

Youth Empowerment and Community Wellbeing: The Case of Ophelia's Place

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Adolescence is a time of change and exploration, and youth today experience adolescence in world of hyper-connectedness and unlimited access. Post COVID, the adolescent experience comes with its own unique challenges, encouraging communities to reflect on the ways in which they are supporting and empowering their youth.

Through a case study analysis of the local Eugene non-profit organization, Ophelia's Place, communities must be implementing services that work to empower their youth in order to reach levels of community wellbeing. Through highlighting a gap in community wellbeing literature where the youth experience is not discussed in community wellbeing indexes, it is paramount that moving forward youth empowerment should be at the forefront of community projects. Various interviews, participant observations, and examinations of survey data at Ophelia's Place exemplify that by providing spaces for youth outside of the home and school, youth can better navigate adolescence and engage with their communities.

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## DEDICATION

Dear reader, you were young once, and as time progresses there are only more challenges associated with the adolescent experience. So take yourself back to the time when you were 13 and felt the world was against you, now is your chance to be what you needed when you were younger.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. YOUTH IN SOCIETY .....	1
1.1 Why youth? .....	1
1.2 Youth today: The age of technology .....	3
1.3 A moment for COVID-19 .....	5
1.4 Framing this research .....	7
1.5 Ophelia's Place .....	8
1.51 Drop in .....	11
1.52 School groups .....	14
1.53 Therapy .....	15
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	19
2.1 Empowerment .....	19
2.2 Youth empowerment .....	20
2.3 Situating intersectionality .....	22
2.31 Age .....	23
2.32 Gender .....	24
2.33 Sexuality .....	25
2.34 Race .....	26
2.4 Adultism .....	28
2.5 The impact of language .....	29
2.51 At-Risk .....	29
2.52 At-Promise .....	33
2.6 Community based practices and non-profits .....	33
2.7 Community wellbeing .....	35

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN .....	37
3.1 Observations .....	37
3.2 Semi-structured interviews .....	38
3.3 Survey data .....	40
3.4 Limitations and pivots .....	41
4. THE BLURRINESS OF PREVENTION WORK: LANGUAGE AND MARGINALIZATION .....	43
4.1 What do you mean by 'at-risk'? .....	43
4.2 What are we preventing, exactly? .....	48
4.3 The good, the bad and the ugly: Funding .....	51
5. YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AS A TOOL OF RESISTANCE .....	54
5.1 How would you define youth empowerment? .....	54
5.2 Youth empowerment at OP .....	58
5.3 Measuring empowerment: The impact of OP .....	66
6. SO WHAT? POSITIONING COMMUNITY WELLBEING .....	75
6.1 Adulthood in the community .....	75
6.2 Community wellbeing .....	78
6.3 The time is now: start empowering our youth .....	80
6.4 Conclusion .....	84
6.5 Future research .....	85
APPENDIX: OP Survey Questions .....	87
REFERENCES .....	88

## LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	Page
1. The main 'couch' space, Ophelia's Place Eugene .....	11
2. Basement wall, Ophelia's Place Eugene .....	12
3. Jewelry making at drop-in, Ophelia's Place Eugene .....	14
4. Journal decorating during drop-in, Ophelia's Place Eugene .....	16
5. Ophelia's Place 2021-2022 Annual Report .....	52
6. AOS post survey qualitative answer results .....	69
7. AOS post survey qualitative answer results .....	69
8. AOS post survey qualitative answer results .....	70
9. School group post survey qualitative answer results .....	70
10. School group post survey qualitative answer results .....	71
11. School group post survey qualitative answer results .....	71

## **CHAPTER 1: YOUTH IN SOCIETY**

### **1.1 Why youth?**

According to UNESCO's World Youth Report (2020) there are "1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24 years, accounting for 16 per cent of the global population" (UNESCO). The United Nations further describes how "young people are a major human resource for development and key agents for social change, economic growth and technological innovation" (UN Youth Participation Report, 2013, p. 1). Across the globe there is an emphasis placed onto the youth population, from family members to global development leaders, as REAP USA puts it, youth are "the next wave of leaders" (REAP USA website). Whether as key actors to preserve and continue cultural traditions, or as potential problem solvers to address the world's issues, there is a local and global understanding that youth shape the future in some way. With these expectations directed towards the youth population, I ask, What are we doing to foster these expectations of problem solvers and innovators? What are the tools required, if any, to shape youth into these actors so crucial to our collective future? The empowerment of youth is key to fostering a space where growth and change can occur, ultimately allowing youth to step into their own power and implement agency through taking action towards shaping the future. Through investigating approaches to enhance the wellbeing of youth, we can look at how increased levels of empowered youth can inform broader discussions regarding community wellbeing. What do we do to empower youth? How are they supported in their growth and development and how is that both an individual and collective level of growth and engagement?

This research centers youth in hopes of highlighting the ways in which youth are undermined and overlooked in society. Centering youth also allows for a contribution to intersectionality literature, as a focus on age can better situate the experience of

adolescence in the context of society today. This research examines youth empowerment efforts within the non-profit sector and identifies this as a crucial aspect of community wellbeing. Through situating the importance of youth empowering spaces, and highlighting the lack of youth focus in larger community structures, I critique the ways adultism is perpetuated in communities. This research aims to speak to a gap in community wellbeing literature, and give voice to youth in communities and wider society. In order for youth to feel empowered and grow into the expectations of adults, communities must better amplify the voices and needs of their youth.

This research argues that in order for communities to achieve high levels of wellbeing, there must be adequate levels of youth empowerment, and communities must provide spaces and services that highlight the complexities of the adolescent experience. The key research questions that this research seeks to answer are: How are youth involved in their communities? What barriers prevent them from implementing their agency? How are youth supported in their growth and development and how is that both an individual and collective level of growth and engagement? How does the language communities use to describe their youth inform their approaches to youth empowerment? Outside of the family and school, where are youth highlighted and amplified in the community?

This research was conducted in Eugene, Oregon, United States, from September-December 2023. The youth in this context experience adolescence differently based on their identities and positionality, and highlighting specific adolescence experiences in a modern-Western context is crucial in situating the youth in this research. Life in the United States in 2023 brings many nuanced experiences and situations, and for youth in this context, provides additional layers of political turmoil, social activism, international tensions, hyper-consumerism and increased living costs. This research asserts that

adolescence is never a monolithic experience nor is it seamless in any time period; however, 2023 does provide its own challenges for youth. A key factor that impacts the lives of adolescents today is the role of technology, specifically smart phones and social media.

### **1.2 Youth today: The age of technology**

Generations Z and Alpha grew up in what we know as ‘the age of technology’, and especially in a Western country such as the United States, technology has a daily influence on the upbringings of youth. I believe adolescence is generally understood as a complicated time full of experimentation and discovery, and the increasing influence of smart phones and social media has an impact on this already fraught time. Although I am technically a ‘gen Z’ (born in 1999), I did not experience a personal smart phone until I was in high school, and even that was not very “smart” in comparison to phones today. Ahad and Anshari (2017) discuss the rising prevalence of smart phone use amongst adolescents, “Statistics have shown that an accelerated growth of smart phone usage is highest among young people or youths... it becomes apparent that smart phones are common and most influential in these young people’s everyday lives” (p. 67). Given the recent change in access to smart phones and social media, highlighting the relationship between youth and technology can offer insight into how youth today are navigating adolescence, and offer insight into how technology can produce a different kind of adolescent experience. This is not to say that smart phones and access to technology is inherently negative for youth, as there are many positive impacts technology can have for youth. However, it is increasingly clear that access to smart phones and social media can produce negative impacts on youth development, and therefore should be highlighted to better understand the youth who are the key focus of this research.

Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe (2022) offer an examination of the impact technology has on adolescents, and use attachment theory to understand this relationship. When highlighting previous findings regarding technology and adolescents, they state how for adolescents on a broader scale, “increased emotional investment in social media was associated with poorer sleep, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of anxiety and depression.” (Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe, 2022, p. 154). Hodge and Gebler-Wolfe (2022) also discuss findings specifically associated with adolescent girls, “When looking specifically at adolescent girls, researchers found that females who posted pictures of themselves on social media had lower levels of self-esteem, higher levels of depressive symptoms, and higher levels of beliefs associated with eating disorders.” (p. 154). This discussion asserts that technology can have negative impacts on adolescents, however, factors such as parental restriction, class, culture and general access impact the extent to which technology negatively influences an adolescent’s life.

Davis (2023) finds specifically how the imagery and communities on social media play a large role in negatively impacting the experience of adolescence. Davis (2023) discusses social media as an additional stressor in adolescents’ lives, “Unfortunately, rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide have been increasing alarmingly in recent years, especially among girls and LGBTQ+ youth, with many pointing a finger at smartphones and social media.” (p. 113). Davis continues to spread awareness about the severity of social media’s role in the self-confidence of adolescents, “there’s a lot of idealized imagery on social media, and there’s evidence that viewing it can trigger social comparisons and make many teens feel worse about their own bodies.” (Davis, 2023, p. 115). Another key point of Davis’ research is that social media is a vehicle for discrimination of youth populations, “Technology didn’t create homophobia, racism, or other forms of discrimination. But certain design features and

the actions they make possible can and do contribute to the risk that marginalized teens experience on a daily basis” (Davis, 2023, p. 122).

In recognizing the role of technology in the lives of youth today we can better understand how youth are navigating the world, and what kinds of challenges they are encountering online as well as how the online world relates to their in-person experiences. It is clear the majority of youth today possess some version of a smartphone and essentially have the internet at their fingertips. This online vulnerability can exacerbate stressors that negatively impact the mental health of adolescents. In addition to the conversation noting the consequences of technology, it is also integral to discuss the role of COVID-19 in the lives of youth.

### **1.3 A moment for COVID-19**

It is no news that COVID-19 was an extremely unprecedented and difficult time for all, however, there were particular difficulties for children who experienced COVID-19 during their prime development ages. Lockdown created a new kind of online presence for every person, but for children this time hindered important socialization and schooling milestones. Reimers (2021) provides insight into the impact COVID-19 remote learning conditions had on youth, describing the barriers to learning during this time this way: “In a nutshell, the pandemic limited student opportunity for interactions with peers and teachers and for individualized attention—decreasing student engagement, participation, and learning” (p. 28). Reimers’ research analyzed eight studies that examined school learning in different countries during COVID-19, and concluded that “seven out of eight studies that identified learning loss were conducted in countries where education systems were relatively well-resourced and covered relatively short periods of school closures” (Reimers, 2021, p. 31). The reported loss of learning may be amplified for youth who were struggling more economically - for

example, a lack of access to a computer would further hinder their learning. This research showed how even in the 'best' circumstances, i.e. access to a computer, Wi-Fi or a quiet space to do homework, learning loss was still evident, and therefore we can assume the same or worse for other youth who experienced less desirable circumstances during COVID-19.

In terms of mental health it is clear all ages found it difficult to adjust to new found loneliness and anxiety. However, for the then children and now teens this created a new obstacle of having to re-enter post-COVID society offline. National Academies of Sciences et al. (2023) provides findings from national data that show the negative impact of COVID-19 on youth, specifically in the realm of mental health. Factors such as, "increasing academic demands, barriers to mental health treatments, alcohol and drug use, family financial crises, income inequality, and experiences of discrimination and racism... all worsened or were increasingly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic." (National Academies of Sciences et al, 2023, p. 151). The COVID-19 pandemic produced stressors for youth that were not experienced by previous generations, and exacerbated existing inequalities by class and race in society. The National Academies of Science et al. (2023) highlighted how these inequalities worsened during COVID-19, "This increased need for behavioral health among low-income and racially and ethnically minoritized children cannot be met with the current workforce shortage of child behavioral health providers" (p. 151). The authors continue to assert that, "During the COVID-19 pandemic, children were confronted with continual reminders of illness and potential death; experiences of fear and perceived threat; economic and social instability; and physical and social distancing from loved ones, friends, school, and communities, putting them at increased risk of experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety" (National Academies of Science et al., 2023, p. 154). The COVID-19

pandemic altered the developmental trajectory of many youths, and potentially left lingering mental health issues associated with this traumatic time period. These inequalities and learning conditions are important to note when situating this research, as this drastically changed the experience of many people's adolescence, including the youth in this study.

This research uses intersectionality as a lens to investigate youth and the language used in the non-profit sector. The intersection of age is a driving piece of this research, and this research aims to understand how age (adolescence) interacts with other intersections such as gender, sexuality and race. The examination of youth in this research does not imply a universal experience of adolescence, and acknowledges the many intersections and differing experiences of youth across the world. Therefore, youth empowerment is discussed as a pertinent tool that is lacking in many communities, and is a key part of fostering community wellbeing.

#### **1.4 Framing this research**

This research journey began in Spring 2023 after brain storming various ideas linked to community wellbeing. I always knew I wanted to observe and explore the dynamics of communities at a local, grassroots level but struggled to find an angle. After various long-winded conversations with my advisor, I decided to think back to my own experiences in my community back home in New Zealand. As an athlete most of my adolescence I ended up volunteering at my local track and field club in 2019, and I remember the joy I felt mentoring the 7-year-old girl's group on their weekly club night. I sat on the idea of approaching this research through youth sports for a while, however I found that I was still missing a key component of community wellbeing. I turned to the academic literature, beginning with broad strokes of researching 'community wellbeing' and 'community solidarity' key words, and I eventually landed on community wellbeing

indexes from across the world. What conditions, environments or experiences in a community constitute high levels of community wellbeing? Well, not youth – according to the various indexes I sought through, as there was a real absence of addressing youth and youth’s lives in the community wellbeing indices other than as students in schools. With the beginnings of a research angle, I landed on the idea of situating youth empowerment within community wellbeing. From there began the journey of finding a non-profit or local organization in Eugene to use as a case study. The thought of going home and doing this research in New Zealand crossed my mind, however I felt the vibrant non-profit community within Eugene provided a great foundation for a study of youth empowerment.. After reaching out to several non-profits that serve female-identified youth and/or teens, only one responded with interest in taking in this unqualified Kiwi, Ophelia’s Place.

### **1.5 Ophelia’s Place**

Ophelia’s Place (OP) is a 501c3 non-profit organization that is prevention based, serving female-identified youth aged between 10 and 18 years of age with locations in Eugene, Junction City and Albany, Oregon. OP was created in 2005, by founder Rosaria P. Haugland with a vision to “to provide intervention at an early point in a girl’s life to give her an opportunity to develop supportive relationships and strengths that will lead to her long-term well-being” (OP website). OP aims to empower and support youth through offering free therapy, after and out of school services, and in school empowerment groups. The mission statement on the Ophelia’s Place website shares that the organization is, “dedicated to helping girls make healthy life choices through empowerment, education, and support” (OP website). Over time OP has styled its language to who OP identifies as ‘female identified youth’, “*We are for all trans girls and*

*cis girls, as well as for nonbinary youth, gender non-conforming youth, and genderqueer youth who feel or have a connection to girlhood or girlness.” (OP website).*

My first day working as a community volunteer at OP was the first day of drop-in in September 2023 after the organization’s summer break. I was nervous and felt underqualified to suddenly be a research ‘expert’ in the field of youth prevention work. I had only visited the Eugene site twice before, and was so unfamiliar with the space and its operations. In the moment, I felt as if I was being thrown into the deep end and I wasn’t qualified. However, looking back now I realized that this is the way of prevention work, there is no such thing as being ready, and you learn as you go.

The drop-in space was prepped for the return of the youth with fresh arts and crafts, new board games strategically scattered around the space and a variety of snacks within easy reach. The Direct Service Interns, who were all college students, introduced themselves to me and we immediately hit it off, with them now being some of my closest friends. After an ‘OP crash course’ on the space expectations, the youth start to make their way in and the drop-in activities commence. As the youth enter, the interns get everyone to introduce themselves, with our names and pronouns, a usual protocol when a new person enters the space. There was an expected hesitancy to interact with me, a new and unfamiliar person, but I persevered and reminded myself of how uncomfortable this would have been at 12 years old. The energy of the space led to one of the interns grabbing the temporary tattoo pens, and encouraging everyone to grab a few colors to draw on themselves, which sparked a creative vibe across the space. I did my best to jump in and out of light conversation, with my foreign accent becoming a key topic amongst the youth and interns alike. I explained my home country of New Zealand, which sparked many questions and comments, creating some rapport and making myself a little more comfortable for everyone in the space. After a few hours, and many

colorful flowers and icons drawn onto our arms and legs, 5:45pm rolled around and it was time for the chill out room. Another intern and I took on the chill out room duty, where we congregate and 'chill out' before guardians come to pick up youth at 6:00pm. I left OP after my first day feeling equally excited and intimidated, how am I ever going to successfully encompass this organization's service and mission? I knew it was going to be an uphill battle between myself and my expectations for my research. Moving forward I worked at forging relationships and doing my best to intertwine myself into the fabric of OP. Over the course of my four month research journey, my understanding of OP's mission changed as I immersed myself into OP's services and experienced the impact of the organization.

