

Healthy Relationships for Youth Program

Evaluation Report 2011-2012



Prepared by Julie Stinson, Program Coordinator

Healthy Relationships for Youth Program
Antigonish Women's Resource Centre and
Sexual Assault Services Association
Suite 204, 219 Main Street
Antigonish, NS B2G 2C1

902.863.6221

ruralityouthawrc@ns.sympatico.ca

Healthy Relationships for Youth Program

Evaluation Report 2011-2012

Contents

Program Overview	2
Program Objectives.....	2
Evaluation methodology	3
Objective 1: To Engage Grade 9 students in 10 school sites within the Strait Regional School Board in a series of classroom sessions	4
Objective 2: To assist youth in developing the attitudes, values and skills they need to build and maintain healthy relationships	5
Objective 3: To increase students' understanding of racial/cultural diversity specifically relating to the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities	9
Objective 4: To increase students' awareness of issues related to violence prevention and social inequities from a gender based perspective	11
Objective 5: To foster youth development: peer support, youth empowerment, youth adult partnerships, meaningful contribution and experiential learning	13
Conclusions.....	21

Program Overview

The Healthy Relationships for Youth (HRY) program is a school-based violence prevention program offered in partnership with the Strait Regional School Board by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. The school-board serves a predominantly rural area in Northern Nova Scotia. In a nutshell, HRY consists of a series of twelve cumulative sessions within the grade nine health curriculum that are delivered by trained youth facilitators. The interactive sessions are designed to reduce the risk of violence for youth through developing their skills and knowledge about creating and maintaining healthy relationships.

HRY has a diversity focus which helps students understand and make the links among issues related to different forms of oppression, exclusion and violence prevalence. It uses a strength-based approach which encourages students to develop a deeper understanding of diversity and to both recognize and challenge sexism, racism and homophobia as forms of violence that impact personal and social relationships. HRY has been cited as a best practice program for the way it involves youth as peer educators in the classroom, schools and communities.

The HRY program has been offered to local schools since 2006. Over the past six years, HRY has reached 3126 grade nine students in ten schools and has trained 436 youth facilitators. For the 2011-2012 school year, HRY trained 101 youth facilitators in eight schools and delivered the program to 346 grade nine students.

The program follows the school year with variation in length of program depending on school course schedules, number of classes and teacher preference. Youth facilitators attend training sessions in the fall with ongoing support throughout the school year. Two regional day long training sessions took place in September with follow-up half day training at each participating school. The series of twelve sessions were delivered from October- February, with several schools continuing until the end of the school year in June. Evaluation focus groups and other evaluation activities were carried out from March until June.

Program Objectives

- to engage Grade 9 students in ten school sites within the Strait Regional School Board of Nova Scotia in a series of classroom sessions designed to promote healthy and respectful relationships
- to assist youth in developing the attitudes, values and skills they need to build and maintain healthy relationships
- to increase students' understanding of racial/cultural diversity specifically relating to the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities
- to increase students' awareness of issues related to violence prevention and social inequities from a gender based perspective

- to foster youth development which includes: peer support, youth empowerment, youth-adult partnerships, meaningful contribution and experiential learning

Evaluation methodology

All Antigonish Women Resource Centre programs are evaluated on a regular basis. The HRY Program gathers feedback throughout the school year for program evaluation and review. Formative evaluation information from teachers and youth facilitators is collected through quick written and oral comments during training and follow-up sessions on an on-going basis. Summative evaluation information is collected with youth facilitators, teachers and grade nine students through on-line surveys and focus groups. Both formative and summative information has been included in this report, with an emphasis on the later for quantitative data.

Teacher and administrator feedback

Teachers receive training, organize the schedule, meet with youth facilitators and the program coordinator and provide disciplinary intervention during the delivery of the program. For formal evaluation, they completed paper surveys following the training (9 respondents) and on-line surveys after the class had completed the twelve sessions (5 respondents). The on-line surveys contained open ended questions and a series of statements about methodologies used, skills gained by the students and changes in attitude or knowledge. Teachers *strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed* to the statements. Oral and text feedback was collected through conversations with teachers and administrators by e-mail or in person during school visits.

