



Research Report
Youth Engagement

UNDERSTANDING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

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**PRUDENTIA
INSTITUTE**

YOUTH KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

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ABOUT PRUDENTIA INSTITUTE

Prudentia Institute is a purpose driven, charitable research and development organization with a mission to empower and develop youth in Atlantic Canada. The institute supports the inclusive development and empowerment of youth. The Institute's charitable objective is advancing education through research and knowledge mobilization and developing educational programs for youth and youth-serving organizations. The Institute believes in nurturing self-belief, autonomy, personal power and independence in youth so that they can achieve their infinite potential.

Founded in 2020, the Institute became a registered charity in 2024. By conducting primary research and developing educational programs and resources, the Institute strives to increase youth confidence, foster stronger community bonds, and advocate for inclusivity. The Institute is home to the award-winning Student Research Lab where students act as peer researchers using participatory action research. The charity is focusing its research and development work on addressing the most pressing issues faced by young people today, including equity, security, health, connection, and protection. For more information see www.prudentia institute.ca.

OVERVIEW

The aim of this study is to understand youth engagement. The study explores motivations for engagement, as defined and described by youth. Additionally, the study explores youth perceptions regarding inhibiting or facilitating factors affecting their engagement. **This study asks: "how can youth help us understand youth engagement?"**

The research study applies both youth participatory action research (YPAR) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The study features insights from youth to help us understand youth engagement in a post-pandemic reality. The study involved 34 interviews conducted by 15 youth researchers.

The Lab

The Student Research Lab provides an opportunity for youth (ages 15-18, in grades 11 or 12) to learn and engage in research and to collect and analyze qualitative data on issues that matter to youth. Topics of study are informed by youth. While participating in the research lab, students earn a full high school credit through a co-operative education program. Therefore, it is important to understand that the research lab featured in this study is both a scholarly research site hosted within a formal organizational context (with a mission, vision, and purpose), and a developmental and educational program for youth (stewarded in collaboration with formal educational partners).



DEFINING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



Youth engagement involves sustained involvement in an activity over time. It is an active process where youth have the power to make decisions, have their voice heard and demonstrate or develop various competencies.

Youth that participate in meaningful activities benefit from personal growth and they think more proactively about their futures. Youth engagement also results in important cognitive and social development as well as stronger community ties. However, youth engagement is not well understood and potential models remain under explored. This study set out to better understand the conditions which promote engagement behaviour. These insights can help inform models of youth engagement and they can support youth advocates, educators and caregivers.

Our study identifies motivational drivers in youth. Motivations figure significantly in youth engagement and can stem from a variety of factors including future goals, beliefs, time and cognitive engagement. Motivations can also be combined and this study points to the potential value of motivational convergence. Motivation(s) can also be ignited or re-ignited when activities are well aligned with a young person's interests, opportunities for kinship, or empowerment. Agency (voice and choice) also are important considerations with respect to motivation and may amplify engagement.



Locus of control refers to the extent that a young person feels that they have control. An internally oriented locus of control means that a young person not only feels that they have personal power, but they also feel responsible for the consequences stemming from their behaviour and actions. An internal locus of control can promote proactive, self-driven engagement behaviour. In youth, an internally oriented locus of control is still developing.



ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

According to the youth in our study, youth engagement encompasses a range of activities from formal to informal, skilled to unskilled, individual to collective, obligatory to pleasure-seeking, physical to body-fixed, and educational to nescient.



Volunteering



Games



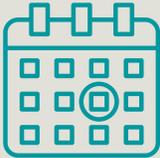
Hobbies



Events



Social Media



Holidays



Work



Rest



Sports



Academics

BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

For educators, advocates and youth serving organizations, there are many **organizational barriers** to consider when configuring activities for youth.

Organizational barriers can include **adult readiness** (preparedness and openness) as well as **organizational readiness** (safety and meaningful opportunities).

Barriers and Enablers can be one in the same and will depend on context. Youth in our study cited the following as critical elements that **inhibited or facilitated** their engagement.



Adult Involvement



Access



Availability



Time



Physical Ability



Mental & Emotional Ability



Technology



Environment



MOTIVATIONS IN YOUTH

In our study on youth engagement, youth defined and described several motivations for engaging in a range of activities and these included:

Responsibility: A desire to please or satisfy others, care for others. A duty or formal obligation.

Altruism: Demonstrating selflessness, prioritizing others and their needs; authentic and sincere.

Accomplishment: A feeling of satisfaction, pride, completion and external validation. A desire for praise.

Proficiency: Fluent and knowledgeable, confident and deeply skilled.

Enjoyment: Feelings of joy, passion euphoria, fun, promoting positive emotions.

Pressure: Pressures to represent, to participate, to compete or even to disrupt or challenge.

