



Youth Engagement – A Conceptual Model

The research gathered by The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement provides evidence that youth are doing many more good things than is commonly perceived, that this involvement is good for youth, and finally that youth participation is much more than "just doing it...." The quality of the engagement, its meaningfulness, matters.

Still many questions remain. What are the most important factors of participation? Why is engagement linked to well-being? How does the link between involvement and positive outcomes change depending upon



the person, their environment and the activity they are engaged in? To explore these questions, and others, we have developed a model, which serves as a starting point for our research projects, and as a way to structure and organize our work.

The following information does not reflect our conclusions, but rather our questions and ideas. We are "growing" our model as we collect research findings and learn from our experiences!

WHAT IS YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

Our working definition:

"Youth engagement is the meaningful and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity focusing outside the self."

– Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement

Youth can become engaged in a wide variety of activities, including sports, music, community volunteering, helping friends, or political action.

WHAT ARE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF ENGAGEMENT?

Engagement experiences are complex and vary widely in content and quality. They include both objective pieces (behaviour, structure, content), and subjective pieces (feeling, thinking, evaluation). We are interested in identifying and measuring a number of potentially important aspects of engaging experiences.

SOME QUALITIES OF ENGAGEMENT

SUBJECTIVE PIECES:

Feelings about the activities – enjoyment, meaningfulness, stress

Thinking about the activities – concentration, learning

Evaluation – how good you are, how challenging it is, how important to society, who controls the activity

OBJECTIVE PIECES:

Behaviour doing the activities – frequency, duration, breadth or diversity, type of activity

Structure – who youth do it with, where youth do it, how it is organized, who leads the activity

Content of activity – focus and goal of the activity



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Hmmm...

THE MODEL – UNDER CONSTRUCTION...

There are many ways to represent youth engagement. Our goal is to start with some key questions that invite others to share their own views about engaging youth. Through an ongoing process of inquiry, discussion, and practice we hope to build our collective knowledge. Let us start the inquiry with some questions:

What we're doing will make a difference...

Looks like fun...

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

WHAT INITIATES ENGAGEMENT?

Part of our model is concerned with how youth first become involved in an activity. This initiating process may be different for each person and each type of activity or engagement.

We represent initiating process in our model with a "bubble", like this ...

INITIATORS

fig. 1

Some of the things that may help youth become involved include:

- 1. Individual or "self" factors.** These are characteristics such as values, temperament, and interests, and
- 2. Social factors.** For example, some youth report that they become involved in order to be with their friends or because a teacher asked them.

We represent these two initiating processes as a two-layered bubble. We consider that people exist as (1) individuals who (2) have important relationships with other people

INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL

fig. 2

A person's decision to get involved also may be influenced by

- 3. Systems.** For example, the schools, organizations, communities, and countries in which he or she lives and works.

INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL SYSTEM

fig. 3

We add a third layer to represent (3) system processes that may influence whether youth become involved or not.

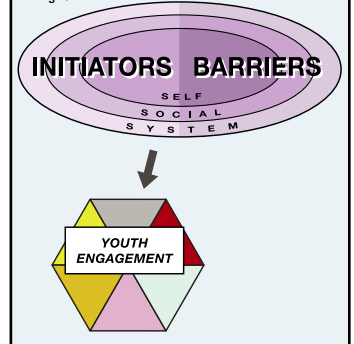
INITIATORS BARRIERS

fig. 4

Think of the resulting bubble as what gets engagement started or hinders it – at a personal level, in terms of relationships with others, and the systems in which we live and work.

We can connect the layered bubble and the engagement circle with an arrow. The arrow shows that initiating factors may lead to engagement.

fig. 5



WHAT SUSTAINS ENGAGEMENT?

Once youth are involved in an activity, they may decide to keep doing it – or to stop doing it. Similar to the initiating

process, sustaining factors may be different for each person and for each type of activity or engagement.