My positionality is paramount to this research and the data I collected. I was fortunate enough to enter this research at OP as a community volunteer, and over my research period built strong relationships with both the youth and the staff at OP. This led to an offer from OP to stay on as a paid direct service intern, and further develop these relationships. The richness of the data I collected is thanks to my proximity and involvement within OP, and I would not have been able to gather the intimate observations and interview discussions I did without being so intertwined into the fabrics of OP. I currently work in this position at OP and have continued my passion for this type of youth work. The following sections describe the various programs OP offers to Oregon communities, including drop-in hours, school groups, and therapy.

I spent the rest of the year working this position and doing observations and interviews with the staff and fellow interns, in addition to my volunteer work. As my research came to an end in December 2023, and after forging so many beautiful relationships with both youth and staff, I was offered a paid position as a Direct Service Intern in January 2024. I currently work in this position at OP and have continued my

passion for this type of youth work. The following sections describe the various programs OP offers to Oregon communities, including drop-in hours, school groups, and therapy.

### **1.51 Drop-in**

Drop-in time is a key component of the after and out of school programs that OP provides and operates at all OP locations. At Eugene specifically it is from 3pm – 6pm Monday to Thursday, where youth can ‘drop-in’ at any time between these hours for as long or as short as they need. Drop-in is facilitated by interns, or community volunteers who are primarily college-aged, and either female-identified or queer-identified, who follow the guidelines of OP to ensure the youth are comfortable, safe, engaged and, of course, having fun. The OP Eugene main space is broken up into six main parts, with two separate sitting spaces with comfy couches, the arts and craft tables, the ‘Zen zone’ for private rest, the ‘chill out room’ for quietness and calmness, and the downstairs basement area with a ping pong table and space to let out energy.



*Figure 1: The main ‘couch’ space, Ophelia’s Place Eugene*

Drop-in has a looser structure in comparison to other OP services such as school groups, with drop-in being structured around what the youth want to do in the moment. There is always a 'craft of the week' available with supplies and space to create, and this can range from scrapbooking, to painting to constructing plants out of cardboard. In addition to craft of the week, there is always an abundance of board games, puzzles, basic arts and craft supplies and various fidget toys OP provides for free. This is where the flexibility and adaptability of the interns is important, as we aim to meet youth where they are at, which ultimately means we have to bring the energy to whatever activity the youth decides to do. A lot of the time, however, drop-in is where youth simply want to sit and chat with interns and be listened to, share their interests or even things that trouble them. The main takeaway from my time at drop-in is that it is youth-led in the sense that we allow them to navigate their way through the space so they feel empowered and supported in what they decide to do.



*Figure 2: Basement wall, Ophelia's Place Eugene*

Drop-in also offers specially curated workshops that youth or their parents can sign them up for, sometimes for a small fee. During the fall of 2023 for example, I was a

co-facilitator for one of these workshops that was named “Treat yourself Thursdays”. Like the name suggests, this was a once a week workshop directed towards self-care and focused on what our minds and bodies need. The activities ranged from spa days downstairs in the OP basement space, making scented candles to take home, or tying together custom blankets for the youth to use at home to encourage cozy time. Other workshops available for youth to participate in during drop-in hours is a “Fanime club” (for youth interested in anime and various fandoms), “Makerspace” (arts and crafts workshop), “Mad Scientists Kitchen” (for science curious youth) and even different dance workshops. There are workshops targeted towards specific youth backgrounds and experiences, and have the presence of OP’s therapists, such as BIPOC connect, Queerspace group, and various parent-child evenings to strengthen relationships. Drop-in sees an ever-changing amount of youth enter the space, in the OP Eugene location we could see as low as 3 and up to 10 youth in one drop-in session. The workshops bring in more youth, with approximately 4 – 8 youth attending workshops such as Makerspace and Fanime club. With the constant OP-curated Spotify playlist playing in the background, youth and interns are scattered across the space doing various fun and creative activities, drop-in is a space where time flies and imaginations are encouraged to flourish.



*Figure 3: Jewelry making at drop-in, Ophelia's Place Eugene*

### **1.52 School groups**

OP has growing partnerships with local elementary, middle and high schools in the wider Eugene area which allows OP to facilitate school groups, or as they are also referred to 'Girl empowerment groups'. School groups are where staff from OP, including interns and senior staff such as supervisors and directors, travel to schools across Eugene and teach 'empowerment groups' once a week throughout the school term. These groups focus on content such as relational aggression, consent, healthy coping mechanisms, setting boundaries, healthy romantic and platonic relationships, body image and self-love (taught differently depending on age group). This content aims to both 'fill gaps' in traditional school curriculums, but also provide a safe and neutral space where this content can be learned. These groups take place within the schools, in a classroom setting and with parental permission obtained through the school and can have from 4 to 9 youth enrolled. Unfortunately, I did not facilitate a school group during fall 2023 when I was undergoing research. However, after being hired as a paid intern I currently co-facilitate school groups weekly, and those experiences inform my understanding of what school groups entail.

### **1.53 Therapy**

A main component of what OP offers youth is free therapy, which like all other aspects of what OP does is youth-led, centering the needs and desires of youth in every session. OP offers individual, family and group therapy depending on what the youth desires. Every youth that uses any services in OP has to undergo an orientation, where they meet the staff and discuss what they are looking for. If therapy is something the youth is wanting to participate in, then the OP therapists work to create a plan that works for the youth. At OP there are two licensed therapists, three student therapy interns and three postgraduate associate level therapists who are working towards licensure. The therapy structure at OP does not bill insurance, due to the many barriers this can pose to youth such as a required diagnosis. So the billing situation for therapy at OP is on a fully sliding scale, from \$0 to \$100 with most paying closer to \$0. This makes OP's therapy services extremely accessible and not intimidating for both youth and parents seeking therapy.

The most important part of therapy at OP is that it is entirely youth-led and centered. This begins at orientation where the youth themselves decide if therapy is something they want to do, and if they say yes then the sessions are based on goals the youth set for themselves. For example, if a youth agrees they want therapy, perhaps they choose to do it alone and want to discuss their struggles with understanding their sexuality, the therapist will cater the sessions to be one-on-one and focus on how to articulate and explore one's sexuality. This youth-led structure deviates from more 'traditional' forms of therapy, that are usually led and directed by the therapist based on what they believe to be important. In addition, OP's therapy team are constantly working to create a culture around therapy that in a way 'demystifies' therapy as a

practice. OP therapy is collaborative and exploratory with youth, with what some may consider a more informal and non-structured approach.



*Figure 4: Journal decorating during drop-in, Ophelia's Place Eugene*

The pandemic was especially challenging for non-profit organizations that offer prevention and crisis services, as it greatly impacted the extent in which organizations like OP could implement their mission. However, OP pivoted and worked with what they could within the COVID-19 guidelines. Therapy operated via zoom, and staff at OP during this time prerecorded helpful videos or did live zoom sessions with youth and their parents covering topics to do with adolescence. Additionally, OP offered a 'pick up' service where staff created prepacked kits of crafts and activities that youth could pick up safely and do at home. These kits also extended to light food packs that youth could also pick up if needed. Lastly, OP decided to create an 'OP Minecraft server' where the youth could log on and play together from home, and from what I heard was a huge hit amongst the youth. Although OP could not operate at their normal capacity, they offered

prevention in a new way that still allowed connection and interaction with youth and parents during this unprecedented time.

My proposed research sought to investigate how OP empowered the youth they serve, and to address the lack of youth focus in community wellbeing indexes to discuss how places like OP are integral to community wellbeing. For the most part this research stayed within those bounds, however my findings also uncovered additional insights and tensions associated with language and funding within the non-profit sector. Lastly, this research has served as so much more than my Master's thesis, as working with OP has opened my eyes to my own passion for prevention work and youth development. Research can benefit from researchers who are participant observers in the spaces they study. I have found this to be the case and I strive to use my personal connections with OP as a strength, and to continually check any biases it may introduce. These are real stories and real feelings, I urge you as a reader to approach this thesis with compassion and an open mind to the world of prevention work, as you are part of the change that I am calling to make.

Chapter 2 offers a review of academic literature within the fields of youth studies, empowerment, intersectionality and community wellbeing. It situates this research within academia whilst further setting the tone for the incoming data discussions. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodology used for this research, discussing the observations completed within OP, the semi-structured interviews with OP staff, and the survey data offered by OP that reflects the experiences of youth. Chapter 3 also touches on the limitations I experienced working with youth and the pivots I made during the research process. Chapter 4 interrogates the use of the term 'at-risk' in the non-profit sector alongside other language that is prevention-related, and calls for a shift in the way organizations categorize youth. I also discuss this shift in

language in relation to funding, and the tension between language used for funding opposed to language used for OP's mission and community outreach. Chapter 5 proposes youth empowerment as a tool for resistance in response to the ways in which youth are labelled by organizations and wider society. This chapter uses OP as a case study to exemplify how communities should be empowering their youth, and the potential impact this can have on their communities as a whole. Chapter 6 then moves to broader understandings of community wellbeing, and how to position youth empowerment amongst adultism and societal expectations of youth. Chapter 7 offers an overview of this research and a call for future research within the sphere of youth in communities.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Empowerment

This research proposes youth empowerment as a tool to overcome structural inequalities associated with adultist and discriminatory language faced by youth. In order to understand what youth-focused empowerment looks like alongside intersectionality, an analysis of empowerment theory is necessary. In Peterson's (2014) article dissecting empowerment theory as a "higher order multidimension construct," they provide helpful background regarding empowerment theory as a discourse. They define empowerment theory as, "an active, participatory process through which individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives, acquire rights, and reduce marginalization" (p. 96). They continue to discuss how empowerment theory for many researchers, "represents a strengths-based, non-expert driven approach that emphasizes the ability of people facing difficult life circumstances or community conditions to define and actively engage in solutions to the problems confronting them" (p. 96). This research also views empowerment as a strengths-based approach to overcoming various barriers, specifically discriminatory labels perpetuated by the hegemonic actors and institutions.

It is also integral to highlight the connection between empowerment and power, specifically the historical use of empowerment in the Black feminist movement. Martínez et al. (2017) illustrates how the term 'empowerment' traces back to feminist and Black power movements in the 1970s, and now lends itself as a popular term across various disciplines. After deliberation the study framed empowerment as "connected to the acquisition of power in order to accede or contribute to desired change" (Martínez et al, 2017, p. 409). The acquisition and, in some cases, the reclamation of power is important when looking at the goal of youth empowerment. Ultimately, empowerment

can offer increased agency and sites for change, as stepping into one's power can potentially lead to enhanced feelings of belonging and purpose in the world. This research focuses its lens on youth empowerment specifically, and applies these understanding of empowerment in a youth and adolescence context.

## **2.2 Youth empowerment**

The central idea undergirding youth empowerment is to nurture and support the livelihood of youth, aiming for increased self-efficacy and leadership skills among youth. Ultimately, youth empowerment focuses on the needs and experiences of a large portion of a community's population, and seeks to enhance the wellbeing of communities through the focus on future generations. However, there is also an individual aspect of youth empowerment that speaks to unique experiences based on one's positionality. Martínez et al. (2017) pulls from the United Nations (UN) which defines empowered young people as "rights bearers, decision-makers, and social actors with potential to participate fully in their own and their community's development" (UN Commission on Human Rights Safety, 2003, p. 201, cited in Martínez et al, 2017, p. 412). This definition touches on autonomy and agency, and provides a helpful example of how to better curate a definition of the term.

Jegede et al. (2019) discusses the importance of mobilizing and working with youth populations in Nigeria, "In as much as the youth population constitutes a major percentage (more than half) of the Nigeria population, neglecting them would have grievous effects on national development" (p. 148). To et al. (2021) offers insight into why youth empowerment is so important to implement into communities, "Youth empowerment in the community can be understood as opportunities that allow youth to express their voice, participate in decision-making processes, or engage in meaningful roles related to their communities" (p. 1024).

Zimmerman et al (2018) asserts, “early adolescence, which is characterized by growing levels of autonomy is an opportune time to intervene to promote positive outcomes” (p. 21). This focus on the ‘intervention’ or ‘interception’ of youth during adolescence is where the work of non-profits, parents, schools or other programs is so integral to the positive and empowering development of youth.

Anyon et al (2018) offers a review of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in the United States, and with that a helpful background about the core components of YPAR. They state, “YPAR involves young people constructing knowledge by identifying, researching, and addressing social problems through youth–adult partnerships” (p. 865). The goal of YPAR over the years is to enhance the livelihood of youth through engagement in their communities or wider civil society. YPAR facilitates empowerment through its encouragement of youth autonomy and youth participation in often ‘adult’ sectors of society. Carabello et al (2017) also discussed the epistemological history of YPAR, stating, “In the first study to document YPAR in education, grounded in the field of critical psychology, McIntyre (2000) argues for the power of ‘engaging in a process that positions youth as agents of inquiry and as experts about their own lives’” (p. 313). This positions youth as autonomous leaders and allows them to engage with not only their own interests but also be in charge of creating change. Carabello et al (2017) illustrates how, “In the context of a critical-epistemological YPAR framework, the action implicit in youths' self-transformation and knowledge production bears promise for large-scale social transformation” (p. 331).

Jennings et al. (2008) offers a ‘Critical Social theory of Youth Empowerment’, with six dimensions, “A welcoming and safe environment; Meaningful participation and engagement; Equitable power-sharing between youth and adults; Engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes; Participation in sociopolitical

processes to effect change; and Integrated individual- and community-level empowerment” (p. 41). This framework offers a preliminary understanding of what youth empowerment *should* look like on the surface level, and will help guide my own observations at Ophelia’s Place. I expect my research at Ophelia’s Place to operate within two specific dimensions, ‘A welcoming and safe environment’ and ‘Meaningful participation and engagement’ which shows similar connections between this framework and the work potentially being done within Ophelia’s Place.

This research frames OP as a ‘youth empowerment program,’ or YEP as discussed in Morton and Montgomery (2011), “ as interventions that regularly involve young people as partners and participants in the decision-making processes that determine program design, planning, and/or implementation.... YEPs engage young people in program leadership as a characteristic of their involvement in safe, positive, and structured activities” (p. 9). The work that Ophelia’s Place is doing directly links to efforts to empower youth, and therefore will act as a the case study for this research to help inform the importance of the impacts of YEP’s in local communities. It is essential to consider the different identities and social locations of youth in order to understand youth empowerment, and for that I now turn to intersectionality.

### **2.3 Situating intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a theoretical and methodological framework, its origins largely attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw and her work on the experiences of African-American women (Crenshaw 1989). The framework of intersectionality offers a nuanced lens to consider how aspects of people’s identity are multiple and constitutive, and how those social locations occur within a larger social structural context, or matrix of oppression (Collins 2000), that shapes experience and opportunity within the broader organization of power and society (Braun 2005, 2011). This research focuses

on age as a primary intersection, with a specific focus on adolescence, and understanding how age interacts with other intersections or aspects of social location or identity. This research covers all intersections beyond two or three categories, not limited to age, gender, race, sexuality, class, and ability.