Grade nine feedback

Grade 9 students participate in the twelve HRY sessions delivered by the youth facilitators. The bulk of the evaluation information from grade nine students is collected through an online survey. The survey asks basic questions such as gender and school name that is used for a gendered analysis of the information. The survey asks participants for general highlights and comments. The grade nine students also read twenty-five positive learning statements about the HRY program and rate them with a choice of *agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree* and *disagree*. The twenty-five statements are drawn from the learning objectives of the twelve sessions in the program and broader program objectives. Seven of the statements ask for specific reactions to HRY program content (i.e. reaction to a movie or activity) and eighteen of the statements are affirmative comments about skills, knowledge and values learned in the HRY program. This year 201 of the 346 grade 9 HRY participants completed the survey.

For evaluation purposes, a second group of grade 9 students who did not participate in HRY completed a comparison survey with the identical eighteen questions about knowledge, values and skills. These 56 students completed the same Healthy Living course but did not participate in the Healthy Relationships for Youth program. Teachers administered the survey but information

remained confidential. Data collected is compared to students in the HRY program where significant differences or similarities appear.

In addition to the grade nine survey, two sample grade nine classes (total of 31 students) from two of the eight participating schools participated in focus groups and other evaluation activities about their experience in the HRY program. Each session consisted of a series of interactive stations for students to express feedback in a variety of ways. Stations included: a facilitated focus group; a wall space to post comments about HRY categorized into STOP, START and CONTINUE; and two stations where students responded to advice columns that mentioned scenarios involving racism, sexism, homophobia and on-line relationships.

Youth facilitator feedback

Youth facilitators attend training sessions and regular lunchtime meetings with the program coordinator. Each facilitator leads anywhere from two to twelve sessions depending on the school. For final evaluation, they provided written and oral feedback to a series of five questions during a focus group following the delivery of the program (64 out of 101 facilitators). They also had the option of completing an online survey (25 respondents). As the facilitators of the program, their input is a critical part of program review. Quotes from surveys and other written comments are used throughout the report.

Methodology notes

All the data collected from surveys, focus groups and other evaluation activities has been divided into subcategories and organized within the five program objectives. Many of the statistics and quotes cross beyond the divisions created for the organization of the report. However, the information is matched to the most pertinent category.

The HRY program adheres to a gender based perspective in that gender affects the lives of young people in different ways. The program evaluation analyses responses from students in general but also examines the differences and similarities in responses by gender. The grade 9 students who filled out online surveys were asked to write in their gender (male, female, trans, other) rather than check just male or female. The comparison between genders occurs throughout the report between males and females and not between trans and other because of the low statistical numbers in these categories. The gender analysis is used a tool for better understanding the impact of the HRY program. Other social, cultural and economic factors also influence how individuals participate in the program but these factors are beyond the scope of this evaluation.

Objective 1: To Engage Grade 9 students in 10 school sites within the Strait Regional School Board in a series of classroom sessions

This year the HRY Program was implemented in eight of the ten high schools within the Strait Regional School Board. Both schools that did not participate had changes in teaching staff and

school programming that affected the interest or capacity to participate in the program. The participating schools included 346 grade 9 students, 18 grade 9 classes, 10 classroom teachers and 101 youth facilitators from grades 10-12. Each of the 18 classes of students participated in twelve consecutive sessions and an evaluation component.

