



From Engagement of Youth to Engagement with Youth:

*Perspective on Youth Engagement from a
Community Psychologist*

*CEH Annual Conference
January 23, 2023*

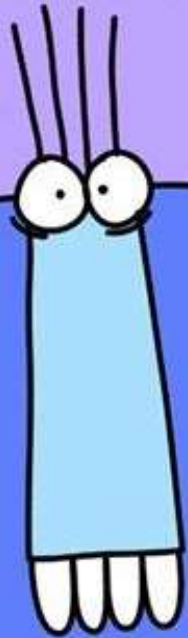
Manuel Riemer, PhD

Overview

- *What is community psychology?*
- *A learning journey about youth engagement*
 - *How to learn from research and evaluation*
- *Conversation, questions, and discussion*

I live, work, and play on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnawbe and Haudenosaunee peoples

People don't Resist change.
They Resist being changed.



@gapingvoid

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From
engagement of
youth to
engaging with
youth

Quote from Peter Senge,
systems thinker and
organizational change expert

Community Psychology

“Community psychology offers a framework for working with those marginalized by the social system that leads to self-aware social change with an emphasis on value-based, participatory work and the forging of alliances. It is a way of working that is pragmatic and reflexive, whilst not wedded to any particular orthodoxy of method. As such, community psychology is one alternative to the dominant individualistic psychology typically taught and practiced in the high-income countries. It is community psychology because it emphasizes a level of analysis and intervention other than the individual and their immediate interpersonal context. It is community psychology because it is nevertheless concerned with how people feel, think, experience, and act as they work together, resisting oppression and struggling to create a better world.”

(Burton & Kegan, n.d. Cited in Burton, Boyle, Harris & Kagan, 2007, p. 219)



Engaging with youth

A learning journey

Photo sources: <https://healthpeople.org/where-we-work/> & NYTimes

Youth-led Climate Action

- *Hired youth over the summer*
- *Youth engaged in climate action*
- *Youth co-designed their approach*
- *Missing a systems and environmental justice perspective*



What did we learn from our research?

- *Added workshops focused on critical thinking, systems-thinking, environmental justice*
- *Youth expanded their ecological lens, felt empowered to broaden their conversations with residents, and were highly motivated by concerns for environmental justice*
- *Positive experience with successful actions in the RDJ program motivated youth to take further environmental actions and change personal practice*

Dittmer, L. & Riemer, M. (2012). Fostering critical thinking about climate change: Applying community psychology to an environmental education project with youth.

Youth Leading Environmental Change (YLEC)

- Study in Bangladesh, Canada, Germany, India, Uganda, and USA
- Youth engaging in climate action
- Environmental justice lens
- Co-designed by academics, local community organizations, and youth leaders
- Mixed-method longitudinal comparison design (N=365 / 63 interviews)

Riemer et al. (2016). The Youth Leading Environmental Change project: A mixed-method longitudinal study across Six Countries.

YLEC Theory of Change & Key Components



- Common elements and context-specific content and activities
- Youth-led action project
- Workshops on climate change, effective activism, systems-thinking, and environmental justice
- Live exchange with youth from other country
- Local environmental justice speaker

Key Finding: Personal Transformation

Relationship to environmental issues

Short-term change

- Background to foreground/increased sense of importance
- Passion/inspiration
- Hope

Long-term change

- Perspective shift (acts as priming for short-term changes)
 - Cognitive to emotional
 - Toward multi-scalar
 - Toward complexity and interconnectedness
 - Abstract to concrete and rational
- Passive to active

“The personal accounts they [the Indian students] told us about the problems from their daily lives, and family members who are directly affected by some environmental problem, that of course hit closer to home, and, one knew about it, but wasn't so emotionally involved, before. And that really affected me, that video exchange.”