### **2.31 Age**

Age is a primary intersection discussed in this research, as the research population and main themes relate to the experiences of youth. The ‘time’ of adolescence is often labelled as a type of liminal or in-between period of adjustment and growth. Pullen (2014) quotes Hall 2003 in discussing this adolescent in-betweenness, “Young people are betwixt and between. No longer children and not yet adults, they do not quite fit or fully belong; and this makes the youth a rolling movement of social tension and unease” (Hall 2003 p. 117, quoted in Pullen 2014, p. 8). It is integral to understand that this time of tension and unease is also enhanced by additional stressors such as education deadlines, schooling decisions, physical puberty, interpersonal relationship development and general navigation of life-direction. Often youth can be treated as not yet experiencing ‘real life’ issues like adults, but that this time of in-betweenness shapes adulthood and experiences during this period of life can have very real consequences. Calasanti and Slevin (2006) describe the three dimensions of age in regards to our place in society, “Firstly, age serves as a social organizing principle; second, different age groups gain identities and power in relation to one another; and third, age relations intersect with other power relations”(p. 5). Although Calasanti and Slevin focus on critiquing ageism towards older women, their work provides insight into how age operates: “In theorizing age relations, then, we also posit systematic differences between being, for instance an old woman and a young woman” (p. 5). It is important to understand that adolescent girls do not achieve some of the privileges or milestones

that middle-aged and elder women experience, as their young age leaves them to only grow within the boundaries of their guardians and without the various civil freedoms older women have. Yet, we also know that gender shapes the experience of everyone, and in the example above, older women may experience age-based discrimination in certain ways and accumulate power due to their age in other ways. I turn now to discuss gender.

### **2.32 Gender**

The intersection of gender is used throughout this research, primarily due to OP serving 'female identified' youth and centering the female experience. Because of this, we must highlight the importance of female adolescent experience in the context of youth empowerment research. Additionally, much of the literature on youth empowerment comes out of scholarly work that centers gender. Baird et al. (2021) discusses the impact of the female adolescent experience, "With puberty, gender norms begin to confine girls' lives. Restrictions on girls' agency and mobility as a result of norms about appropriate feminine behaviour can result in further marginalisation in adulthood" (p. 1145).

Although I hold tension with using the gender binary to discuss the experiences of youth, I understand how in some ways it can differentiate adolescent experiences of different genders. OP does clearly label the youth they serve as 'female-identified' and labels them as girls, however they do expand upon this language and identify how these terms encompass more than the binary. Although there is a heavy focus on the female adolescent experience throughout this research, it is critical to discuss the experiences of non-binary youth. Sostar (2019) provide a summary of the non-binary youth discussion group they co-facilitated in Adelaide, Australia and in Calgary, Canada. When asked to answer the question "who am I?", some of the responses they note in their

research included, 'It sucks not being able to instantly tell who you are' and 'It's hard questioning and not knowing' (Sostar 2019, p. 27). These answers from youth show the added tension and anxiety associated with gender exploration and understanding identity. From our own knowledge of adolescence, it is already a time of identity exploration and experimentation, and if you do not fit within the hegemonic boundaries of the gender binary, this can result in added stress. In the Calgary discussion regarding labels and the gender binary, youth responded, 'Hearing conversations that talk about us as if we don't exist is painful' and 'There is a lot of work in reminding myself that I exist, and that it's okay for me to exist' (Sostar 2019, p. 29). This discussion helps understand the experiences of non-binary youth, and ultimately how they can feel further marginalized and misunderstood in addition to the already restrictive spaces for youth to express themselves.

### **2.33 Sexuality**

Sexuality is another key intersection that is woven throughout this research, as queerness is something that OP specifically creates spaces for to facilitate open discussion and expression. Referring to literature previously discussed regarding additional stressors, the uncertainty of sexuality amongst all other adolescent developments could increase tension and stress from societal expectations or expectations of adults. Pullen quotes Caitlin and Futterman 1998, "As [gay and lesbian youth] develop cognitively many . . . begin to understand the nature of their difference and society's negative reaction to it. In identifying and learning to manage stigma, lesbian and gay adolescents face additional, highly complex challenges and tasks" (Caitlin and Futterman p. 9, quoted in Pullen 2014 p. 8).

For youth, queerness can be overlooked by adults as nothing more than a 'phase', due to youths' assumed lack of experience and knowledge of the world and its

complexities. However, Diamond's (2008) study on female bisexuality proves that these attitudes towards youth queerness should not always be assumed. Their study looked at females who identified as bisexual during adolescence, and were monitored over a period of 10 years to document changes or nuances with their sexuality and sexual orientation. Diamond (2008) states how, "The notion that bisexuality is a transitional stage that women adopt 'on the way' to lesbian identification, or is an experimental phase among heterosexual women, is not consistent with the results of this study" (p. 12). The limitations and scope of this study is not vast enough to make universal claims, however, it is important to note that these assumptions about queer youth experimentation can be a result of heteronormative thinking. Heterosexuality is assumed amongst youth, and there continues to be a need for more literature covering this topic. Although we have a need to understand the experiences of queer youth, it remains important to understand the potential trauma and difficulties experienced by heterosexual youth as well.

### **2.34 Race**

Race is another key intersection that is vital in understanding and situating the lived experiences of youth, especially when interrogating discriminatory language. This research uses the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color), Latino/a and immigrant to describe youth who are non-white, and have non-white experiences in the United States. However, this research acknowledges the complexities with racialized labels and the use of 'umbrella' terms to group marginalized populations. In this section, the writing will mirror the language used in the aligning literature. Halgunseth (2022) calls for the dismantling and restructuring of systems to better support the development of BIPOC youth in the United States. Statistics that situate the BIPOC youth experience are striking: "The high school graduation rate for most racial-ethnic

minoritized youth [American Indian/Alaska Native (74%), Black (80%), and Hispanic (82%)] is below the national average (86%)” (Halgunseth 2022, p. 387). Additionally, “Depression is prevalent among BIPOC adolescents; in 2020, almost 16% of Latinx, 13% of Black, 14% of Asian, and 30% of multiracial adolescents report a major depressive episode” (Halgunseth 2022, p. 387, cited from the U.S Department of Health and Human Services). These statistics offer insight into the lived experiences of BIPOC youth, and give a glimpse into how race impacts the adolescent experience. Sánchez et al (2021) offers a critique of youth programs, “the foundational underpinnings of most mentoring and youth development programs are rooted in White supremacy culture” (p. 689). They continue to discuss the importance of dismantling this ‘deficit’ ideology when working with BIPOC youth, “mentoring programs are built upon deficit ideas of particular communities and young people who belong to them.... These deficit perspectives, rooted in racism and White supremacy culture” (Sánchez et al, 2021, p. 689). When investigating youth empowerment efforts it is paramount to ensure that there is an absence of ‘deficit’ culture narratives and ideologies, as this is where the terminology such as ‘at-risk’ begin to creep in. For BIPOC, Latino/a, Asian and immigrant youth it is easy to fall into a white saviorism when serving these demographics, as ‘prevention work’ can turn into attempts to ‘fix’ youths problems. This ‘fixing’ is also informed by racialized assumptions about different racial and ethnic communities within a framework that elevates or assumes unspoken white supremacy. This research works to eliminate this cultural deficit approach through an interrogation of ‘at-risk’ and ‘preventative’ language. It is also important to note that although this research focuses on the inspiring work of non-profits, this does not mean that there cannot be continued work done to elevate and address racial inequities within the sector itself.

## 2.4 Adultism

A key facet of this research is focusing on how youth are overlooked and undervalued in communities, and much of this conversation revolves around adultism. Arguably an 'ism' that is understudied and misunderstood, adultism is a common way in which youth populations are discriminated against every day.

Bertrand et al. (2023) provides a definition of adultism: "Adultism is an ideology, associated with a set of beliefs and attitudes, that places adults above children" (p. 2574). This creates power imbalances that often leave youth feeling inferior, and their way of thinking and acting reflects this feeling. This often leads to youth not feeling truly autonomous, which could mean not expressing their opinions because they don't feel they matter, or being afraid to answer or ask questions in fear of being scolded for being wrong. The kinds of expression that are deemed "unruly" or concerning by adults can potentially be read as in opposition or resistance to the effects of adultism, hence why they are labelled this way. Bertrand et al (2023) continues to discuss how, "Potentially at either level, [youth-adult interactions and social structures] adultism can entail 'disrespect and mistreatment that can cause young people to feel powerless, disrespected, and dismissed'" (p. 2575). It is these feelings that do not allow youth empowerment to occur, and ultimately keeps power in the hands of adults which can ignore the will and influence of youth in any space. The power that adults hold is based on their age-associated roles in society, such as bearing responsibility for youths' shelter, food and general care.

Corney et al. (2021) call for more youth participation in political arenas. They highlight how, "Young people under the age of enfranchisement (voting age) are politically disenfranchised, treated unequally and often excluded from political and civic decision-making processes and governance structures by virtue of their age" (p. 678).

This is a different take on adultism as it focuses on youth as unrecognized members of society without any agency, based on their participation in the community. They continue, “Drawing parallels with racism and sexism, adultism can thus be understood as an orientation that is based in a web of cultural norms that continually and ubiquitously affirms and reinforces the superior position of the adult relative to the young person” (Corney et al, 2018, p. 680). This speaks to the lack of youth or age-focussed literature within intersectionality discourse, thus resulting in adultism being an often overlooked ‘ism’ that can be harmful.

This research centers the youth experience and therefore works to dismantle adultism, and critique the ways in which adultism hinders youth development and empowerment in local settings. Defining adultism and understanding how it operates in the lives of youth can better situate the research environment at OP and the critiques of adultism in communities. An important aspect of adultism that is evident within the non-profit sector is the use of discriminatory language against youth, which categorizes them using labels that are harmful to their development.

## **2.5 The impact of language**

### **2.51 “At-risk”**

The term “at risk” is not a component of my research I had planned to investigate from the beginning, however after understanding that the non-profit where I was conducting research removed that term from their mission statement, it sparked my curiosity. I would deem the term “at-risk” to be reasonably popular amongst organizations and literature when situating demographics, specifically in the context of non-profit prevention or crisis work. Concerns about the term focused on how it is problematic in this context because instead of identifying society’s structural disadvantages as factors that mediate uneven social outcomes, the term has come to be

used as a proxy for blaming identity as the key factor. In conducting this research, I found that the term at-risk is complex and somewhat controversial, but was created to try to differentiate how groups in society are structurally disadvantaged. However, it is important to note there is a difference between folks who are deemed 'high risk', such as various medical or health circumstances (for example hereditary diseases or severe allergies), or folks who are living in situations that put them in closer proximity to harm (for example living in a war zone or the convergence of multiple risks shaped by historical inequities (Faye and Braun 2022) or riskscapes (Braun 2020)). In the context of youth empowerment, 'at-risk' is often associated with identity factors such as race, gender and class, it often causes the 'risk' to increase. This is due to the many 'isms' that operate in our society, however this research interrogates the use of this term amongst youth populations specifically. It is important to note that it is not only youth that are labelled 'at-risk' by society but they are the focus here as the primary group associated with this research.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the term "at risk" as: "That is exposed to the possibility of loss, harm, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance. Also: (of a list, etc.) comprising those exposed in this way". What is more interesting are the examples of the term 'at risk' being used in a sentence, which also demonstrate how our understanding and use of the term "at risk" has changed over time. Two examples shown to further explain this term are, "1965: The appointment should be of interest to those who are prepared to assist in training child care officers and actively supervising casework of *at risk* families." And "1991: The Community Needs and Initiatives Committee has decided to direct this year's money toward *at-risk* children and their families" (Oxford Dictionary online). Even though the definitions are silent on what constitutes an "at-risk" family, the literature on prevention work demonstrates how "at

risk” rests on assumptions regarding the ‘normative’ white, middle class, heterosexual, two parent household. The examples used by Oxford Dictionaries are an accurate reflection of how the term may be used in a discriminatory way, as these sentences have the reader paint a picture in their heads about what *kind* of family or child they are referring to. The literature suggests the “at-risk” family as potentially one living in poverty, single parent household, without adequate education, engaged in substance use or abuse, and at times even queer or BIPOC.

Berberian and Davis, eds. (2020) questioned the ways in which youth are labelled to be at-risk or at higher risk in life when providing context for their discussion about art therapy for resilient youth. They discuss, “Age, wealth, gender, location, and ability provide general guidelines to classify circumstance, risk, and repair.” (p. 1). They continue to discuss how these indicators provide expected concerns for youth, however they explain how it is, “The experience within the domain, rather than the domain itself is what ultimately influences the young person” (p. 2). Domain refers to circumstance or environment in which the youth lives in, which is where the term at-risk fails. The term blames the youth for their position in society, for their ‘risk’, and fails to address how experiences within these domains influence and cause behaviors or circumstances.

Tidwell and Garrett (1994) offer a helpful critique of the term “at-risk youth” in questioning various examples of how this term is used in education and mental health settings. The authors highlight sources that define “at risk” youth as: “students whose academic histories include attendance problems, failing grades, and difficulty adjusting to school rules... dropouts, substance abusers, and juvenile gang members... aggressive and disruptive [students]” (p. 1). The authors also added, “teenage mothers, premature infants, and adolescents with personality disorders” (p. 1) to the ‘list’ of common “at-risk” indicators for youth. The authors continue to illustrate how, “the individuals in

question seem to be suffering from the very difficulties of which they are supposed to be at risk. Are they at risk, then, of continuing to be in trouble?" (p. 1). This point is a key critique of the use of the term, as someone "at-risk" for something implies they have not yet encountered said risk. So why is the term applied to youth who are already engaging in delinquent or deviant behaviors? This is where, based on my research, I argue that the term has become an indicator of an individual's identity. The authors continue to discuss how often times, "at-risk functions as a general descriptor of a large group of young persons, as a term at least partially interchangeable with disadvantaged, delinquent, troubled, and even minority" (p. 2). It is the interchangeability of the term that makes it problematic, as it has now become a descriptor that largely does not help in diagnosis or treatment, and may just function as an unhelpful generalization.

Brendtro et al (2019) choose to use the term "youth at risk" instead of "at risk youth" in their work that looks at cycles of conflict amongst youth. They chose to use "youth at risk" because it, "refers to environmental hazards that disrupt development. In contrast, the common use of at-risk youth implies the blame lies with the young person" (p. 1). While I agree with the authors definitions, throughout this research I will simply refer to youth dubbed "at-risk" in any capacity as simply, youth. In the context of this research, I find it does not advance our understanding to label them in a way that differentiates them from their peers or fellow community members, as they themselves are not to blame for their perceived level of 'risk'. The literature also highlights how the term "at-risk" centers others' views of youth as opposed to their own understanding of themselves, which removes a key aspect of autonomy from youth.

### **2.52 "At-promise"**

In response to the growing popularity of the term "at-risk" to describe so-called deviant youth, many scholars have come forward with a less discriminatory alternative,

“at-promise” youth. Stutey et al. (2022) propose this term when discussing mental health intervention of youth, explaining, “The phrase at-promise youth describes youth who have the ability to reach their full potential with additional time and resources” (p. 17). When discussing their methodology, they suggest “at-risk” youth as, “may have been in the juvenile justice system, or are in danger of offending or reoffending because of a variety of variables (e.g., substance use, academic failure, absences, aggressive behavior, family stressors) present in their lives” (p. 18). Similarly to previous literature mentioned they label “at-risk” youth as exhibiting delinquent or deviant behaviors, and often remain labelled this way even after intervention.

Lawes (2014) also made the decision to utilize the term youth “at promise” in their dissertation that examined youth deemed “at-risk” in Jamaica and the impact of local level poverty alleviation efforts. Their definition of youth “at risk” was different to prior literature in the way they only used the term with the addition of “of” after the term “at risk”. Lawes explains, “Youth-at-risk (of): This popular term allows for misguided judgment and must always be followed by ‘of’ to indicate that some youth are at risk of or vulnerable to particular circumstances or situations because of a lifestyle and/or living conditions” (List of terms, xii). They continue to define youth “at-promise” as, “the opposite of at-risk, this term recognizes the assets, gifts, skills, potential, talents, and opportunities inherent in and being applied by a young person” (List of terms, xii). Although I acknowledge and understand the shifted focus to potential, the term “at promise” does still imply some sort of deficiency or crisis experienced by the youth prior. I will continue to use the term “youth” alone to describe any youth in my research.