Social Connection: To interact with others. To be with friends and/or family or to make new connections.

Education Imperative: A desire to learn, to become better, gain knowledge and grow.

Escapism: To retreat, to distract from other things, including obligations or pressures.

Brittany: *I have a job because I need to have a job to live. And that's why".*

Avery: *"You want them to have a good day too, to have something [...] I hope it makes [their] day".*

Eve: *"I get to be proud of the things that we're able to do [...] it would be to be proud of the end result".*

Blake: *"So I like being able to control the music and how that stuff works".*

Louis: *"I play video games. You can play with your friends [...] And like, you can try to win; it's fun".*

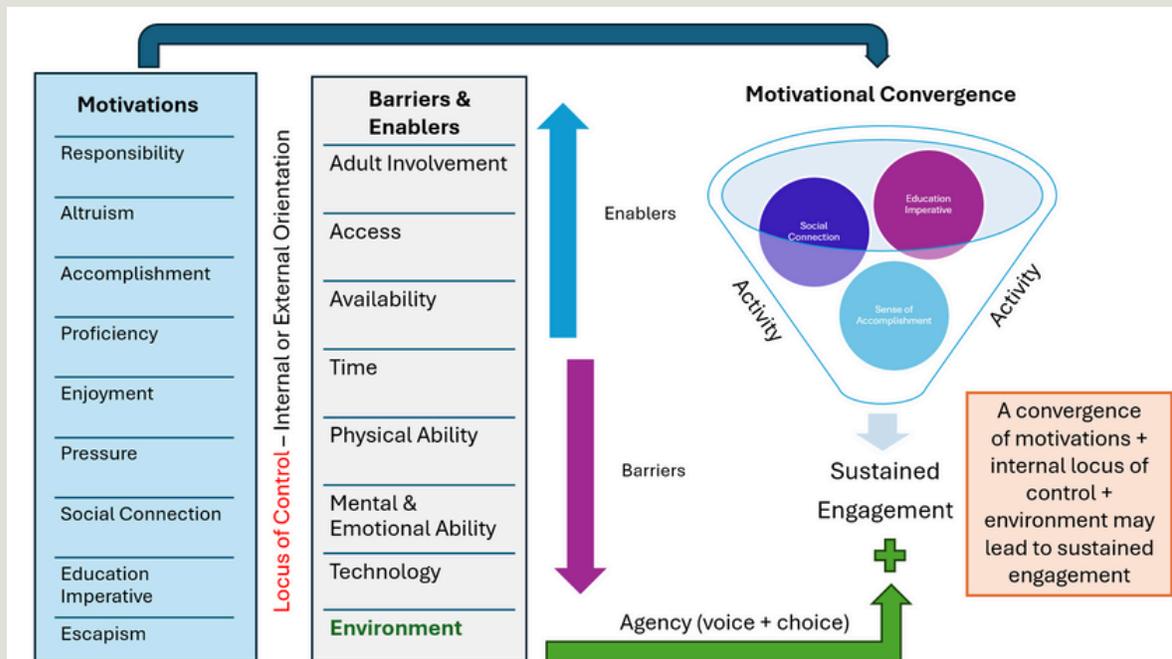
Annie: *"If I'm not the best, I do quit [...]. I don't like learning new things unless I am the best at them".*

Ashley: *"I play board games with my friends. It's just something we can do to spend time together".*

Evan: *"When I swim, I like to see that personal improvement".*

Kaylee: *"[It's] my way of running [...] away from my problems, and coming back to my problems later".*

A convergence of motivations seems to foster engagement. Additionally, environmental considerations may transcend other factors. A motivational convergence, plus an internal locus of control, plus positive environmental factors may lead to sustained engagement.



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Please cite this report as follows:

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This study was conducted with research ethics approval: REB #23-41 Acadia University. This study is current under review in a peer-reviewed, indexed, academic journal.

AUTHOR BIOS

Kristin S. Williams, Ph.D. (she/her) is the Director of the FC Manning School of Business at Acadia University, one of the oldest and most respected liberal arts universities in Canada. She is an Associate Professor (Management) at Acadia University and holds a Visiting Researcher appointment at the University of Eastern Finland (Innovation Management). Dr. Williams is also the Founder, Managing Director, and Principal Researcher at Prudentia Institute: Youth Knowledge Exchange, home to the award-winning Student Research Lab. She is co-editor in chief at the journal of Culture and Organization and a member of the editorial advisory board at the Journal of Management History. Dr. Williams has received several academic awards, and she is a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee Medal. Dr. Williams is the corresponding author. Please contact at kwilliams@prudentia institute.ca or kristin.williams@acadiu.ca.

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FURTHER READINGS & CITATIONS

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