WHAT'S GLITTER GOT TO DO WITH IT:
EXPLORING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND HIV PREVENTION PROGRAMMING

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BACKGROUND

Harm reduction and sexual health curriculum is often not tailored to the diverse experiences, needs and identities of young people[1] or the socio-structural and contextual factors (e.g., poverty, racism, homophobia) that influence HIV vulnerability.[2,3] This may result in education that is often irrelevant and at its worst, detrimental to young peoples' sense of self and identity.[4] One strategy for improving the relevance of HIV programming is to include young people in the design and development of peer-based programs and research.[1,5-7] But what does this look like in practice? While some literature exists on the meaningful involvement of youth in HIV and sexual health research,[5,8,9] research exploring issues of youth participation and engagement in HIV and harm reduction programming is limited,[10] particularly for youth who have experienced marginalization. Similarly, engagement is often discussed but rarely defined or unpacked. This poster shares a youth-developed framework for youth engagement in the context of HIV programming.
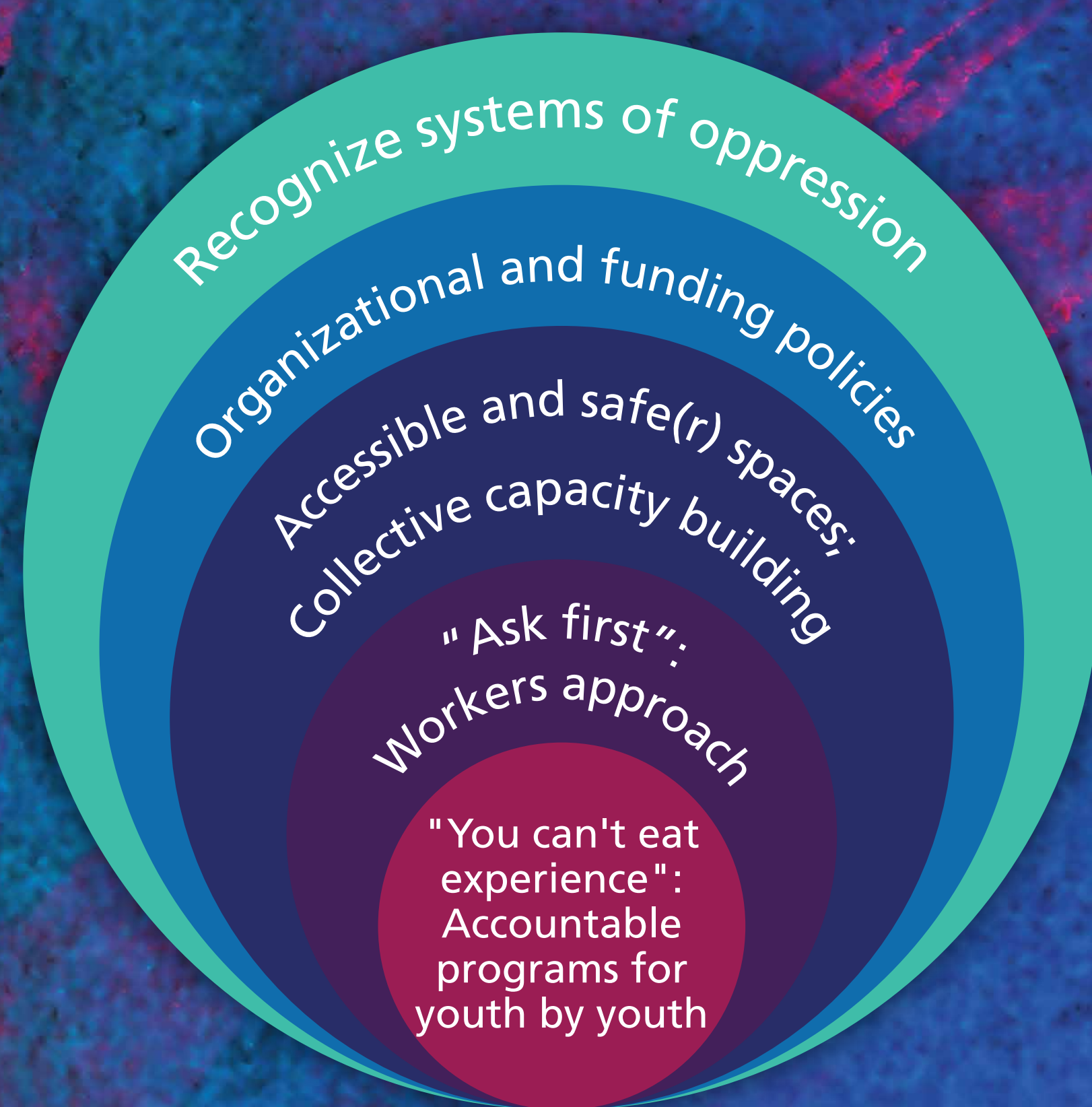
METHODOLOGY