## **2.6 Community based practices and non-profits**

Much of the literature regarding youth empowerment uses community-based projects to test and evaluate approaches to empowering youth in communities. It is

crucial to understand the role of communities in this context, as this research aims to understand approaches to youth empowerment through the work of Ophelia's Place. Zimmerman et al (2018) explains the Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) program to empower youth through engaging in positive community change. According to Zimmerman (2018), the YES program, "incorporates empowerment theory through content focused on skill and confidence building, activities to help youth think critically about and develop a connection with their community, and designing and implementing a community change project" (p. 21). The YES program is a curriculum created for middle schoolers and developed by community partners and youth participants in Michigan, USA. The curriculum provided lesson plans that educated the youth and created opportunities for skill building and collaboration. Taking much of its key programming from Youth Participatory Action research (YPAR), this article concluded that youth who participated in YES saw enhanced empowerment and pro social behaviors.

Prapaveissis et al. (2022) provides an evaluation of youth empowerment in Pasifika youth populations in New Zealand through "Pasifika Prediabetes Youth Empowerment Programme' (PPYEP). The PPYEP is a partnership between researchers at Massey University and two Pasifika community health service providers, one in an urban and the other in a rural location in New Zealand" (p. 57). This study of PPYEP offered insight into how youth empowerment can be facilitated through educating youth about their culture and specifically health promotion, as it "increased the youth's knowledge about health and leadership and social change capacities, and co-design offered a practical model to translate empowerment outcomes into community change" (p. 61). This case study in New Zealand speaks to how youth empowerment operates differently when targeting specific populations. This research acknowledges that there

is no single model of youth empowerment that can be applied to all communities with universal success. The variability across communities in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality shape how youth empowerment is both defined and implemented. Thus, moving forward with this research will require a focus on how these intersections influence the approaches to youth empowerment within OP.

## **2.7 Community wellbeing**

Community wellbeing is an important component of this research and therefore should be examined alone to better understand its role. Wiseman and Brasher (2008) offer a definition of community wellbeing, “Community wellbeing is the combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfil their potential” (p. 358). Our understanding of community wellbeing is limited and yet it seems important for us to interrogate; this research brings a focus on youth and youth empowerment, something important and largely missing from community wellbeing approaches and studies. The wellbeing of our communities is integral at the local level, hence why I call for youth to be included more in these measurements. Wiseman and Brasher (2008) also illustrate the importance of community wellbeing for the overall harmony of society, “There is compelling evidence that promoting community wellbeing can play a key role in improving individual mental health outcomes. Also, community wellbeing provides a useful starting point for rethinking our definition of progress” (p. 358). The critique of community wellbeing comes from it commonly lacking focus on youth needs and wellbeing, and the following community wellbeing indexes exemplify this.

The Australian Community Wellbeing Indicators Framework in 2007 categorized community wellbeing into five domains: healthy, safe and inclusive communities;

dynamic, resilient local economies; sustainable built and natural environments; culturally rich and vibrant communities; democratic and engaged communities (Cox et al, 2010). All five domains fail to include youth empowerment models as an indicator of community wellbeing, and where adolescent ages are mentioned, they are mentioned only in the context of schooling or immunizations. Kim and Jong Lee (2014) offer another community wellbeing index that is applied to the metropolitan areas of Korea. The categories of community wellbeing in this index are residents (existence, relatedness and growth), government and environment. Within these categories are more detailed indicators, however, the only ones that address youth in some way are: “Number of cultural facilities per 100,000 persons, Number of social welfare centers per 100,000 persons and Number of child care centers per 100,000 children” (p. 545). There is a focus on elderly populations, with the indicator “Number of senior citizens’ welfare center per 100,000 senior citizens” (p. 545); however, no mention of services or support for adolescent youth. Maso et al. (2017) discusses how “there is a gap regarding a framework or a general model upon which to map processes for youth empowerment” (p. 20). Academic literature engaging community wellbeing is still new and developing, however, from the few community wellbeing indexes available there is a clear disconnect between community wellbeing and youth empowerment. These indexes pose a question regarding where youth are focused on in communities and society more broadly, exemplifying how youth need to be highlighted in areas beyond the home and school. These indexes provide a beginning point of interest to help guide this research angle, if society is putting expectations and pressures onto youth to solve our future problems, then why is that not being reflected in community wellbeing indexes? The wellbeing of youth must be highlighted as a key component of the overall wellbeing of communities, and youth empowerment is a key aspect of this.

## **CHAPTER 3: Methodology and Research design**

This research began in mid-September 2023 and ended in mid-December 2023, and took place within the local Eugene non-profit organization, Ophelia's Place. As a community volunteer at the organization, I volunteered three days a week at the Eugene location for drop-in services for three months. I completed a series of staff interviews along with my own participant observations of the organization's youth empowerment efforts. I was also granted access to anonymized survey data by the organization that offered insight into the youth at OP. The following sections describe these dimensions of my methodology below.

### **3.1 Observations**

I began my community volunteer position carrying out observations during drop-in, which consisted of observing and learning from the interns about the daily operations and boundaries practiced in the space. After a few weeks of taking a so-called 'backseat' position during drop-in, I was able to start participating more in the activities and facilitation of the drop-in program and build relationships with the youth. This is where I started actively engaging in things such as board games, arts and crafts, puzzles, facilitating games such as 'mafia' and having one on one conversations with some of the youth. My consistent presence at drop-in helped me become a more trusted and well-known person who could build close relationships with youth and staff.

OP holds an annual staff training for all new and returning interns, along with all senior staff members in September before the school term starts. Due to my community volunteer status I attended to learn more about what it means to work for OP, whilst also taking up the role as an observer. The training I attended in September 2023 consisted of two 8-hour days full of content and training activities. This took place in the Eugene location, with approximately 40 staff members in attendance. The curriculum

consisted of various topics, and most of the training was situated in a more traditional classroom setting with the OP Training and Outreach Director delivering most of the content. The content started with basic OP guidelines and principles and then moved into more focused themes. The first part of the training looked at the various youth backgrounds we would see as interns, where we discussed intersectionality and forms of oppression. Then we moved to adultism, which will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis, and sparked my interest especially as OP works hard to combat adultism in its everyday operations. This topic was accompanied with plenty of role-play scenarios for us interns to practice which was helpful as they were framed in the OP space. The next topics of the training looked at bodies, sexuality, gender, trauma and what it means to be a mandatory reporter. The training was not only helpful for me as a community volunteer working with youth, but it gave me extra insight into the inner workings of OP's mission.

### **3.2 Semi-structured interviews**

As my time progressed at OP, I was able to connect with staff members and eventually set up interviews. I completed 15 semi-structured interviews, with 10 staff members including 2 therapists, and 5 direct service interns. The interviews discussed the experiences of the staff at OP and explored what prevention work meant to them. Each interview was completed one-on-one either in the OP space, over Zoom, or, if required, at a neutral space and recorded on my iPhone. Each interview ranged between 35 to 90 minutes, which was dependent on how much the participant was willing to share and discuss. In addition to the phone recording, I also took handwritten notes throughout the interviews to capture key points. The main questions were asked similarly across all participant interviews:

- What is your role at Ophelia's Place? What does it entail?

- What led you to working at Ophelia's Place? What is your background?
- If you could attempt to define the term 'youth empowerment', how would you describe it?
- Could you describe in detail how ....(area of staff member's expertise, e.g. drop-in or therapy)..... operates at OP?
- How do you feel .....(area of staff member's expertise, e.g. drop-in or therapy)..... empowers the youth at OP, if at all?
- Prevention work is difficult to measure, but would you be willing to share any examples or indicators of OP's impact that you have witnessed or experienced?
- How do you feel about OP removing the term 'at-risk' to describe the youth we work with? Please elaborate.
- OP describes itself as a 'prevention based' organization, how do you feel about the work we do to be dubbed as 'prevention work'? Please elaborate.
- From what you have experienced and seen in the community you work with, do you believe there are adequate levels of youth empowerment in (the community the staff works with e.g. Eugene/Albany/Junction City)?
- OP actively works to dismantle adultism throughout the organization, do you feel adultism is evident in larger community structures? If so, what needs to be done to mitigate this?
- Beyond what we are currently working towards here at OP, do you think there is anything missing in communities that could help empower youth?

Most interviews focused more on the interviewee's specific area of work within OP. I prefaced before the interviews took place that there is no expectation regarding the content of their answers, and that I was happy to allow the interviewee to guide the topics of conversation. However, almost all the interviews covered the key topics

regarding youth empowerment, at-risk language, adultism and community wellbeing.

### **3.3 Survey data**

The youth that utilize OP's services, including drop-in and school groups, are asked to fill out surveys with information pertaining to themselves and also how they feel about OP's services. For both drop-in and school groups there is a pre- and post-survey, completed in the beginning of the youths' time at OP, and at the end. These surveys gather a wide range of information spanning from basic demographics to their feelings about their bodies and sexuality. This data was anonymized for the purpose of this research.

The drop-in surveys attempt to gather information about the youth to better understand what services the youth would like to see, and how OP could curate services that could empower them in some way. The youth are encouraged to answer as many of the questions as possible, but are not required to if they don't feel comfortable for any reason. These surveys were done on paper up until recently; the youth now complete the surveys on an iPad. These statements discuss the nature and impact of the AOS services. All the statements asked in the pre survey is asked again with the same answering system. In addition, the post surveys require a text box answer where the youth is required to manually write their response, offering a qualitative aspect.

The school group pre surveys are completed by youth in enrolled in these programs on the first day of group. Both pre and post school group surveys are filled out by hand and ask questions both related to the school group itself, along with other more personal 'life' questions. The school group post surveys are completed by youth in the program on the last day of group, in the same classroom setting. The

post group surveys are different in the way they ask for feedback about their time in the school group, allowing facilitators to understand what worked and what didn't.

The survey questions listed in the appendix are answered by the youth using two different modes, depending on the question, the two answering Likert scales are:

1= Strongly disagree

2= Disagree

3= Somewhat disagree

4= Somewhat agree

5= Agree

6= Strongly agree

AND:

1= Not true at all

2= A little true

3= Pretty much true

4= Very much true

This survey data allows insight into the youth's perspectives. As I was never able to interview youth this data is the best indication of measuring the impact of OP whilst also understanding where a lot of the youth are at when they begin OP. For this research, the survey data offers glimpses into how the youth feel about OP and its impact on their lives and sense of self. This is particularly important as not having direct interviews with youth is a limitation of this study and an opportunity for future research.

### **3.4 Limitations and pivots**

I initially planned to interview the youth at OP, with my IRB allowing this; however, my approach proved not feasible in the context of OP and the time I had for

this research. While I was granted parental waivers for interviews and had the opportunity to interview the youth, I found it difficult to go ahead with the rigorous consent process with the youth. The consent process needed to include a conversation regarding my research, the interview, and a consent form that had to be signed by the youth which I felt was too overwhelming. Although I had built somewhat close relationships with the youth over the four-month period, I felt the complexities of the interview process made it too difficult and scary for the youth. Looking back, I should have looked at other options to gain insight from youth that did not involve a signature and discussion about the complexities of my research.

In the end, I made the decision to not interview the youth, for both the reasons mentioned but also because I felt it was very transactional and intimidating. I did not want the youth to perceive me differently or feel pressured to partake in my research, I wanted to ensure that my relationships with the youth remained authentic and trusting. This pivot away from interviewing youth did mean that my research would look different, and lack the first hand 'impact' accounts from the youth that I thought would add another layer to this thesis. However, I remain content with my decision, and the survey data does offer a brief glimpse into the youth's perception of OP's services.

## **CHAPTER 4: The blurriness of prevention work: Language as a weapon of marginalization**

In this chapter, I examine how the staff at Ophelia's Place understand and critique language used within the non-profit sector. Several years ago, as an organization, OP made the decision to remove the term 'at-risk' across all their platforms when describing the youth they serve, in an effort to remove any bias or discriminatory language from their mission. The term 'at-risk' is multifaceted and intersectional, and is predominantly discussed in this research in the context of prevention work, with this chapter exploring language within the service of non-profit work. With OP labelling themselves as a 'prevention-based' organization, this discussion aims to better understand how these descriptors of service can further suggest that these youth are 'at-risk' and in need of alternative support. This chapter seeks to understand how language shapes positionality, specifically how terms such as 'at-risk' makes assumptions of vulnerability, privilege or deficiency in youths' lives. This discussion also touches on the role language plays within non-profit funding, and the moral struggle OP has with their use of language for different audiences, such as the youth or donors. The following discussions took place within my semi-structured interviews with staff members at OP. The staff were very close to this issue, and much of these discussions sparked passionate and urgent conversations.

### **4.1 What do you mean by 'at-risk'?**

All interviewees discussed the term 'at-risk' in a negative light and agreed the removal of the term from OP's platforms was important. Many, if not all, of the interviewees have had extensive experience working with youth from diverse backgrounds, and felt passionately about minimizing use of the term. A key theme across the answers to this question was how the staff felt the term did not address any

systemic or institutional issues, and framed it as an unhelpful label. The answers from most, if not all, staff aligned with the literature critiquing the term 'at-risk', touching on how identity and physical circumstances of youth was what constituted the label. The staff critiqued how the term lacks insight into the lived experiences and structural barriers that result in the youth being put in vulnerable situations. One of my first interviews was with the OP Training and Outreach Director, who is the lead facilitator of all OP's training programs, including the yearly training for all senior staff and interns. She has an extensive background working with families and people in vulnerable situations, and I witnessed her talent for training folks serving vulnerable communities. She has been an employee of OP since 2011, being one of the longest serving employees I interviewed. On the OP website it states that she, "has expertise in issues of youth advocacy, girls/women's empowerment poverty, eating disorders, body positivity, anti-oppression work, healthy communication, and team building." Our interview was long and informative, and indicated she had a part in removing 'at-risk' from OP's mission: *"Because I think I went on a fiery tirade about it years ago..."*

She had plenty to say about her qualms with this term:

*"it's not very deep, it's not looking at systemic issues, it's also not looking at the nuanced situations of individual families and kids... I just don't think it's helpful. And I think that people also have a lot of inherent bias around it. So we run into that, a lot of people, 'oh, you're for at risk girls', and we're like, what does that even mean? Yeah, like any girl could potentially be at risk, because she's a girl."*

The OP Therapist and Clinical Director and I discussed these discriminatory terms in relation to access and societal vulnerabilities. She comes to OP with a background in therapy and crisis response for sexual assault survivors, and therefore understands therapy as a form of prevention that is important for the future stability and wellbeing of youth. In response to the question asking where she sits with the term 'at-risk' within the therapy space, she responded:

*“People are targeted because they are vulnerable, accessible and less credible. Those are the people who are most at risk of harm in our culture.”*

Describing these populations as ‘accessible’ in relation to ‘at-risk’ is interesting as marginalized communities are often the ones who are ‘touchable’ by society’s oppressive systems, in comparison to wealthier more elite communities that are often able to isolate themselves from these risks. These communities being labelled as accessible leaves them as the ones most impacted by systemic discrimination and exploited – therefore being labelled as ‘at-risk’ by hegemonic actors.

The former OP Rural School Programme Coordinator approached the term ‘at-risk’ in relation to political correctness. We had a conversation regarding ‘at-risk’ youth in rural settings, as that is where the majority of their background and work with youth is focused. Their passion for youth work stems from their own experiences growing up in a rural environment and identifying the absence of intersectionality in their school experience. In response to my questions regarding their tensions with the term ‘at-risk’, they responded,

*“that phrase is being used to be more like polite or PC around saying that there is a youth who has like some concerning behaviours or concerning things from like a punitive standpoint, and that's not super respectful, nor is it really accurate”*

Their response highlights how the term ‘at-risk’ may euphemize a lot of very real and worrying behaviors of youth, and is unhelpful as it does not point to solutions. Their answer also discusses how the term itself is punitive, as mentioned in the literature, and seems to blame the youth for their shortcomings and not the systems that created or fostered these conditions in which the behaviors emerge. Their answer points to the term ‘political correctness,’ and how ‘at-risk’ emerged to highlight settings that were trying to identify needs but has become culturally incompetent as it is now used as a label or marker. This chapter goes into more detail regarding the use of this language in

the funding space, however I think it is important to note how 'at-risk' is widely accepted based on the fact that for many, it feels like an 'acceptable' way to label populations who are displaying certain behaviors or are in certain circumstances.