Table of participants per school:

Participating Schools	Total # of students per school	Number of grade nine classes	Number of grade nine students
Canso Academy	70 (9-12)	1	15
Cape Breton Highlands Academy	389 (P-12)	2	39
Dalbrae Academy	246 (9-12)	3	65
East Antigonish Academy	442 (P-12)	4	40
Guysborough Academy	312 (P-12)	1	26
Inverness Academy	288 (P-12)	1	24
St. Mary's Academy	153 (9-12)	2	31
Strait Area Education and Recreation Centre	377 (9-12)	4	106
Total	2277	18	346

Objective 2: To assist youth in developing the attitudes, values and skills they need to build and maintain healthy relationships

In the HRY program, students identify and practice skills for making and maintaining healthy relationships. They practice assertive communication, active listening, setting boundaries and conflict resolution skills through a variety of activities and discussions. For example, role plays are used several times throughout the program for illustrating and practicing skills. Forty percent (40%) of grade 9 survey respondents *agreed* that the role-plays helped them practice communication and problem solving (38% *somewhat agreed*). Students also practice expressing their needs and expectations in a relationship and examine indicators for healthy and unhealthy relationships. All the teacher survey respondents *strongly agreed* (60%) or *agreed* (40%) that

students practiced the following skills: assertive communication, active listening, and analysis of violence in community.

In this section, focus group and survey information from grade 9 students (HRY and non HRY), teachers and youth facilitators is used to evaluate the objective. Significant differences in responses by gender and by group (HRY or non HRY) are mentioned to provide insight on the effects of the program.

Developing communication, boundaries and conflict resolution

Sixty-eight percent of grade 9 survey respondents agreed that they could give examples of **passive, assertive and aggressive communication**. In the non HRY group, 39 % students *agreed* with the statement. The most significant difference in comparing the two groups is that 54% more males *agreed* with the statement in the HRY group than in the non HRY group. The following comments from grade 9 HRY students illustrate how they learned the difference between types of communication and understood how to assertively say no:

- I learned that every one can say no, even if they find it hard to say to someone
- One thing that I think stood out in the HRY program was when we talked about passive, aggressive and assertive relationships. And did the skits.
- I think that HRY classes should be put in every school so that people understand and can communicate better like my class.

In terms of problem solving, 44 % of grade 9 HRY students *agreed* that they use **conflict resolution skills** to solve problems with people (43% *somewhat agreed*). Five percent more females than males *agreed* or *somewhat agreed*. With the non HRY group, similar percentages of respondents indicated *agree* or *somewhat agree* as the HRY group. This may indicate that conflict resolution skills were not significant skills learned during HRY. Nevertheless, several HRY students commented on how they use communication to solve problems and interact more positively:

- I learned how to treat others in an assertive way, also how to communicate and respond to other people about things.
- I learned how to work and cooperate with others. I learned how to take control of a situation, and treat people with respect.

In addition, 54% of grade 9 HRY students *agreed* that they practice **respecting personal boundaries** (36% *somewhat agreed*). With the students who did not participate in HRY, 44% *agreed* and 43% *somewhat agreed*. The difference between the two groups was mainly with the female students. 10% more female HRY participants *agreed* than in the control group. This difference does not follow some of the trends in the other skills and indicates that personal boundaries were an important learning element for females in the HRY program. The following comments from grade 9 HRY students highlight personal boundaries:

- One thing that I learned in the HRY program is that you have to respect other people's boundaries and personal space. I also learned the different types of boundaries that there are in the world.
- I learned Personal Boundaries and how to keep them.

Self expression

Over 80% of grade 9 HRY participants *agreed* or *somewhat agreed* that they were more comfortable sharing their opinion and experience because of the program (88% of females and 75% of males). In terms of particular forms of self-expression, the majority of grade 9 HRY participants indicated that they could express their needs and expectations for a relationship (64% *agreed* and 30% *somewhat agreed*). 19% more females than males *agreed* to the statement; however, 21% more males indicated *agree* in the HRY group than the non HRY group. Grade 9 HRY students describe how self expression helped them:

- I learned about myself and how to be myself and not feeling I had to change for anything.
- I learned to be assertive and to have self-esteem.
- It helps to make me feel better about myself.