- German Participant

“If you're doing something with other enthusiastic people and you all share similar values and you have a cause and you're working towards something, chances are that you are going to achieve your goals and have an impact and it's a really rewarding feeling”

- Canadian Participant

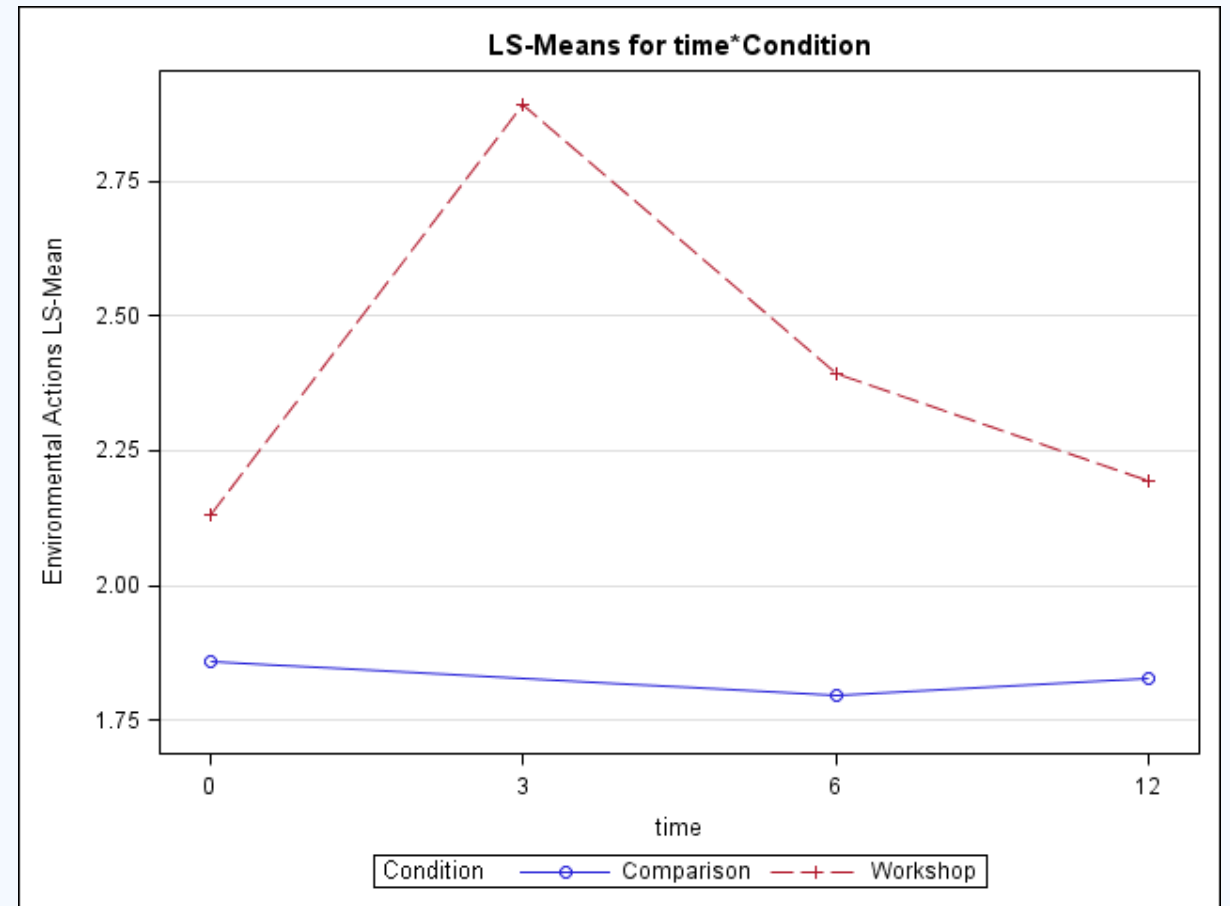
Key Finding: Environmental Action

“Once the course ended I wasn’t just sitting there like or like ‘oh the course has now ended and now what next?’ I had to go on. I had to use the knowledge I’ve got to share with other people so we can keep the fire burning.”

– Uganda Participant

“...really pushed me toward being like an agent of social change... making sure that people are aware of what’s happening around the world, informing them that ... just kind of giving them the knowledge that this is happening, this is actually a real thing... helping to expand their, their perception of what environmental issues are.”