The OP Bilingual and Bicultural therapist dived into discriminatory language based on race specifically. With much of her background and work at OP dealing with racially marginalized groups, she centers the lived experiences of marginalized communities. On the OP website her approach to therapy is described as, "works to create a safe therapeutic space for people of all identities, particularly those who are faced with oppression and hold marginalized identities." I appreciate her take on this language as the term 'at-risk' itself is intersectional, and it is important to highlight the more nuanced aspects of the term. After asking her how she feels about the term 'at-risk', she stated,

*"at risk is especially like a term that is often like, paired with certain communities, especially communities of color.... why are they at risk? Like, what about that specific community? it has nothing to do with that community? It has to do with, like, all of the systems that we live in, and the different things that people experience, oftentimes because of their identities."*

The OP School Program Director and I had an insightful conversation in regard to the content provided in the OP school groups, which often landed on discrimination through language. She too has experience working with female-identified youth and is passionate about bringing the experience of OP to schools in the wider Eugene area. She highlighted how 'at-risk' is such a widely utilized term, and in line with the literature mentions the certain 'picture' painted when using 'at-risk' to describe a population. In response to the question asking her to describe her feelings towards the term 'at-risk' she responded:

*"It paints like a very specific picture of like, again, this quote unquote, broken and or like, quote, unquote, needing to be fixed, young person."*

My interviews also expanded to the OP Direct Service Interns, as they are the ones who work directly with OP youth and can therefore provide different insights. Using the alias Lexi, a now former OP Direct Service Intern, sat down with me for an interview to further discuss our experiences in direct service. With an academic background in psychology, and experience working with youth full-time, they helpfully articulated the tensions and critiques they had with the term 'at-risk':

*"it's a term that you use that like, is making a generalisation about a type of person. And I think that at risk is a term that is a label... The idea that like if you label someone as deviant, they will be deviant because they have been labelled as deviant. And so society will expect a certain behaviour. If you label someone as at risk, they're going to engage in behaviours that are more risky, because everyone is expecting them to do these risky behaviours, right?"*

Lexi's discussion as 'at-risk' as a marker of deviance relates back to literature surrounding the ways 'at-risk' is used in the school space. The term reinforces its own meaning, and therefore is not helpful in offering intervention to help the youth better cope and navigate their circumstances. Lexi touches on our society's obsession with labels, and further expresses how they feel the label actually perpetuates negative outcomes for youth.

Within all the answers to the question regarding the term 'at-risk', there was clear theme that all people are 'at-risk' for something. As the OP Training and Outreach Director touched on, any girl is 'at-risk' for a multitude of things, and as previously discussed in the literature, is not tied to identity factors but instead the systems and institutions that perpetuate circumstances. The following excerpts were taken from the interviews and are a continuation from their initial discussion of the term 'at-risk'.

*"of course you are at risk, all you are at risk."* – OP Therapist and Clinical Director.

*"I don't love the term, because everyone is at risk for something."* – OP School Program Director.

*“you could certainly argue that anybody is at risk for anything.”* – OP Communication Director.

*“I think it's not fair to label kids at risk, because, you know, everyone's at risk of something.”* – Lexi, former intern

Although I understand this argument, of course - all people navigate and experience the world and its complexities, and we *technically* all are ‘at-risk’ of something - I feel that the ‘everyone is at risk’ discussion can in some ways take away from addressing pressing systemic structures, as it lumps us all into one universal category and fails to acknowledge our intersections. The interviews regarding this topic revealed that in response to ‘at-risk’ targeting and alienating certain youths, interviewees combated that alienation inherent in that label by expanding it to all people, I assume, in hopes to lessen the harshness of the term. The solution in combatting this language is perhaps not to label everyone ‘at-risk’ in hopes of eliminating discrimination based on intersectionality. ‘At-risk’ uses people’s intersections or factors related to their identity and circumstances to categorize them, so we must acknowledge that intersections are an integral part of our society and how it discriminates. Everyone is not ‘at-risk’ in this context, and we should aim to move away from believing this is a solution to the incorrect use of this term.

#### **4.2 What are we preventing, exactly?**

As the OP School Program Director mentioned in her interview, the assumption that ‘at-risk’ youth need ‘fixing’ is what brings me to the term ‘prevention work’. What is it that we are preventing? And, why do certain youth *need* prevention based support and others don’t? In addition to asking interviewees about the term ‘at-risk’, I followed up asking about their thoughts on OP being labelled as a ‘prevention-based’ organization, and how they feel about that term in relation to the work OP does. I began asking this question after I had been working alongside other interns directly with youth, and found

at times OP was doing intervention or even crisis work. The interviews reveal that OP staff do not hold tension with the term 'prevention work' in the same way they do with 'at-risk', however, prevention work is blurry and difficult to measure in comparison to crisis intervention. The OP Communication Director, who is very active and present in the 'front facing' OP language discussed her tensions with OP using prevention-based to describe their work,

*"that prevention-based thing is really one of those things that we're kicking around right now. Do we want to hold on to that term? As organization or not?"*

I appreciated the honesty when discussing how OP intends on evolving and moving forward with language as an organization, as I understand the importance of describing services in the non-profit sector. The OP School Program Director approached the term 'prevention' in the context of wider society,

*"when you say prevention-based how much of our work is truly prevention based in a culture that is not prevention based at all?"*

This goes back to my question asking what prevention work is really trying to achieve in a society that is obsessed with labels and is quick to describe any non-normative youth as 'at-risk'. This answer made me think about what does prevention work look like in the context of OP, as at times it does feel like OP is intervening instead of preventing based on the traumas and experiences of youth today. The OP Eugene Youth Program Coordinator, who has an academic background in Human Development and Family Services and overlooks all the Eugene AOS operations expressed her definition of OP's prevention-based work,

*"prevention work, is more like, let's provide, like building blocks and like resources for people that could end up in a crisis in the future. I don't so much have an issue with the term prevention work."*

*"We're going into it just thinking that like, you know, life is hard and things can happen. And we just want to like make sure that like the youth that come into this*

*space are like equipped to, like deal with any situation that may come up in their lives. So that's sort of like how I see prevention."*

I understand prevention work in the way it aims to educate and support youth *so that* they can gain certain tools that will help them better navigate life. However, I still feel that there is this assumption placed onto youth when determining the 'societal requirements' of someone needing prevention. Another interview with a long time OP Direct Service Intern, and Youth Program Assistant, under the alias Diane, led to another approach in understanding 'what is prevention work' and how it operates. Diane has an academic background in Psychology and works with youth in varying Direct Service environments. described prevention work as holding an assumption about youth,

*"that goes to the assumption that these kids are untouched already, or like that they haven't experienced life"*

This is perhaps where this research began to focus on the tension with the term 'prevention', as the more my observations understood the experiences of youth, it felt as if OP is not 'preventing' as much as they are intervening in some way also. This adultist notion that all youth are pure and innocent beings perpetuates the idea that prevention is needed so they do not end up in crisis situations. These crisis situations refer to behaviors or experiences that are undesirable for youth, hence the connection to 'at-risk'. So then, is prevention work a way to 'save' youth from being labelled 'at-risk'? No, because then why would organization (like OP in the past) communicate prevention-based service to 'at-risk' youth? This language continues to feel cyclical and reinforcing itself, but the reality is that most youth that utilize OP's services have experiences that speak to them not being totally naïve to the future and how adolescence operates. Perhaps the term 'prevention work' itself is outdated. Does it nod to a 'before' of an impending doom? How can we better label this kind of work so that it doesn't

perpetuate the idea that these youth *must* be 'prevented' from engaging or doing something seemingly negative?

### **4.3 The good the bad and the ugly: Funding**

While important to investigate the problems tied to certain terms in the non-profit sector, funding is a key reason why labels and descriptions are so important. There is a reason why terms like 'at-risk', 'prevention', 'intervention' and 'crisis' work exist across the language of non-profits, because it provides funders with the information needed to categorize the type of work and demographics being served. It is counterproductive to critique aspects of the non-profit sector without discussing the influence of funding. The OP 2022 Annual Report states, "The bulk of Ophelia's Place's income is from the generous support of foundations and individuals. Ophelia's Place uses most of its funds to directly serve girls with after-school activities, therapy, empowerment groups, and more" (p. 4). The report then expresses OP's thanks to 33 foundations and approximately 60 organizations for their donorship (p. 5). Figure 1 shows the breakdown of OP's donorship, and the two highest sources of income are foundations and individual donors, respectively.

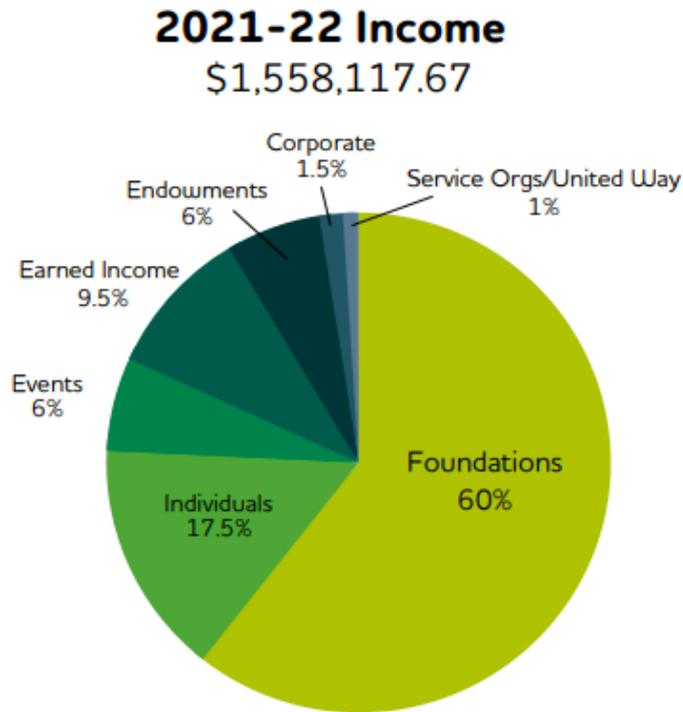


Figure 5. *Ophelia's Place 2021-2022 Annual Report.*

The OP Communication Director dives into the struggle she faces when participating in OP's outreach and grant proposals. Referring back to the term 'at-risk', she states how,

*"I think the only reason or the only way that it could be helpful is like, being able to get the paperwork done"*

Funders want to understand the entire mission of the non-profits they support, and as the Communication Director alluded, 'at-risk' offers the ability to paint a picture of what youth OP serves. In addition to labelling OP's work as 'prevention based', funders can quickly understand OP in a very simplified way that allows them to categorize OP into their own boxes of non-profit work. The OP Therapist and Clinical Director also touched on language and funding at OP:

*"There are grants that provide services to at risk youth, right. So if you can fit your need into this grant opportunity, this funding opportunity in the non-profit industrial system. Yeah. Right, then that's how you are able to do this work, right, we still have to participate in all of these structures and all of these systems in order to get the funding to do this."*

The unfortunate reality of non-profit work is that raising funds is inevitably a double sided coin, constantly navigating the push-and-pull of staying true to the mission and also ensuring that enough funding can be secured to achieve that mission. The OP

Communication Director again expresses her frustration with this aspect of her work,

*“It's hard, because you're like, I really want us to support, you know, the, direction that OP is going with, how are we really talking about ourselves? But how do we do it in a way we're not.... just not connecting with those donors, or those funders or even the community?”*

*“Why are you making us jump through so many hoops? .... if you really care about the youth in your community? Like why put up so many barriers to supporting that group of kids?”*

There is no proposed solution or alternative to funding being hinted at here. However, shedding light on the complexities of language within the non-profit sector can bring these layers to the surface and make those who are so quick to critique the use of language to pause and acknowledge that this isn't a black and white conversation. This chapter aims to highlight the tensions that OP faces with their own language use, and what it can say about how non-profits exist in today's society.

## **CHAPTER 5: Youth empowerment as a tool of resistance**

This chapter frames youth empowerment as a tool of resistance against the adultist systems that hinder the success and potential of youth. This research also aims to better define the term ‘youth empowerment’ in the context of prevention work; as the literature demonstrates there are complexities associated with applying empowerment in a universal manner. Below, I continue to examine how youth empowerment operates within the walls and programs of OP, through the interviews with staff and my own observations as a volunteer and staff member. I end the chapter with analysis of survey data that attempts to quantify the impact of OP, and which speaks to the difficulties of measuring prevention work while also identifying the strategies OP uses to empower youth successfully. Specifically, I examine survey data collected by OP after the youth have participated in OP programs alongside staff experiences. Ultimately, this chapter works to demonstrate the ‘power’ of empowerment.

### **5.1 How would you define the term ‘Youth empowerment’?**

The literature suggests no universally agreed upon definition of youth empowerment, as the term ‘empowerment’ is used across all intersections. As discussed in the literature, empowerment is socially and culturally constructed, dependent on lived experiences. This research does not propose a universal definition of youth empowerment, as I don’t believe one exists, but it suggests dimensions to consider. In examining what youth empowerment looks like in the context of OP we can understand how it operates in this space. These conversations took place within my semi-structured interviews with OP staff, and the staff discussed a wide range of youth empowerment definitions. Although answered differently, there was a common understanding of the key components of youth empowerment including autonomy, choice, listening, believing, and offering tools.

My first interview as part of this research was with the OP Youth Program Director, whom is now my supervisor and in many ways a great mentor. Her academic background is in public health, and her MPH thesis focused on youth in Kenya, and she has additional professional experience serving youth in both prevention and crisis environments. With our hot teas in our hands, we sat for over an hour discussing all things OP, and although my first interview consisted of non-refined, clunky questions, there was still much important conversation. We hovered around the definition of youth empowerment for a while, and a key piece she shared in terms of her own definition of youth empowerment was:

*I think it's really this idea of like believing where, I believe in you, I believe you. I believe what you're saying is true and valid for you and your experience, that I give you opportunity and support to lift you up in whatever that is.*

This was the first instance where the emphasis on believing in youth was mentioned. This became a regular occurrence in the answers which was unexpected, as this research viewed empowerment as a personal venture and not one that relies on the validation or perceptions of others. However, this first answer asserted that we are discussing the empowerment of youth, and that regardless of how OP works to combat adultism, it is a fact that youth need adult support to truly be empowered. Youth are still learning and navigating the world, therefore needing adult guidance and advice about these experiences. Youth look up to adults, whether that be parents, older siblings, teachers, coaches or even older friends, and it is our job to foster a space that allows growth and empowerment. The OP School Program Director provided a similar approach to defining youth empowerment focusing on the importance of adults believing in youth's self and identity:

*"Young people believing that who they are, is important and that they matter. And that they know stuff."*

And OP's Training and Outreach Director also provided a similar take discussing adults helping youth navigate their way through the world, specifically at OP:

*"all our choices and our program design, and our way of interacting with youth oriented around how do how does this create more opportunity for this young person to reclaim their own power? And from that, hopefully generate a sense of worthiness in the world. And belonging."*

Another theme was the importance of adults offering 'tools' or 'lessons' to youth in regards to building empowerment which was particularly salient in my interview with OP's Albany Youth Program Coordinator. Although we met over Zoom, we discussed the importance of OP in its various locations. Her academic background is in public health and family services, and she has experience working in school settings with elementary-aged youth. Due to Albany being one of OP's newer locations, she oversees both the operations and the ongoing development of OP Albany. She discussed what youth empowerment means to her, saying:

*"helping them become more independent and confident in their skills and abilities and knowledge. Also... like reminds me of the growth mindset. And I see that a lot in our spaces. Like, encouraging a growth mindset."*

This growth mindset is a key part of OP's ideology and approach to youth, as it centers youth autonomy instead of adult intervention. This interview used the example of the common situation where youth get discouraged when they feel they aren't succeeding in something, and instead of us as adults offering to do it for them or even help, we first encourage the youth to keep trying or have them do an alternative activity. The goal is to support youth to build independence through completing activities on their own, and making their own decisions. The OP Junction City Program Coordinator also touched on how as adults we have a kind of responsibility to provide guidance for youth in terms of empowerment. Her experience lies in recreation management and serving diverse populations in outdoors and out of school spaces. In our interview, she emphasized the

need for youth spaces in rural communities such as Junction City. In response to what youth empowerment means to her she shared:

*“Youth can kind of be brave and strong to make their own decisions and feel really good about them. And we kind of provide areas or we provide like the backbone by being here and like being willing to talk about hard things with them and they can kind of figure out the rest and make their own choices.”*

Several interviews touched on the importance of choice and decisions, highlighting the role of autonomy in understanding empowerment. This is how I originally approached the term youth empowerment, however, as I mentioned previously, I failed to consider the importance of the role of adults in youths lives. As this quote demonstrates, adults indeed do have an important role in fostering a youth’s autonomy and character, and youth empowerment does not mean leaving them alone to experience life without support. The OP Communication Director continues this discussion with her answer about how she defines youth empowerment:

*“Giving them tools they need to make their own decisions, but to also find their voices and their own resilience to be able to go out and make the changes that they think are important for the community, and to know that their voices matter,”*

It was an interesting observation to see how each one of these staff members at OP mentioned the role of adults when asked about defining youth empowerment. I was not expecting so much thought about the cultivation of empowerment for youth through adults, perhaps because my focus on youth and youth empowerment was centering this as a youth-led and centered concept and less about adult influence. Yet, my interviews and the literature note the realities that youth rely on adults across many contexts, and even as they grow in independence and self-identity, youth need some tools and encouragement from adults. This observation takes me to the examination of how OP works to empower the youth they serve, as a large part of OP’s youth empowerment positions adults as a constructive presence to help youth reach their full potential and

practice their autonomy. In amplifying and validating youth voices, us as adults can impact the confidence of youth to encourage them to stand in their own power.