Youth facilitators also commented on the increase in communication and comfort in expressing themselves:

- More confident in being themselves. They learn what works and doesn't work in different situations.
- They feel more comfortable expressing their feelings.
- HRY has made them more comfortable and willing to participate in sessions as well with extracurricular activities.
- They are more open and accepting.
- During the separate gender session, there was one moment where one girl said she liked tall boys and another said she preferred short, and as we continued we all saw the different opinions of others, but nobody ever made fun of an idea or put down anyone. It was huge for me to see that they were all learning that it's okay to have different views.

Recognizing unhealthy relationships and preventing/reducing violence in relationships

Most grade 9 HRY participants responded that they could list signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships (73% *agreed* and 20% *somewhat agreed*). The majority of all genders *agreed* with this statement (82% females, 63% males). About 15% more students *agreed* in the HRY group than the non HRY group, with a more significant difference in the male responses. This suggests that the program helps students (male students especially) understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. HRY students share their responses regarding healthy and unhealthy relationships:

- It made me realize that you can't always be with your boyfriend/girlfriend; you need time to yourself also.
- I learned what a healthy relationship is compared to an unhealthy relationship. Before the HRY class I didn't know any of the differences.

- I have learned in HRY that stands out is people you hang out with might have been in an unhealthy relationship and you wouldn't even know.

Youth facilitators also commented on the learnings they observed with the grade nines:

- HRY has impacted the grade nines by helping to show them valuable life skills that can help them have better relationships and to help them respect themselves
- I think grade nines know what the difference is between healthy and non-healthy relationships.
- It made them more aware of if they were in a healthy or abusive relationship and signs of when to get out or get help.

Over two thirds (68%) of the HRY participants *agreed* that they could explain different kinds of violence (27% *somewhat agreed*). This skill was more highly indicated by female respondents than male respondents, with the difference between genders being less in the non HRY group. Students' comments on violence in relationships mainly centered around abusive relationships and how to get help:

- I learned about teenage relationship abuse, all the warning signs and some ways to prevent it if you or a friend is in an abusive relationship.
- I learned how to stop relationship violence in a safe way.
- One thing that stood out for me was the relationship part because this is the age where teens begin to get into relationships.
- How to help a friend in an abusive relationship
- Relationship abuse is actually a serious problem, and teens can be severely hurt.
- I learned the definition of consent and all things about sexual assault, bullying and violence.

The variety of responses suggests that students are at different levels of personal experience with both dating relationships and the issue of relationship violence. Some students indicated that they are just beginning to think about dating and others have had a few years of experience. They also mentioned different forms of violence. The following quote from a grade 9 HRY student shows the need for further discussion about violence in the lives of youth:

- I really liked the program, but personally i think we should of went deeper into the abusive relationships. We're at the age now where relationships begin to mean something more then just holding hands and giving hugs, and if we find our selves in an abusive one, it would be good to know how to get out of it all. Not only abusive relationships with boyfriends/girlfriends, i think we should go into abusive family members and friends and how to help get away from it all and fix it all.

Summary

HRY helps youth to develop some of the attitudes, values and skills they need to build and maintain healthy relationships. The topics that stand out the most are respecting personal boundaries, communication styles, knowing the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships and naming different forms of violence. When comparing the HRY and non HRY data sets, topics compare differently depending on gender. For female students, topics that show a significant

difference between the HRY and non HRY groups include respecting personal boundaries and explaining different forms of violence. For male students, the comparison shows that the biggest impact is in explaining the difference between assertive, aggressive and passive communication as well as self-expression.

Objective 3: To increase students' understanding of racial/cultural diversity specifically relating to the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities

The HRY program emphasizes diversity in developing both empathy and a deeper social analysis. Diversity is throughout the program and highlighted in several sessions. Students examine diversity and self-identity in relation to social power. This session references culture and race with mention of the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities. They also analyse stereotypes and discuss the connection with discrimination as a form of violence. In addition, students also learn about a continuum of gender identities and discuss terms and issues related to diverse sexual orientations. Finally, during the storytelling session, students learn about the importance of oral traditions (folklore and talking circles) and are invited to share their own stories.