– Canadian Participant



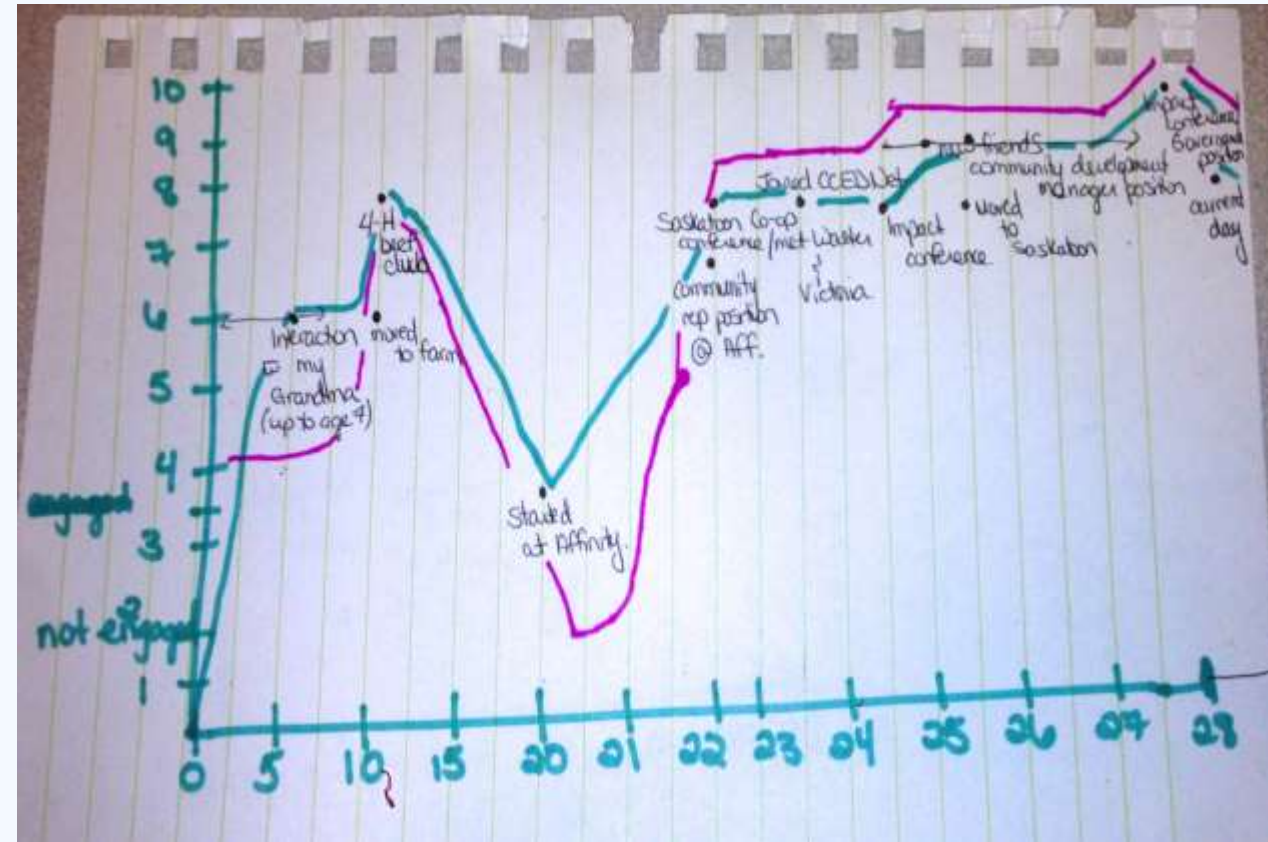
How Can We Sustain Youth Engagement?

- Survey (N=23) and narrative interviews (N=11)

Sustained engagement is a cumulative process that is determined by:

1. A foundation of a strong environmental identity as an engaged citizen
2. A supportive community

Wicks, S.M. (2011). Young leaders' sustained engagement in environmental action: A narrative inquiry



What Impact do Youth Leadership Programs Have?

- *Challenge: How to assess impact beyond initial participants*
- *Case study: Make a Difference (MAD) youth (13-17) leadership program*
- *3-day intensive leadership training followed by ongoing mentoring and networking*
- *Mixed-method study with Seeds (original MAD participants) and ripples (influenced participants)*

Burussa, Dreyer, Riemer & Harré (2017). The Ripple Effect: A report from the study on young leaders motivating environmental action in the community