## **5.2 Youth empowerment at OP**

With these definitions in mind, understanding how OP structures their programs for youth can help identify how OP as an organization defines and operationalizes empowerment. Empowering the youth they serve is in their mission statement, “helping girls make healthy life choices through empowerment, education, and support.” (OP website, ‘About’ section). My interviews with the Direct Service Interns were particularly important for this understanding as they work directly with the youth in the informal and formal times of drop-in, school groups and workshops.

According to the staff interviews, the AOS programs at OP are the most ‘loose’ in structure due to it being entirely based on the youth’s needs and desires. This is not to say there are not boundaries and rules to ensure safety, however, in spaces like drop-in, every day looks completely different and is responsive to what youth want to do. A Direct Service Intern that I had the pleasure of speaking with was Camryn. She has an academic background in psychology and applies this approach to her work at OP. Now a friend and regular co-worker, Camryn and I sat down together for an interview after a drop in shift at OP, and discussed so many of the beautiful moments we have experienced as interns working in the space. In terms of drop-in, Camryn explained how OP encourages youth autonomy and decision making in various ways, such as:

*“them having the choice to come at any time, or any day that we’re open is really big, because I think a lot of community supports are really strict on attendance. So being able to be like, yeah, you can come Monday from three to six. And the next Monday, maybe not, is really big on autonomy. And then also, like, we don’t have parents like monitoring, like they’re not allowed to come into the space.”*

The lack of parents and guardians in the space, I agreed, was a key aspect of empowerment for all OP programs. Many of the youth are home-schooled in some capacity, so therefore OP is one of the only spaces where these youth can exist without their parent or guardian present. Another key aspect of empowerment in the AOS space is what we call 'snack', which is free access to food for the youth. Snack at OP allows unlimited access to the food served, and overall positive food and body talk. As Camryn discusses:

*"I think another big aspect is snack. Because we don't limit how much they can eat. We don't - we try not to limit like any, or we try not to impose any boundaries around food, like, 'oh, you can only have this much' or like, 'ooh, negatively talking about food where it's like, you're gonna eat that much popcorn really, like?' I'm so trying to do the opposite of that. And like, have positive conversations about food and have like, yeah, you're hungry, cool eat, then come join us for this game. You know, like, I think that's really big. And then also having the autonomy to just do what they want in the space, whether that's crafting or playing a game or chilling by themselves, or having a conversation."*

Lexi also touches on the loose aspect of AOS as an empowering tool, specifically the importance of freedom and boundary testing:

*"think it's just it's, it's giving them a place where they can be themselves with the freedom as long as they're engaging in behaviours that are safe... I think we empower the kids to explore and navigate boundaries in AOS, where it's a safe place where they can kind of test and see whether or not we're safe people. And it gives them a person to talk to."*

The OP Youth Program Director also had much to say about how the AOS programs empower youth, noting they:

*"provide opportunities for creativity, and silliness, and really embrace being our authentic selves, so that they feel comfortable and confident in being their authentic self... no matter what kind of day they've had, no matter what kind of place that they're in how they feel, you know that they can just come and be. And that each day is a new day."*

This is the breadth of AOS, that I also got to see first-hand in my participant observations that we as interns and as an organization meet youth where they're at, every single day; that regardless of the specific circumstances a youth could be having at

home or in school, or if the youth is navigating a difficult relationship, or if a youth achieved an important milestone, OP is a space where every youth is approached differently and can receive support based on individual needs. This is a unique space because many after-school programs are very structured or are centered around one specific activity. At OP AOS, activities include playing games, completing a puzzle, arts and crafts or, just taking a nap in the Zen room alone. AOS allows youth to build trust and relationships with both the adult interns and their youth peers. The fact that after school drop-in and reoccurring workshops are always available at OP, there is no specific time line or pressure to progress a certain way and youth can engage at their own capacity. It is a space that can meet ups and downs with consistency for youth allowing them to practice their autonomy in a way that they may not have space to do elsewhere.

In addition to drop in, are the AOS workshops that require registration and are focused on more specific interests and topics. In Fall 2023, when this research took place, there were three weekly workshops. The first one was Makerspace, which is an arts and crafts based workshop that allows youth to explore and further strengthen their art skills and passions. Lexi co-facilitated Makerspace, and discussed how they believe Makerspace empowers youth:

*“Like, we have these kids who are really into crafts, which just seems like very stereotypically girly, right? And like, I get to come in and be like, actually, no, like crafts are for everyone. Like everyone gets to do crafts. I’m like, let’s teach you new skills, right? Like, you know how to paint. Okay, like, let’s teach you oil painting. Now let’s teach you how to do mapmaking. Let’s teach you how to bind a book. Right? So there’s a lot of like, empowering them to learn new things. And just being like, try new things, right? Like you can find your thing. And then maybe like they find something that the main thing never would have found before.”*

Makerspace is one of the more popular workshops due to the general youth population at OP being passionate about arts and crafts. The workshop also utilizes community

members who will facilitate a week sharing their personal skills with OP. Makerspace shows that in building skills related to art, for example, it is also building confidence and creative autonomy.

The second Fall 2023 workshop was Fanime, which is a club based around anime and fandoms and has an intern who is also passionate about these topics facilitate activities on these topics. I sat down with another Direct Service Intern, under the alias of Charlie, who was the lead facilitator for Famine club every Tuesday night at OP Eugene. I have worked with Charlie during my whole OP experience and now consider them a friend in addition to co-worker. With an academic background in clinical psychology and sociology, Charlie and I discussed the various aspects of OP that we especially enjoy as interns. They have a personal passion for anime and fandoms which shines through in their work with the Fanime workshop. I asked them about their experience facilitating Fanime:

*“So just stuff to do with like the general like anime fandom TV show kind of vibe. And I think that empowers them because like I mentioned earlier, I think it is very nice and important. for them to see that here are these like 22, like 23 year old adults, like we are so into these things that they are also into. And we're showing them that like, it's okay to be like loud and proud about these like nerdy things that you enjoy. Because it's fun, and it's enjoyable. And like, I think that as like kids that they kind of need that because they may feel like they're being ostracised for liking stuff like that.”*

Lexi also co-facilitated Fanime with Charlie in the Fall of 2023, so I asked them about their experience with the Fanime workshop and how they feel it empowers the youth:

*“And a lot of that culture definitely gets a lot of hate. And there's a lot of misunderstanding around it. And it's a very specific knowledge base. And so our idea is that with Fanime, we are presenting these kids with two adults who like, love this thing and still do this thing. I'm, like, still engaged in this space, right? Like, me, and my co facilitator, we still like are watching animes. Like, we text about it all the time. You know, like, we both grew up, like on Tumblr in the fandoms, right? Like, we wrote fanfiction, that sort of stuff. And we love it, right? So like, we're giving these kids a space where they get to see you like, these people exist. And like, this is a thing you can do as an adult. And like, if this is something you're into, like, own it, be happy about it.”*

This highlights the power that the interns have in exemplifying to the youth how to remain connected to your passions into adulthood. The workshops are important because they are an opportunity for youth to connect with others who share similar interests and build community. Lexi continued to discuss the power of these workshops:

*"I just love it, because they're sharing this thing with us. And I asked them, I was like, 'Oh, do you ever, like talk about this with your friends?' And they were like, 'no, because my friends get sick of me talking about it.' Right? And so like, it was really kind of this cool moment where we got to see like, we were empowering this youth to like, talk about this thing they love because they knew we weren't going to judge them or be like, 'Oh, my god, stop talking about it.' Like we were like, no, we want to listen, we want to hear what you have to say we want to hear about your favourite show, like, please share it with us in a way that is appropriate for the space. And like, we get to do that for them, which is really awesome."*

This is another key strength of the OP AOS workshops, that many youth don't often get a chance to engage with these passions in their life and OP offers that space. This not only provides a space for growth and passions to thrive for youth, but also a safe space where youth know they won't be judged. The third and final Fall 2023 AOS workshop was Treat Yourself Thursday, where youth sign up for activities centered in self-care and nurturing our mind and bodies. I was a co-facilitator for this workshop alongside Camryn and we had a lot of fun doing face masks, painting our nails, amongst other activities. This focus on self-care is important because for many youth, this workshop was their first introduction to this practice, which is a fundamental part of mental health maintenance. This workshop modelled self-care to the youth and highlighted the importance of caring for ourselves, and, in terms of empowerment, Camryn stated:

*"I think treat yourself club specifically, is giving, like the girl, the youth that we are working with in that space, like, an opportunity to do something that the group enjoys, and like that, like each girl enjoys, but getting to do that as a group. So being like, like treating yourself in terms of like baking, like that is a very common, like self-care thing is like I'm going to bake tonight, but getting to do that with the people that are in the shared space."*

A large part of Treat Yourself was the group aspect, where, as Camryn discussed for baking, we did it in groups and the youth had to work together in order to bake their dish. This was great because there aren't a lot of opportunities at OP for the youth to work together in this way or to practice skills like collaboration due to the space focusing on individual autonomy and personal needs. These interview answers also link back to Jennings et al's (2008) 'Critical Social theory of Youth Empowerment' dimension: 'Meaningful participation and engagement' as they highlight the importance of youth engagement and participation in the OP drop-in space. This was an expected finding, as the OP drop-in space is marketed as a place where youth engage and participate in various things related to their interests. The observations also aligned with this finding, as a key part of drop-in as an intern is to encourage youth engagement and participation in some form.

School groups are another key aspect of how OP seeks to provide empowerment to the youth they serve. Unlike AOS, school groups are very structured and follow a specific curriculum based on adolescent 'girl' experiences. The school groups are organized and facilitated by OP interns alongside the school program staff at OP, and are labelled as 'School empowerment groups'. The name implies its agenda: to empower the youth they serve in these schools. The curriculum also reflects this, as discussed in Chapter 4, every week focuses on a different topic related to adolescent personal and interpersonal relationships. These groups offer direct education about adolescent experiences in a classroom setting. Not all vehicles of empowerment look alike, and OP practices this with the parallel of AOS's active application and physical autonomy based approach, alongside the OP school groups education based approach. Whilst discussing the mechanics of OP's school groups and why offering these services to school is integral, the OP Youth School Program Director herself mentioned:

*"I think it's really interesting about, you know, our programming, taking place in school is school is kind of a place where adultism runs rampant, right, students are told where to be, how to be one time to right, like, you sit down, and you're quiet, and you're doing all of this, right. And you sit and you learn, and you are expected to show respect, right."*

Empowerment looks differently in school groups in comparison to AOS, as this is less about physical autonomy and 'application' of empowerment, but instead using education as a tool to help youth understand their own experiences. In some ways, one could view school groups as more true 'prevention work' as they actively are offering tools and knowledge that can help these youth better navigate life experiences in the future. The discussion regarding school groups points to Jennings et al's (2008) 'Critical Social theory of Youth Empowerment' dimension: 'Equitable power-sharing between youth and adults' as the school groups aim to provide an equal and empowering space for youth in a school context. The observations showed how at times during drop-in, there are moments of authority required for redirection, due to the drop-in space being more loosely structured. School groups, as discussed by the School Program Director and other interns take a more horizontal approach to empowerment where both youth and interns are sharing a space for productive conversation and empowerment to occur. OP's school groups illustrate how words and collective discussions are important, and OP's former Rural Youth School Program Coordinator explains this:

*"So I think that it can be really empowering to be able to talk about experiences and connect them to your sense of development. So being able to have the language to identify experiences of having a really great friendship, or having a really unhealthy friendship, or being able to identify and talk about, you know, body image and your experiences with that can be really empowering to really claim that experience for yourself. And to also do so in a supportive environment in which other peers are, you know, just naming your experience, and validating those emotions and experiences, I think can be really empowering."*

The OP Direct Service Interns also had a lot to say in terms of how the school groups work to empower youth; specifically, how as interns we can model empowerment by

sharing our own experiences and stories in these spaces. Diane highlighted this in her interview:

*"I feel like it's just like literally teaching them and just like telling them like, from my own experience, it's just like really just sharing stories and I feel like a lot of empathy building and that is like, a way that like, I think we're empowering them... And so because of like the rapport of it, it's easy for me to like kind of like model that and like by empowering them and like just giving them the knowledge and like the just the direct tools and give them all these handouts."*

Lexi also emphasized the importance of education when empowering youth, as they highlighted both the impact of combating adultist traditions in education spaces and also providing a space to talk about experiences:

*"I think that information is power, right? And so by giving these kids a space to like, learn about it, and then also talk about it, I'm like, be like, oh, like, this is how my experience relates to this thing we're talking about, we're giving them a moment to see that, like, their experiences are valid, and their experiences are important. And their experiences aren't trivial, right? This isn't just like the girl drama that we talked about. Relational aggression is a real thing. People ignoring your boundaries is like, really, it's intense, right? And so I think by giving people that information, and by giving them a space to like, talk about like, 'Oh my God, I didn't know this thing had a name' or like, 'oh, I experienced this' you're giving them that empowerment, where they get to take back the narrative, and they get to make it their own."*

There was also an emphasis on the importance of naming experiences, and how through identifying certain behaviors the youth can be empowered. Camryn discussed this along with the importance of this type of curriculum in schools, emphasizing how there is a need for this type of content in schools:

*"I think all of the topics that we go over are things that aren't talked about in school, I mean, at least when I was in elementary, middle and high school, like those weren't topics that you openly talked about... And so being able to just name that, for the girls in the groups, I think is huge. Because it's like, wow, I experienced that. And I didn't realise there was like a whole concept about it, like a whole name for it. So I think naming it is really important."*

As Camryn discussed, there are many gaps in the school curriculum, but confronting that is outside of the scope of this research. However, it is clear based on the feedback from youth in the school groups that much of the content delivered in the OP school

groups has never been discussed before by these youth. This next section will highlight how participants identified the impacts of OP in both AOS and school groups.