In this section, most of the evaluation focuses on grade 9 survey data. The comparison between the group of students who participated in HRY with the group of students who followed the regular school program gives further insight to the program, particularly in gender differences.

Valuing diversity and understanding issues of stereotypes and discrimination

HRY students discuss various types of diversity to develop an increased awareness of diversity, stereotypes and discrimination. Forty-seven percent (47%) of HRY students *agreed* that they could see diversity in themselves and in their communities (about 8% fewer males than females). This is a real difference with the non HRY group where more than double the percentage of females *agreed* compared to males. The following comments from grade 9 HRY students express some of what they learned about valuing diversity:

- I really enjoyed the HRY program, I think it helps a lot of students who many not have felt comfortable in their own skin accept who they are and it okay to be that way.
- One thing that I learned from the HRY program is them teaching us that it's okay to be different, and no matter what you shouldn't let people make you feel like you're less than you can be

Most of the grade 9 HRY students responded that they valued local traditions and cultures other than their own (63% *agree*, 28% *somewhat agree*). More females agreed more strongly to the statement than males in both the HRY and non HRY groups. The most significant difference in the two groups was with the male respondents (71 % of the HRY male respondents *agreed*

compared to 26% of the non HRY group). HRY students commented on acceptance of people unconditional of race or culture:

- I really enjoyed learning how to respect people that are of different cultures or sexual orientation.
- I learned that everyone should be accepted no matter what race, sexual orientation or other culture one may be.

In terms of understanding issues, two thirds of grade 9 HRY respondents *agreed* that they could talk about stereotypes, how they reinforce discrimination and affect self-esteem. Another quarter *somewhat agreed*. Again, there are about 15% more students who *agreed* in the HRY group than the non HRY group, the largest difference being with the male respondents. Many HRY students commented about stereotypes and equality:

- That everyone should be equal. Everyone has the same rights as other people. Many people should feel good about themselves not bringing themselves down or let others bring them down.
- Something I learned is that you can't judge anyone by the way they look, or stereotype against them.
- They taught me not to judge people, to listen to what they have to say, and have overall changed my perspective towards different groups of people in a positive way.

The many student comments about equality show an appreciation of equal rights as human beings but lack an analysis of social equity. Most of the comments about equality are mentioned as a counter to discrimination.

Developing an understanding of diversity in gender identity and sexual orientation

When responding to the statement “I use and understand correct terms for gender identity and sexual orientation,” 60% of HRY grade 9 students *agreed* and 34% *somewhat agreed*. Thirteen percent more females *agreed* with the statement as compared to males. However, with male respondents there was a greater difference between the HRY students and the non HRY students. Fifty-three percent (53%) of males in the HRY program *agreed* as compared to 41% of males who did not participate in HRY. The following quotes from grade 9 HRY surveys show a sample of views and different levels of learning and acceptance:

- It made me more aware of what gays, bisexuals, and transgenders are going through, I do now support them, and understand how they feel.
- I learned that we are still in an age where we still use certain things that aren't always the best way to describe something and/or something. Example: assuming that a girl would have a boyfriend and a boy has a girlfriend.
- Gay people are people. I respect them now.
- I respect the different people, as bisexual, transgender. and everything else there is.

Summary

HRY helps to increase student’s understanding of racial and cultural diversity as well as diversity of self, sexual orientation and gender identity. Both male and female students are developing a

stronger understanding of stereotypes, discrimination and terminology. Although females show higher levels of agreement than males overall, there is less of a gap between males and females in the HRY group than the non HRY group. This means that the program is helping to address student understanding, especially with male students.

In terms of cultural content, as the program has developed over the year, there has been a shift towards including more content on sexual orientation and gender identity. The content specific to Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian people is not featured as specific topics and is not particularly reflected in the evaluation data.