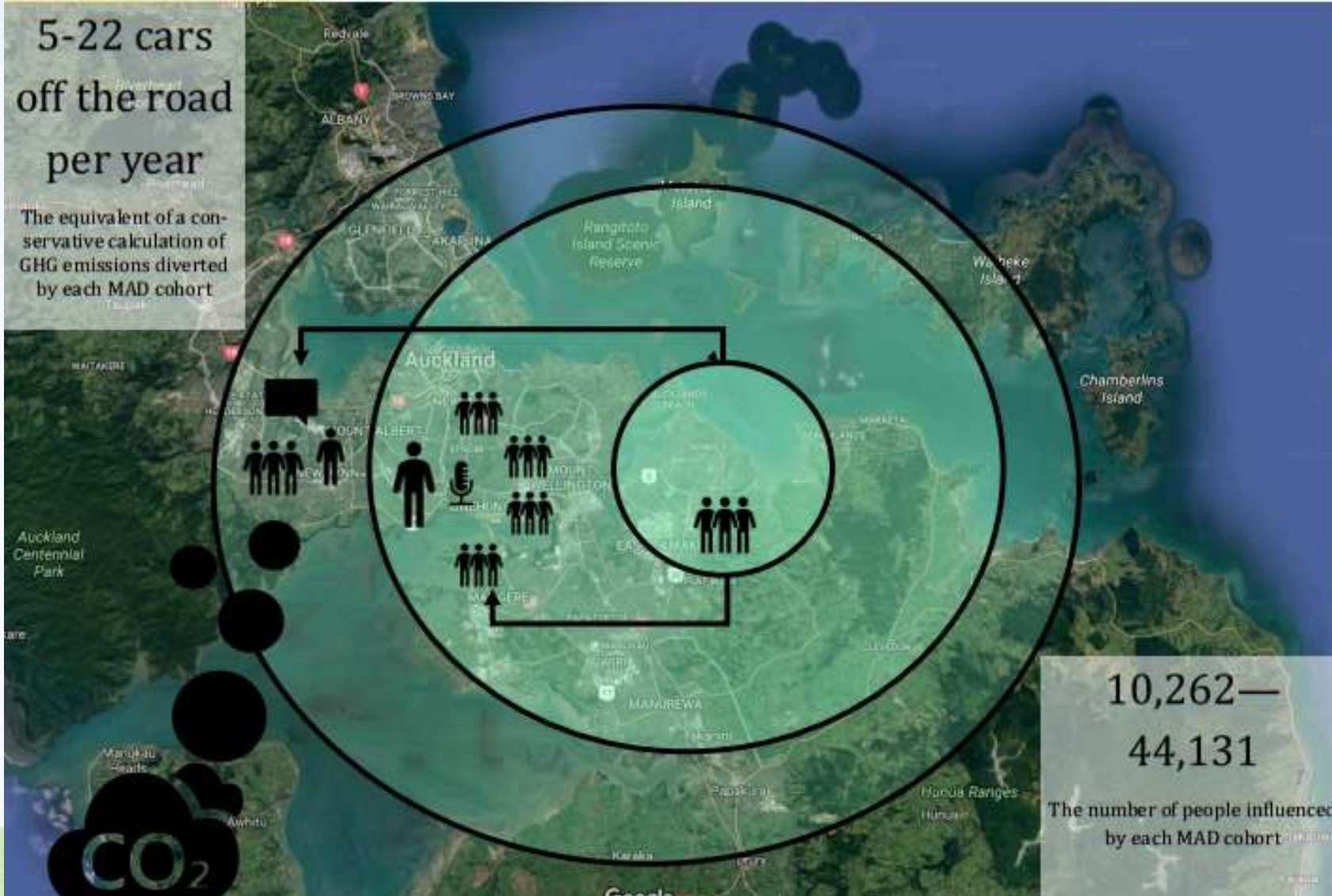
“Becoming a MADster helped me to become more confident in so many different areas. I'm currently studying at [...] University, and am trying to involve myself in all the different environmental groups here, which I wouldn't have done before attending MAD because I would have been too shy.”

- MAD Participant (Seed)

The Ripple Effect

5-22 cars
off the road
per year

The equivalent of a conservative calculation of GHG emissions diverted by each MAD cohort



*“... [our enviro group] gathered all the rubbish together... did a preview... in an assembly... so we can talk about littering and sorting”
(John, ripple)*

Our estimates range between a 0.2% reduction of total city GHG emissions from 2014 levels to 0.9% based on numbers provided by Auckland Council in 2016.

10,262—
44,131

The number of people influenced
by each MAD cohort

Overall Learnings

- *Focus on relationship building (learn from Indigenous knowledge)*
- *Develop youth-adult partnerships (practice two-eyed seeing)*
- *Co-create, co-design, and co-learn with youth*
- *Focus on action rather than behaviour*
- *Consider the social context and social practice*
- *Build on empathy and value for social justice*
- *Provide many opportunities for engagement*
- *Take a long-term systems perspective*





*Thank you for your
interest*

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