### **5.3 Measuring empowerment: The impact of OP**

Measuring prevention work is difficult due to how ‘progress’ in a space like OP looks vastly different for each and every youth. ‘Progress’ at OP is not linear, and therefore is more difficult to be measured using more traditional quantitative indicators. From the perspective of staff, the impact of OP is often small special moments and feelings where staff witness a glimpse of change in a youth’s behavior or something brief that a youth mentions to an intern. However, the findings suggest that OP has a profound impact on youth, but due to the nature of this research could not be fully identified. These moments are difficult to capture, but they are extremely powerful and I believe that OP could implement more data collection methods to better capture the special impact of their services. The question of, ‘In your own way, could you discuss the impact of OP? Perhaps there was a specific moment that comes to mind?’ sparked many different scenarios. Most of the interviewees agreed that this question is difficult to answer in a ‘formal’ setting, but many responded with some beautiful examples of how OP impacts youth. Most notably, the OP Bilingual and Bicultural Therapist shared a discussion she had with an OP youth:

*“Something that is cool and different about like, quantifying things and therapy is that we have a treatment plan. And so we do see progress in that way. So like the first example that comes to my mind is, I have a client who is like, visually, really socially anxious and has like, a pretty low self-esteem. And recently, they were talking about how they don’t experience their social anxiety here at OP. And I asked like, Why do you think that is? And they said, like, OP is a welcoming community, like here everybody talks to one another.”*

Impact is not often verbalized by youth in this way, mainly because at OP we don’t ask or pressure youth to discuss their feelings about the programs or themselves. Also, many youth don’t feel extremely inclined to express their emotions in an explicit way, so

hearing therapists discuss these moments directly exemplifies how some youth view OP as a safe and welcoming space. This discussion speaks to the Jennings et al's (2008) 'Critical Social theory of Youth Empowerment' dimension, 'A welcoming and safe environment'. This was an expected finding, as the observations also revealed this to be true, however it is crucial to hear this perspective from a youth. Natalie, an OP Direct Service intern with an academic background in psychology and gender studies, discussed OP's impact from her own experience as a youth and seeing the parallel:

*"There was, and I guess still is so much out there in terms of like, toxic portrayals of relationships in your teen years in books and film and media and stuff that like, I wish I had an OP when I was 13 to learn what like a healthy relationship looks like."*

Furthermore, the former OP Rural Youth School Program Coordinator also touched on some key moments of impact in the context of school groups:

*"I think some of my favourite moments from like, empowerment groups are the weeks where we talk about gender stereotypes, really defining what a gender stereotype is, and talking about that, because it is a moment where I see a group of us who up until this point, maybe haven't really known each other very well suddenly be like, 'Oh, my gosh, yeah, I do feel stereotyped in the way that I feel pressured to dress a certain way' or 'the way that I'm expected to act' or like, 'these unfair things, I've heard my parents tell my siblings' and seeing a group of folks be able to just light up with the like, I have so much to say about this thing is really indicative of this is something that they've been experiencing that now they have a space to be able to share about. And those are moments that are really meaningful for me."*

The OP Albany Youth Program Coordinator also had a moment to share in terms of impact:

*"there was this girl that started coming earlier this year. So she was here for probably six months. And when she first started coming, she was very, like, chaotic. And like, really, like yeah, just all over the place. And she would talk a lot about like, people at school and just like what, you know, drama, and like, just all of the things, which is totally fine. And, like, valid, we would do a lot of one on one conversations, and like, you know, what's going on today? Like, okay, what can we do you know, or do you just want me to listen today?.... And so yeah, at first it was like, you know, a lot of redirection a lot of like conversations, etc. But like, over the course of like, a couple of months, we saw ginormous growth in her like it was incredible. And so I do like at least like in our space the growth that we saw like I know that it was like a product of like our impact and our investment in her."*

Although less direct, these are the small and subtle moments where impact is seen at OP and as discussed in prior chapters, this *is* prevention work. The difficulty of measuring and quantifying these beautiful moments is an ongoing struggle for prevention-based organizations such as OP. Speaking from my own experience as a volunteer and employee at OP, these moments are integral to continuing our work, as they often outweigh the more tiring and demanding moments.

While I was unable to interview the youth themselves, I was given access to OP's anonymous post surveys from both AOS and school groups of 2022-2023. The post surveys offer a qualitative aspect where youth express their thoughts and feelings about the program and space. I analyzed the Likert scale answers separately from the qualitative answers due to their difference in content. The Likert scale questions didn't offer much insight in terms of impact, as many answers remained the same or slightly increased when comparing the pre answers to the post. The qualitative answers provides a more nuanced look into how youth view OP, and revealed some helpful insight that speaks to empowerment. I gathered the averages of answers from three qualitative statements I felt best reflected impact at OP.

1. My unique skills and talents are valued by members of this program.
2. It is safe to take a risk in this program.
3. Members in this program are able to bring up problems and tough issues.

The methodology to categorize the responses to these statements were; 'Wrote with agreement', which consisted of responses that included the word 'yes' or actively agreed to the statement in some capacity. 'Wrote neutrally' consisted of answers that either did not relate to the statement or the answer showed confusion or lack of understanding. 'Wrote with disagreement' consists of responses that used the word 'no' or actively disagreed with the statement in some capacity. The remaining responses were empty.

For AOS (after and out of school), the statements were responded to as follows:



Figure 6: AOS post survey qualitative answer results.



Figure 7: AOS post survey qualitative answer results.

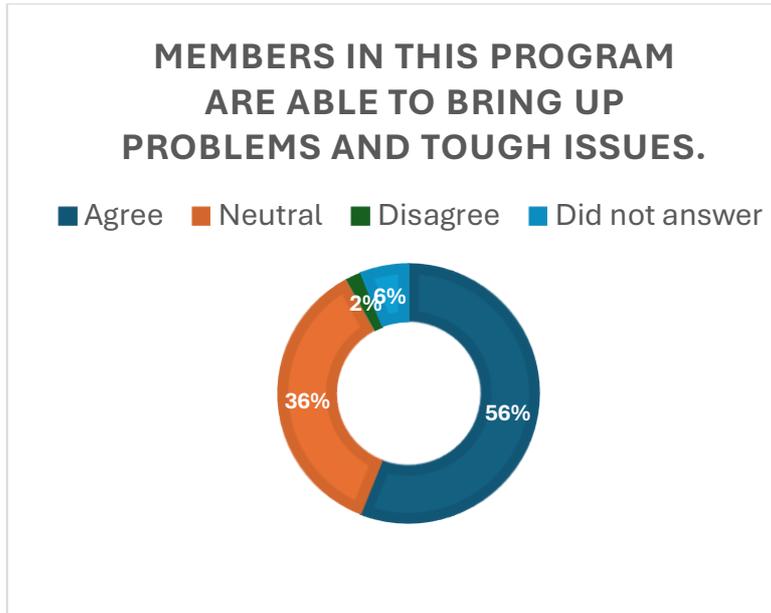


Figure 8: AOS post survey qualitative answer results.

For school groups, the statements were responded to as follows:

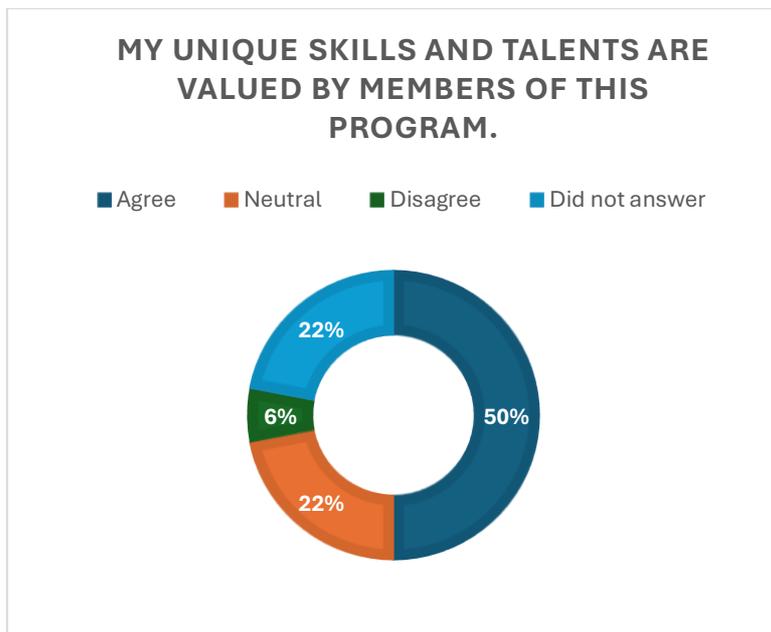


Figure 9: School group post survey qualitative answer results.



Figure 10: School group post survey qualitative answer results.

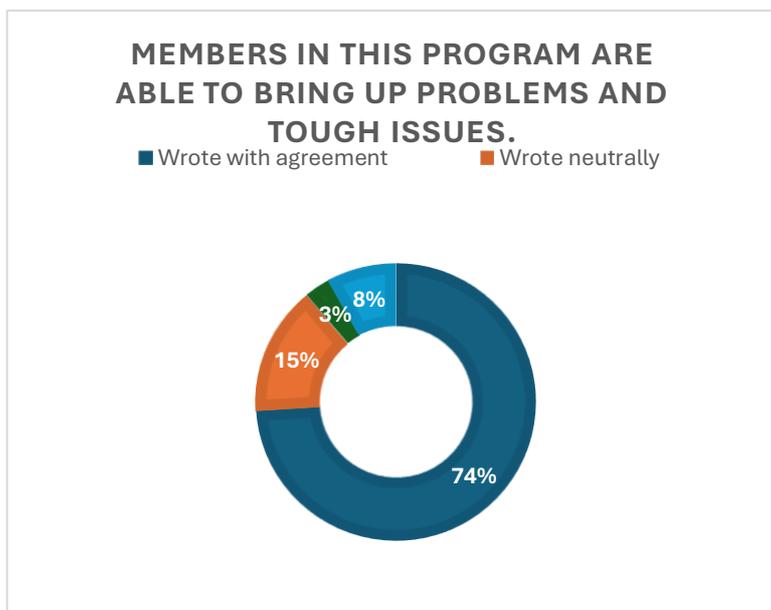


Figure 11: School group post survey qualitative answer results.

The overall positive response to these statements speak to the impact of both AOS and school groups. Some notable written responses to these questions included youth expressing that they ‘feel safe’ within the OP program, and additionally they felt ‘listened to’ by the staff. Although these survey responses don’t show any measurable change or progress, they show that OP is succeeding in their mission to create a space where youth feel safe and empowered.

The OP Communications Director graciously offered testimonials from the last few years from both OP youth and parents/guardians of youth here at OP. These are testimonials used for various outreach and marketing efforts, and I believe speak to the impact of OP. The date of these testimonials is unknown, however, regardless of how current they are, I believe they still offer insight into the impact of OP as an organization.

The testimonials given by former and current OP youth that stood out are as follows:

*"I was part of Ophelia's Place about 10 years ago. I went through a lot of trauma in my young years. Ophelia's Place was a safe and encouraging place that I felt that I belonged and felt supported. The staff there and counselors were so amazing to me. I was able to obtain a bus pass back then to be able to ride the bus to Ophelia's Place, my job and to be able to get home safe. I loved the groups and to be able to have some sort of communication with other girls my age. Ophelia's Place was a foundation for me to finish high school, to feel like someone believed in me. I was also given the opportunity to paint a mural in the Eugene location and even though I didn't finish it, the staff there gave me a sense of me being able to show some talent. Something that no one was able to provide to me..." - Former OP youth.*

*"I used to get made fun of for like how I wore my hair or the people I hung out with. But at Ophelia's Place there's all these girls who have gone through the same thing and they tell you 'you are an amazing person.' Ophelia's Place has given me a lot of self-esteem and I'm sure it has for other girls too." - an OP youth.*

Some may say these responses are 'baited' by questions and encouragement to produce a certain type of answer. While I don't have more context about these specific testimonials, from my own experience at OP doing research and as an intern, I have heard and experienced countless moments with youth that revealed some sort of impact in the OP space. Therefore, these testimonials align with what many of the staff revealed, and my own observations as an intern. In addition to youth testimonials, the OP Communication Director shared testimonials from parents/guardians of OP youth that expressed their own progress with their child:

*"My daughter and I heard about Ophelia's Place when she was 11 and I was at my wit's end. Not a day went by without conflict between us. We did 3 months of counseling, and a weekend "Mother and Daughter Workshop." The counseling helped us make some headway, and the workshop helped us find some common ground. We signed up for the Mother and Daughter workshop series - 6 mother/daughter pairs*

*and 2 leaders, meeting once a week. During the next several weeks, an amazing thing happened. My daughter and I became a team again. She got to see me and the other moms in the group as a real person, not just her mom. We started to understand each other more. We found shared humor. There are still rough times now, but we have the tools to deal with those. More than that, our relationship has become more resilient. A year ago we showed up at Ophelia's Place, in tatters. You helped us heal and knit a relationship that can withstand the wear and tear of mistakes. I am so grateful for that." - an OP Parent/Guardian*

*"...Our relationship has become more resilient. A year ago we showed up at Ophelia's Place, in tatters. You helped us heal and knit a relationship that can withstand the wear and tear of mistakes. I am so grateful for that." -an OP Parent/Guardian*

A smaller part of OP's services targets parents and guardians of youth at OP. OP holds multiple parent/daughter evenings outside of drop-in and school hours that are created to help nurture and strengthen the relationship between youth and parents. I have never personally assisted or facilitated these parent workshops, however, I think these testimonials suggest that there is value in offering services to parents as they are such an integral part of a youth's life. Another parent-focused service is therapy, where OP offers family therapy sessions in addition to individual sessions.

To conclude, the impact of OP is evident in these surveys even if limited in scope and context; however, measuring impact is not the point of this research. The data pertaining to OP's impact is mostly to highlight how youth empowerment impacts youth agency and autonomy, and how this impact can materialize in the community. This research offers OP a recommendation to consider rethinking the way they measure impact. It is not impossible to capture the powerful moments, and the existing pre and post surveys offer an opportunity to reveal important insights if mined correctly. OP should work towards utilizing their data more to further inform their practices, ultimately providing useful data that could be put towards funding and grants. In understanding the impact of OP in these different ways it helps us situate youth prevention work in a community context. It is important to note that these positive

impacts of OP are not solutions to the shortcomings of schools, communities or domestic environments, but instead highlights a need for spaces like OP in communities. The interviews and survey data show how prevention work is impactful for youth in the way they describe OP's services in a positive light, and also how staff speak to their time in the sector. Regardless of impact, we are seeing more and more youth utilizing services like OP due to their own struggles with adolescence. One dimension that these data and experiences are not able to address is the larger context of youth services in the community, specifically, is it up to non-profits such as OP to alleviate the struggles of youth? Or more importantly, *should* it be up to non-profits such as OP to alleviate youth struggles? The following chapter investigates the role of communities and federal organizations in addressing youth concerns. By zooming out and placing the work of OP in a 'bigger picture' we can identify how and why youth empowerment is put on the shoulders of non-profits.

## **CHAPTER 6: So what? Positioning Community Wellbeing**

This chapter aims to situate the importance of youth empowerment, and the case study of OP in the context of broader community wellbeing. My time at OP exemplified what a youth-centered and empowerment-led organization looks like, and I focus here on OP as a case study to highlight the need for youth empowerment spaces in communities. This research identified the various tensions OP grapples with as a non-profit, such as their current struggles to balance their use of inclusive language but also to secure funding. It is integral to note that these tensions are not a reflection of the organization's flaws, but instead should be understood as an example of how non-profits grapple with language, funding and transparency amidst their various constituencies. This chapter critiques the non-profit sector and larger community structures. I want to note the criticisms are not targeted towards individual non-profits that are providing services such as OP, but rather the larger context in which non-profits arise in which to fill gaps in services, or society more generally. This discussion broadens the scope of this research, applying the data from inside OP to the larger community.

### **6.1 Adultism in the community**

This research has defined adultism broadly and discussed its influence in shaping the services offered to youth at OP, however, adultism is evident in community structures outside of non-profits and schools as well. My interviews with OP staff usually ended with discussing larger scale issues such as the effects of adultism in the wider community and culture at large. A key theme that emerged from these questions regarding the wider community is the way in which youth are not treated or perceived as civil, active agents in society. My conversation with the OP Training and Outreach

Director picked up this discussion regarding the ways in which adultism manifests in larger contexts, as she shared:

*“There’s something about our language of valuing children, and wanting to say that we have this orientation towards empowering them, supporting them, keeping them safe. But our behaviour does not match up with that.... So often the focus of work with adolescents in particular, is that they are the problem that we have to somehow fix.”*

This was only my second interview, and after this discussion I felt it was important to add an additional question to my interviews asking about adultism in our communities. It is clear from the literature and my interviews and experiences at OP, that there is much front-facing communication valuing and appreciating our youth, but not necessarily following this up with action that centers their perspectives. How are youth supposed to successfully navigate their futures if they are not given the support and visibility in society that allows them to feel worthy? Lexi, a former Direct Service Intern, made the connection between adultism and capitalism in our culture and society:

*“The role of an adult is like you go, you work, you contribute to society by like working and making money. And then like, you buy a home to invest in the economy, and you like support businesses to like, buy into the economy. And the idea with kids is that their job is to go to school and to learn from right like, and we don’t want them to teach us because we see that kids, we think that kids have nothing to teach us. And so I think that the problem is, we’ve set up this idea as warning of a very, like one way street. It’s like, you will learn what I am teaching you, and you will not question it. Because these are the facts.”*

Lexi’s discussion about how Western countries operate highlighted that a large understanding of one’s value is based upon the economy and one’s contribution to it. Youth are often exempt from participating in the economy the same way adults are, and instead are expected to go to school in order to one day participate in this capacity. If youth do not follow this path, they are often labelled as useless or unhelpful in society. This thesis does not examine the relationship between adultism and capitalism, however I think it is an important aspect of the conversation surrounding youth’s place

in wider society. Lexi continued to talk about their own experiences entering adolescence in regards to them earning their driver's license. We both discussed how we gained our drivers' licenses at age 16, and how this made us feel like we were more involved in our communities and closer to adulthood.