The sustaining process also may be **layered**, since a person's decision to stay involved may be influenced by personal characteristics, other people, and the systems in which the person lives and works.

SUSTAINERS BARRIERS

fig. 6

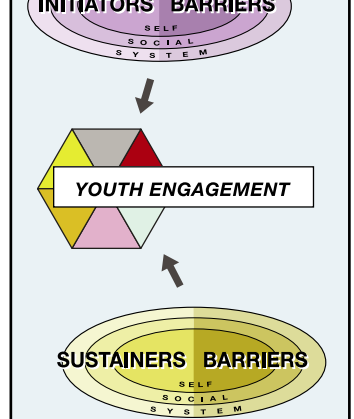
So, in our model, we put in a bubble called "Sustainers/Barriers" to represent the things that affect whether a person stays involved or not. This bubble has layers, just like the initiating bubble.

Think of this bubble as what keeps engagement going and what discourages it – at a personal level, in terms of relationships with others, and the systems in which we live and work.

The **arrows** show that initiating factors may lead to the beginning of engagement, and that sustaining factors may lead to continued engagement.

INITIATORS BARRIERS

fig. 7



ENGAGEMENT AND OUTCOMES?

Another question is whether engagement leads to positive outcomes.

Outcomes may be layered since engagement could lead to personal benefits, as well as improved social relationships, and even improvements in the systems (schools, organizations, communities, towns, provinces, countries) in which we live and work.

So, the connection between engagement and positive outcomes may be different for each person, type of activity, and type of outcome.

POSITIVE NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

fig. 8

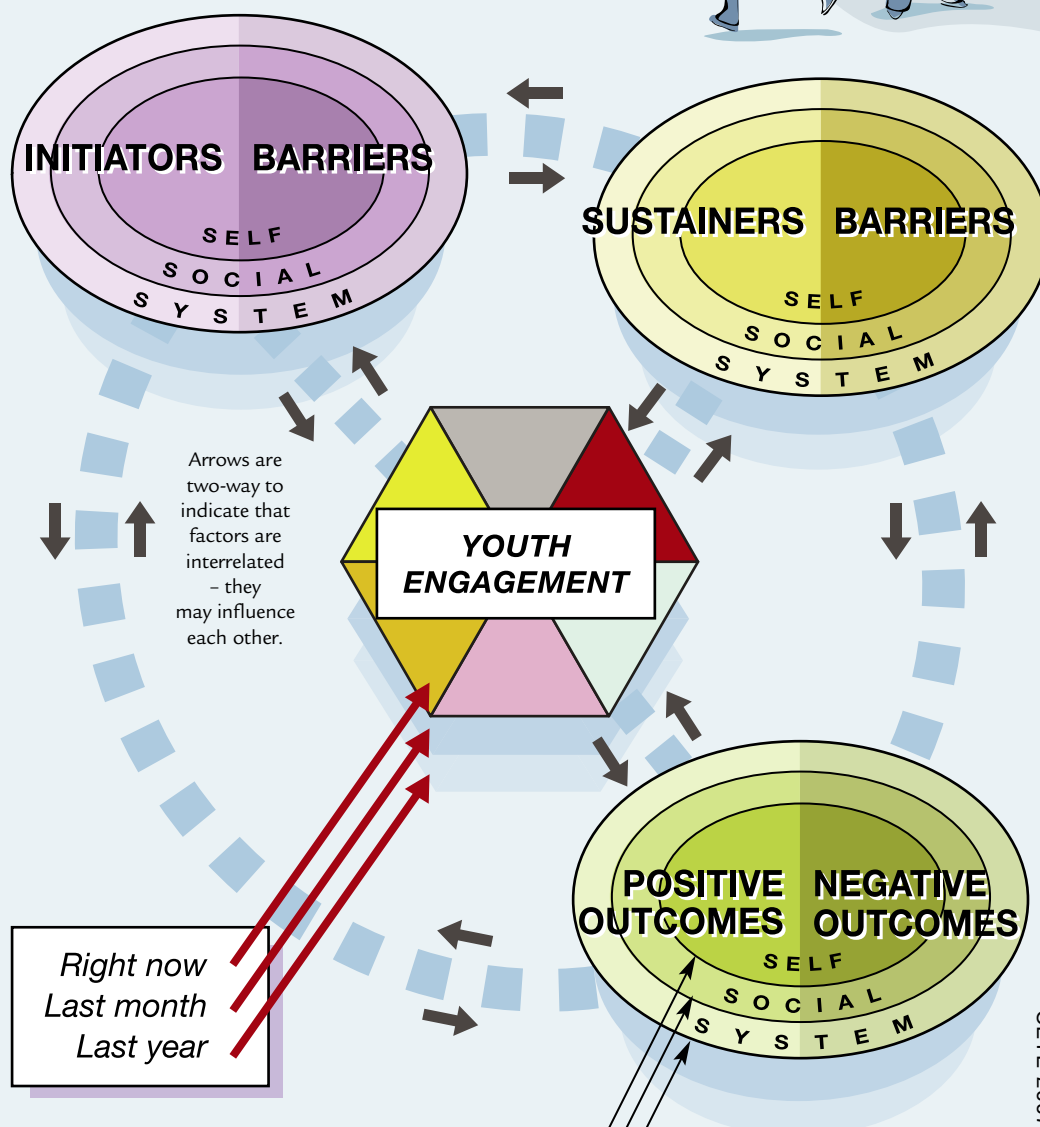
In our model, we have a bubble for "outcomes". This bubble has layers, just like the other bubbles and indicates the potential for both positive outcomes (the left side of the bubble) and negative outcomes (the right side).