Objective 4: To increase students' awareness of issues related to violence prevention and social inequities from a gender based perspective

Preventing violence involves an understanding of the underlying social equities such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Violence affects everyone and affects them differently depending on various social factors such as gender. The HRY program uses a gender based perspective to explore issues and social equities that are both a cause and a form of violence. This takes place through expanding students' understanding of gender and stereotypes as well as talking together about homophobia, racism and sexism and how to stop it.

Understanding gender and gender stereotypes

Most grade nine HRY respondents indicated that they could explain how gender affects their lives (67% *agreed* and 21% *somewhat agreed*). This compares to 56% *agree* and 19% *somewhat agree* from the non-HRY group. Again, although there's a higher percentage of females than males from the HRY group who *agreed* to the statement, there is a greater increase of males who *agree* than females between the two groups. 63% of males from the HRY group *agreed* that they could explain how gender affects their lives as compared to 50% of the males who did not participate in the program.

Students in the program list stereotypes of being male and female. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of female grade 9 HRY respondents and 70% of males *agreed* that they could identify stereotypes associated with being male and female. This compares to 80% of females and 44% of males in the non HRY group. HRY students commented about some of the stereotyping and what they learned when they talked about gender stereotypes:

- I have learned a lot about relationships, and what the other gender thinks of my gender. It was also really cool to see what every girl (my gender) thinks of boys.
- Males have just as many stereotypes about them as females do.

Even the youth facilitators learned more about gender stereotypes. One of the facilitators commented:

- During the gender stereotypes, I learned that a lot of girls felt self conscious and held back because they were afraid of being made fun of. I had no idea that people felt like that!

Students also analyse magazine advertising to examine how gender stereotypes are portrayed and created. Ninety percent (90%) of female and 70% of male grade 9 HRY students *agreed* that they understand how stereotypes are reinforced by media (magazine ads). In this case, the comparison with the students who did not do the program indicates a greater increase in ability to identify stereotypes for females than males (29% increase for females and 12% increase for males). The following quote is a comment from a grade 9 HRY student:

- I learned that ads have a psychological effect that involves stereotyping. Men are viewed as very muscular and are very athletic, and women are viewed as items and as inferior people. Women also tend to be related with sex to sell products.

Awareness of underlying issues of homophobia, racism and sexism

In one of the sessions, students discuss correct terms for diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity. They also watch a movie about homophobia and a girl's journey of "coming out". Sixty-seven percent (67%) of HRY grade 9 respondents *agreed* and 23% *somewhat agreed* that they understand what homophobia is and how harmful it is. More females than males *agreed* (21% more). However, in comparing with the non- HRY group there appears to be a 23% increase in understanding for males in the HRY program and actually a 6% decrease for the females.

Students are also encouraged to make links between homophobia and other forms of oppression such as racism and sexism. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of grade 9 HRY students *agreed* that homophobia is connected to other forms of violence such as racism and sexism. There is no significant difference between males and females in the HRY group but a large difference of 27% between the males and females in the other group. Also, only 19% of males in the non HRY group *agreed* in comparison to 54% in the HRY group.

In terms of teaching methodology, overall the students expressed that the video on homophobia made them more aware of the feelings of others. However, there was a big difference between the females (79% *agreed*) and males (45% *agreed*). This may have to do with the fact that the two main characters in the film were female.

In surveys, all of the teachers *strongly agreed* (60%) or *agreed* (40%) that students expressed an understanding and empathy on the following topics: diversity, homophobia, racism, sexism, violence in relationship.

Speaking up against homophobia, racism and sexism

Recognizing homophobia, racism and sexism is one step but speaking out against it is a further action. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of HRY grade 9 respondents *agreed* and 31% *somewhat agreed* that they could challenge racism, homophobia and sexism when they see, hear or feel it. With this question, there is only a 9% difference between the males (54%) and females (63%). This compares to 19% of males who *agreed* and 48% of females in the non HRY group. The huge

difference between the HRY and the non HRY group (especially with male respondents) may indicate that the HRY program makes students feel more comfortable, safe or knowledgeable to prevent or challenge these forms of violence.