*"So I was able to drive myself around. That's a huge, um, I was able to get a job. Right, I was able to start contributing to society beyond just going to school. Yeah. Right. And it didn't really make sense to me. Like, I felt like I was already kind of like, doing something worthwhile. Yeah. And I think that was the problem was just I was being told like, well, this isn't worthwhile enough, like you learning and you just being curious is not enough for what this society needs from you."*

Lexi further noted that when you began to hit these milestones as a teenager you still were not valued the same as an adult. This made me think about my own journey as a youth in society, where I tended to measure my success through education and the workforce. Lexi points to the 'traditional' expectations society puts onto youth, and in order to be deemed valuable to society youth must succeed in school so they can provide skills to contribute to society. As Lexi's and my conversation came to an end, we finished on the topic of youth's role in change and activism today, moreover, how youth are often the ones to question societal structures or the ones to call for change:

*"So like, we can literally say like, oh, no, like, you are not following the order that we have created. Yes. So we're going to like... label you as deviant. Right, like, we aren't open to that criticism of like, 'hi, like, this is not working. Let's do something different'. Yeah. And we do don't want to hear it because like, this is the world that we live in. We have accepted that this is our reality, and it's very difficult to change. And I think kids are like, Well, why not try?"*

The common label of deviancy is almost always assigned due to a failure to abide by the status quo – whatever that may be. I often see and hear the adultist responses to youth-led activism; whether that be vilifying Greta Thunberg's call to mitigate climate change, or the physical harm done to young people protesting for the Black Lives Matter movement, many adults refuse to listen to youth's calls for change. The following

discussions will pivot to centering community wellbeing and how youth need to be factored into determining whether a community has high levels of wellbeing.

## **6.2 Community wellbeing**

Community wellbeing is where this research journey began, as through my interest in local efforts to maintain and increase the wellbeing of their communities, I found my passion for youth empowerment. I initially approached this concept through the work of local non-profits, as it leaned into a community of care model that I still think is integral to the survival of communities. To make sense of Ophelia's Place, we must first understand what community wellbeing is and what it looks like for youth. As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, community wellbeing focuses on 'essential conditions' needed for communities to 'flourish and thrive'. This concept is underdeveloped and very broad, as not all communities require the same conditions. However, there is a common recognition that in order to succeed, communities need adequate cultural, environmental, political and social resources. This definition can lean into more adult-focused needs, for example, 'political' resources often point to people over 18 who can vote and actively participate in civic matters. As mentioned in the literature review, various community wellbeing indexes show that the factors associated with high levels of community wellbeing are associated with adult-aged or above people, with little to no mention of youth specific factors.

This chapter argues that for communities to achieve high levels of wellbeing, there must be adequate levels of youth empowerment. All ages must be factored into a community's wellbeing, and from the existing literature regarding community wellbeing indexes, it is clear that youth are not part of this discussion. The interviews with the OP staff discussed their thoughts on whether Eugene, or wider Oregon communities have adequate levels of youth empowerment, and why or why not? These answers led to the

conversation about where youth are in the context of community wellbeing, in relation to local youth services. The following excerpts are taken from that discussion. The OP Eugene Youth Program Coordinator shared her thoughts on where Oregon communities are at with youth empowerment:

*"I do think that there are a lot of really good services in Eugene, compared to like more rural areas or smaller towns. That being said, there could absolutely be more. I think the youth are like incredibly important to society, they're literally going to grow up and like, be part of society and creating laws and like creating the world that they want to see. But we're not creating enough support for them when they're younger, to grow up, to have the abilities to do great things. And I think that that's absolutely worries. That being said, like, Oregon itself, like, Isn't creating enough, like laws and funding and all of these, like different things that like need to be offered, in order for our communities to create different programmes for youth? And so it's definitely like part of a bigger picture. It costs a lot of money to run a place like this. And without those resources, like there's not much that can be done."*

This interview spoke to how at the site of this research in Eugene, Oregon, we have high amounts of non-profit organizations in comparison to other communities, and from the types of organizations available, you can see that there is an effort to address youth inequities. However, this discussion also highlighted that this kind of work requires extensive funding and resources which is difficult to find, and why does it have to land on the shoulders of non-profits like Ophelia's Place? The OP Albany Youth Program Coordinator spoke to how schools in Oregon aren't enough to empower youth:

*"I think that, like, at their actual schools, a lot of times they don't feel heard. Like, I've heard a lot about like, a lot of like bullying and like fights happening at school and like, this is happening with my friends and like, the teachers aren't doing anything about it. But I, I noticed like that most of these girls I do feel like they like believe in themselves or like, are confident and like, yeah, so I don't know, it's kind of hard. It's hard to think about like the whole community and like town."*

Many of the discussions with staff at OP referred back to schools and their role in the community. The interviews implied that schools in Oregon, and perhaps across other states are not providing adequate support and empowerment efforts for youth, hence why so many youth are seeking this elsewhere. This answer also speaks to the youth in

the observations in Eugene, that regardless of their negative school experiences they still hold an optimism for their futures and that of others. It is this youth optimism and hope that we need to be nurturing and encouraging as adults. The former OP Rural School Program Coordinator discussed the levels of youth empowerment in the context of rural communities in Oregon:

*“And when I think about rural communities, many of the youth organisations, if there are any, most of them were centred towards adults, honestly. And most of them are centred towards like pretty big issues that youth can experience too, but it is less likely. So things like very intensive like drug and alcohol addiction. Like obviously, there are youth who navigate addiction. But the services themselves are really centred towards adults and their experiences. Or they are all youth services that exist - may exist through something like school, or through church, which both of which can be really valuable social hubs for youth until they're not.”*

It is clear that the discussion regarding rural communities can be treated as a separate one entirely due to the difference in funding, services, community culture, etc. This shows that if somewhere like Eugene is struggling to adequately empower youth, then rural communities outside of Eugene are struggling far more. The discussion about most ‘community’ services being offered for only extreme or very severe issues such as addiction falls into the prior discussion about the lack of funding given to ‘prevention’ services. There needs to be more community focus on preventative services, specific to youth experiences to adequately empower youth in communities.

### **6.3 The time is now: Start empowering our youth**

This research aims to use Ophelia’s Place as a case study example as to how youth empowerment should be accessible for youth. After discussing adultism in communities and broader conversations about community wellbeing’s connection to youth empowerment, understanding what the next steps are is integral. My interviews ended with the same question: ‘What do you think needs to be done in order for youth to be empowered in communities? These answers ended in various places depending on

what the interviewee was most passionate or concerned about. These conversations offered insight into how communities should move forward in empowering their youth. The OP School Program Director discussed the importance of forming organizations dedicated to prevention work, and offering youth entered spaces:

*“I think, organizational collaboration, I think having more organizations that are doing prevention work.... we as a society have to value young people more, like we have to like really work to be anti-adult this and recognise how that plays out. And then yeah, like what everyone else was saying, like, offering lots of different spaces for youth to be in, and also lots of different spaces that accommodate youth different identity so that they can find community with one another.”*

Unfortunately a lot of this work does rely on organizations such as OP, and therefore these organizations are key partners for delivering youth empowerment to communities. The importance of non-profits was a common theme across the interview answers in response to the question regarding what’s next. The OP Bilingual and Bicultural therapist touched on how non-profits cannot operate to their full potential due to the restrictions and barriers experienced in the sector:

*“people that work in non-profits, and like do community work. Often times, like, get the short end of the stick and that like, we’re not paid well, or like we don’t have the funds to do all of the things that we would want to do. But I think that we are the people that have the most right intentions, I guess, I wouldn’t say that everybody has the right intentions and the non-profit world, but I think they have the most right intentions. And I don’t think that’s to say that like folks that work in like state funded or federal funded organizations don’t also want those things. But there also seems to be like a lot more barriers there. Not just for like, the creation of those organizations and like who gets to work there, but also the people that get to receive those services. And so it just seems more difficult to try to tackle that system and make a difference there.”*

This interview emphasized the inequities and struggles of being part of the non-profit sector, and points to how OP’s ‘balancing act’ between securing funding and staying true to their mission. It is easy to fall into the discouraged mindset that there cannot be any change or impact in a society that does not support the local work of non-profits.

However, I find that focusing on smaller more subtle changes makes prevention work easier to situate in our society. The OP Bilingual and Bicultural Therapist continues:

*“spend some more time listening to you, and like, take their needs and their wants seriously, not minimise them. Learn to be interested in the things that they're interested in, learn to love the things that they love. Because I feel like oftentimes, we just kind of brush that off or like invalidate.”*

Redirecting our focus to youth was a very common response, with the OP Youth

Program Director and the OP Training and Outreach Director also mentioning this:

*“I think we could always do it better, is believing in the power of young people. Right. But I mean, again, like this idea of believing and believing in the power, that young people are brilliant, and strong and creative, and all of these, you know, have capacity to change the world, their worlds and the world around them. And, you know, organizations, schools, non-profits, the government you know, again, creating opportunities, right, letting there be a feminist club at the local high school letting there be, you know, a famine club at the library. Right, those are those are great tools, right, that are that are in place, and those things both exist, right. More of that.” – OP Youth Program Director*

*“what are the ways where teens, energy and expertise and curiosity are valued and are seen as a contributing factor to their communities, right? And that doesn't mean exploiting them, but it is giving them those spaces.” – OP Training and Outreach Director*

The call is not to make large scale changes in legislation or complex implementation of new programming, but to change our adultist attitudes towards youth and truly hear what they have to say. Like many of the answers discussed, we already have the tools required to empower our youth. There are already organizations and services that are working to empower youth, we just have to recognize their impact and importance on a community level scale. Ultimately, both the OP Youth Program Director and the OP Training and Outreach Director called for change in how we measure ‘valuable’ assets to a community, youth services need to be recognized as pertinent to the survival and flourishing of communities:

*“We're putting band aids on these social ills. And this is a worldwide phenomenon. It's an Oregonian thing, it's United States thing. But we are reacting in our funding, because again, nobody wants to find a feeling and so, I think what we, you know, we*

*can continue, we can believe in, you know, we can believe in the impact, that after school programme that youth programmes, youth development programmes, summer camps, sports, I mean, you know, has, we can fund music teachers and art teachers and PE teachers in school, you know, we can, you know, believe in the power of chess club and ukulele club, and, you know, again, these are just, you know, all of these things are so important. And, and these little things make sense, I mean, generates such an impact. And, I mean, those are all things that we can be doing to improve I mean, youth development the lives of, of youth in the state of Oregon.” – OP Youth Program Director*

Only through changing the attitudes towards youth prevention services can we see a shift in funding and therefore impact. The understanding that non-profits like OP can only react within their funding shows just how restricted these kinds of youth prevention services are. This interview spoke to how our understanding of impact and change is rooted in larger scale – quantitative – capitalistic notions of progress, and that there must be a shift in what society deems valuable to see the true impact of youth prevention work. The OP Training and Outreach Director concluded her interview with a larger statement of how communities should operate to successfully amplify youth needs:

*“I think a community that is healthy, has bases for all ages of people, to be engaged, to be active, whatever that looks like, to be stimulated to have strong connection with each other and, and different generations, low barriers to access all of those things, you know, have some membership somewhere.” – OP Training and Outreach Director*

This mention of community membership stuck with me, as it speaks to how people in a local context make space for others, including youth. Ultimately, for all generations interact and support one another, youth must be uplifted and connected to their communities. Only through true intergenerational collaboration and youth visibility can communities achieve increased levels of wellbeing. This research focuses on youth populations being ignored and discouraged within their communities, however, there is much to be said and done about other overlooked populations. It is time for

communities to start valuing their youth, and understand how much more connected communities could be if youth were involved and seen in the same capacity as adults.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

This research aimed to start a conversation surrounding youth in a local community context, and address the many ways in which youth need to be empowered in order to strengthen community wellbeing and solidarity. The case study of Ophelia's Place exemplifies how youth empowerment should operate in communities, providing a space for youth voices to be amplified and be encouraged to participate in their community. The research findings saw the services of OP align with three of Jennings et al's (2008) 'Critical Social theory of Youth Empowerment' dimensions: A welcoming and safe environment, Meaningful participation and engagement and Equitable power-sharing between youth and adults. This asserts that many of the services OP offers do work to empower youth theoretically, and that the organization is aware of key factors that can provide an empowering experience. These are the more 'micro' dimensions of the framework, as the other dimensions, Engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, Participation in sociopolitical processes to effect change and Integrated individual- and community-level empowerment, are more macro level. In order for OP to reach these levels of macro empowerment, the organization must implement services that address wider community and societal education and engagement.

This research also highlighted the tensions that non-profits like OP grapple with on a common basis; the balance between securing funding and staying true to one's mission is difficult and ongoing. This is a call for community members to start putting time, energy and resources into services that empower youth to ultimately strengthen their community. When we start to do this, we must also take into account the various

challenges associated with community-led and operated services such as funding, however we must also create a space that is likely to foster empowerment and not harm the youth populations. In order to build a society that is connected, prosperous and thriving, we need to listen to all populations to create true solidarity.

### **6.5 Future research**

This research focused on a small, local non-profit to exemplify youth empowerment services and sought to discuss how youth can be better involved in their communities to allow for higher levels of community wellbeing. Future research must examine a plethora of local non-profits or community organizations to create a more well-rounded understanding of what youth empowerment looks like. More importantly, future research must focus on all intersections in addition to age to offer a more complex examination of the term 'at-risk' and how it operates. The term 'at-risk' is used repeatedly today to describe youth and older generations that do not fit within society's expectations, and in order to dismantle this term and its use, research must explore how race, gender, class, sexuality and ability are used in relation to the term. Only then will we understand the term in its entirety, and therefore call for its abolishment. In discussion with community wellbeing, future studies need to collect more data to create a more nuanced definition and measurement of the concept. The more community wellbeing indexes we can create can draw more awareness to the gaps within our own communities, ultimately allowing more targeted work to be done to enhance the wellbeing of our communities. Lastly, this research points to a need for more research into the intersection of age, specifically adolescence, as there is much work to be done in understanding the potential of intergenerational connectivity in a local context. The interviews conducted for this research highlighted the importance of intergenerational connection in a local and global context, as it feels like there is a disconnect between

youth and older generations. If future research examined the potential that could come from true collaboration between all people of all intersections in communities, we could create a better understanding of community wellbeing.

## Appendix

### OP SURVEY QUESTIONS

#### PRE

1. I can actively talk to someone I've never met before
2. I know how to communicate with others
3. I understand the rules and expectations in interacting with others
4. I get along with others in a peaceful way
5. I enjoy joining social activities
6. I know how to tell the difference between good and bad friends
7. I know how to listen to others
8. I am a pleasant person
9. When I am unhappy, I can appropriately show my emotions
10. When I am angry, I can clearly describe my feelings
11. When I have conflict with others, I can manage my emotions
12. I can see the world from the perspectives of other people
13. I will let other people know my emotions
14. I can do things as good as others
15. I think I perform just as well at school as my classmates
16. I am satisfied with my body and appearance
17. I feel that I am welcomed by others
18. I am a person with self-confidence
19. I am a loyal person
20. I know my strengths and weaknesses
21. I have a friend about my own age who really cares about me
22. I have a friend about my own age who talks with me about my problems
23. I have a friend my own age who helps me when I'm having a hard time
24. I have a trusted adult who really tries to help me
25. I have a trusted adult who gives me the emotional help and support I need
26. I have a trusted adult who I can talk with about my problems
27. I have a trusted adult who is willing to help me make decisions

#### POST

Includes all questions listed prior with the additional open answer statements:

28. Members in this program are able to bring up problems and tough issues
29. It is safe to take a risk in this program
30. My unique skills and talents are valued by members of this program
31. I would recommend this program to a friend
32. I would participate in an OP program again

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