Think of this bubble as what the benefits of engagement may be – at a personal level, in terms of relationships with others, and the environments we live in.

THE MAIN PARTS OF THE MODEL

Together, the **bubbles** capture the main parts of our model:

- What initiates or hinders engagement?
- What sustains or discourages engagement?
- What are the many different qualities of engagement?
- What are the potential outcomes?



And the **layers** of each bubble remind us that youth are:

- Individuals
- Who have relationships with other people
- Who live and work in environments and systems

fig. 10

We also need to consider whether engagement may sometimes lead to outcomes that are not so positive – such as frustration or stress.

Thus, in our model, engagement may lead to specific outcomes.

ENGAGEMENT DEVELOPS

In our model, the factors and processes that engage youth or prevent them from being engaged operate over time.

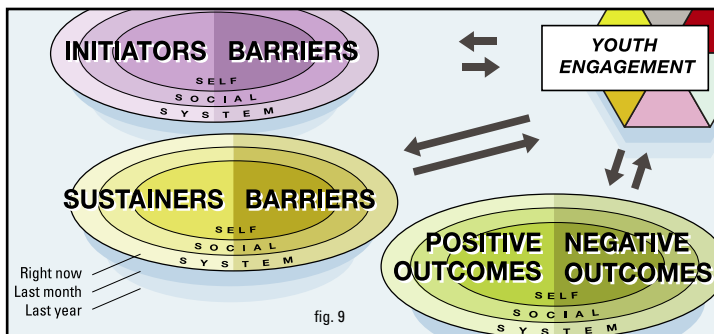


fig. 9

CEYE 2007

CEYE 2007

GROWING THE MODEL

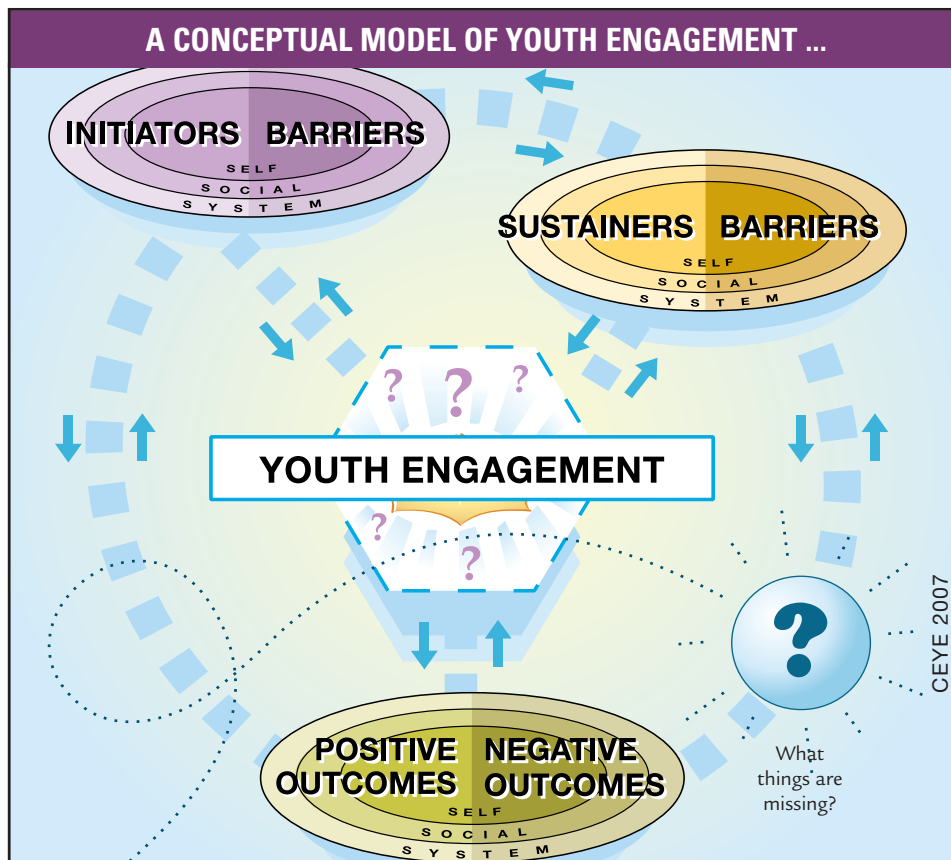
Have we really got it all? How do we know this model is correct? What is the model missing?

We don't know! But as we "grow" the model, we hope to learn answers to these questions. Until then, we can add one more bubble to remind us that the model is a work in progress...