A collaborative project between Central Toronto Community Health Centres (CTCHC) and Gendering Adolescent AIDS Prevention (GAAP), Empower is a youth-led HIV prevention program that uses the arts to train youth to develop and deliver workshops in their own communities. A part of CTCHC's harm reduction team, Empower is led by Toronto youth (16–30) whose lives differ from one another in many ways: socially, sexually, racially, religiously, economically, and the drugs they use or don't use.

From January – April 2015, 8 Empower youth and peer mentors met to participate in a series of interactive capacity-building sessions with the aim of co-developing 1) a series of conference presentations on youth engagement and harm reduction and HIV programming and 2) a manuscript based on the content of these presentations. Using a series of interactive and arts-based activities, we developed a framework for youth engagement in the context of harm reduction, HIV and sexual health programming, with service providers, policy makers and researchers (individuals with decision-making power) as the main audience.

FINDINGS

To support youth-led programs, organizations and service providers must account for the following when acknowledging, prioritizing, and supporting youth-led programs [Figure 1]:

[Figure 1:] Supporting youth-led spaces in practice

(Figure 1 ring labels, from outer to inner:)
- Recognize systems of oppression
- Organizational and funding policies
- Accessible and safe(r) spaces.
- Collective capacity building
- "Ask first": Workers approach
- "You can't eat experience": Accountable programs for youth by youth

"YOU CAN'T EAT EXPERIENCE": ACCOUNTABLE PROGRAMS FOR YOUTH BY YOUTH

Programs need to be accountable to the communities they serve, culturally-specific and inclusive. This means that:

- Programs are designed by youth
- Involve peer positions (mentorship, support, employment)
- Provide compensation ($$$)
- Programs need to take youth seriously — no busy work!
- Authorship and ownership over program
- Queer, Sex and Trans Positive

"ASK FIRST": WORKER'S APPROACH

A non-judgmental approach means…

- Don't make assumptions (ask first)
- Break down us / them divisions
- Be approachable (be yourself)
- Self-reflection (being aware of prejudices and privileges)
- Leverage your privilege
- More understanding of HIV, harm reduction, and LGBTTIQQ2SADA communities

"YOUTH ARE REAL PEOPLE DON'T JUST KEEP US BUSY": COLLECTIVE CAPACITY BUILDING

Social support and mentorship must recognize the important skills and perspectives young people bring to the table. Collective capacity-building should include:

- Experienced leaders and mentors from diverse communities
- Skill building that identifies and encourages transferable skills
- Skill building that balances individual and group needs (no one left behind)
- Opportunities to move up within a program or organization
- Holistic approach (mind, body and soul)

ACCESSIBLE AND SAFE(R) SPACES

A space can never be 100% safe. It is important to recognize the systems of violence that young people encounter in the world. In addition, programs may want to provide:

- Accessible location and evening hours
- Food and transportation tokens
- Technology (assistive technology and social media)
- Plounges (comfortable chairs)
- Flexibility in involvement and participation
- Gender neutral and accessible washrooms
- Resources and referrals
- All of the supplies! (harm reduction, but creative supplies like glitter too)
- Fun!

"LET ME DRAW MY OWN BOXES": ORGANIZATIONAL POLICY CHANGE

Organizations should involve youth in policy change that affects them. This means:

- "No more policy nonsense!"
- Policies should recognize young people's multiple identities
- Opportunities to move up within an organization
- Supporting youth-led programs and positions from the top down
- Prioritizing funding that supports youth-led programming

CONCLUSION

More youth-led research is needed on how to tailor and deliver harm reduction programs to effectively meet the needs of diverse youth. Organizations must also recognize the way systems of oppression play out and shape young people's lives. This means understanding that: 1) youth are not "at risk" just because we are youth; 2) We do not lead single issue lives. Youth hold many different intersecting identities (gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual-orientation, housing status, serostatus, drug use, etc.). Like the flecks of glitter in a kaleidoscope, our identities and lives are complex and brilliant. 3) Young people know best how to structure programs and spaces to meet our needs. We believe that a starting point for this conversation is to directly involve and support young people accessing and leading these programs.

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I have no conflicts of interest.