Think of this bubble as the things the model is missing (and all the things we have yet to learn).

So, it helps us see how we can add to the model...



OTHER THOUGHTS ON THE MODEL

As we mentioned at the beginning, our model is meant to serve as a framework for our projects and our research questions.

Engagement may be somewhat different for every person, for every type of activity, and for every type of outcome. So, we can't conclude that this is the only way that "engagement works."

As we conduct our research, we will be testing our model to see if it "fits" with the experiences of youth.

We also hope that the model helps people think about engagement in ways that stimulate questions, result in suggestions, and new ideas ...

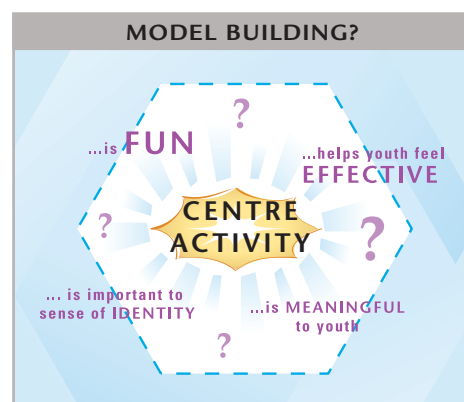
We do think that the engagement process is dynamic and fluid - it changes over time as people change and as the world changes.

Therefore, the arrows go both ways between all the bubbles, so that everything is connect-

ed to everything else - and everything influences everything else over time ...

Check out the large graphic, above, to see what the model looks like so far.

Check out the graphic below for how we are measuring ourselves.



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