Violence prevention

Youth facilitators were asked how HRY helps prevent violence. In general, they commented on increased awareness of signs and what to do and developing confidence. The following quotes from the online survey shows a sample of their comments:

- HRY helps prevent violence because the grade 9s are able to have a new view on each other and to develop new relationships and also they are taught about relationship violence and how to respond to it.
- HRY helps the students notice violence in their lives and maybe give them confidence to do something about it.
- In my opinion, HRY prevents violence by making everyone aware of what violence looks like. So that if you happen to be in a violent relationship or see the warning signs of a violent relationship, it makes people aware of what violence looks like and when to walk away.
- HRY helps prevent violence by effectively teaching students how to stand up for themselves in violent situations. It also makes students aware of where they may come across violence and how to avoid or prevent it.
- It helps young people realize when they could be in an unhealthy relationship, by the different signs, and what boundaries people could be violating in certain situations.
- HRY prevents violence by presenting situations, and helping the kids to learn proper ways to deal with them so that no one is hurt, but there is still a solution.

Summary

HRY students are developing a deeper analysis of violence prevention, including a strong gender analysis. Most of the HRY students could explain how gender affects their lives and can list stereotypes associated with males and females. Again, the females indicated higher levels of skill than the males but the males showed greater improvement (there was a bigger gender difference in the non HRY group). This is also the case for understanding the harmful effects of homophobia. For females, the greatest improvement was in media analysis and understanding gender stereotypes through advertising. Overall, the ability to challenge racism, sexism and homophobia was an important shift in attitude for the HRY participants.

Objective 5: To foster youth development: peer support, youth empowerment, youth adult partnerships, meaningful contribution and experiential learning

Youth development is fostered not only in the grade nine classrooms but also with the youth facilitators. Young people have the opportunity to engage others and make a difference in topics

that matter to them. Most of the evaluation on youth development takes place in focus groups and open-ended online survey questions where youth facilitators share their reflections on what the program means to them. This section analyzes some of the tools used to foster youth development but mainly focuses on the words and experience of the youth.

Peer support

Peer influence is a strong pressure for adolescents and can affect behaviour in positive and negative ways. The HRY program strives to create a supportive peer environment at two levels: youth facilitators as peer educators and methodologies that build trust between peers for respectful classroom participation.

Teachers, youth facilitators and grade 9 students all comment on the effectiveness of **peer education** for the HRY content. Sixty-seven percent of grade 9 students *agreed* that they liked having other students teach the class. When asked what stands out from the program, many grade 9 students immediately comment on the youth facilitators. The following are some of their responses:

- One thing that stands out for me is the way it makes things clearer to understand and helps for people our age to understand. I think having people close to our age teaching it also helped us as well because they understand and can give us examples of what is in their life and what happens in our school that teachers may not know about.
- How good the students taught us!
- Students understand better when other students are teaching.

Teachers also reported that the grade 9 students responded well to the youth facilitators (60% *strongly agreed* and 40% *agreed*). The teachers' comments are similar to the grade 9 students in that the youth facilitators can better relate to the students. The following are some of their survey comments:

- I think the HRY program's impact is huge. I think this impact comes from the fact that students teach students about healthy relationships.
- Great, we loved the program for how it allows students to freely express themselves in the presence of other peers, rather than under watchful eye of the instructor. They can relate more with the facilitators.

Again, youth facilitators echo the grade 9 students and the teachers. Here is a sample of their responses:

- I like that it is older students teaching to grade nines because they are more likely to listen to students than their teacher sometimes
- I think when the grade nines have students come into their class rather than teachers, their curiosity is raised. This makes them want to listen and learn what we have to say.

They comment on the importance of youth teaching youth, especially when it comes to the healthy relationship content. However, they also speak of some of the classroom management and discipline difficulties for them as peers. This is support and intervention required from the classroom teachers.

One of the indicators of a **supportive peer environment** is students getting to know each other better. This means that students have a chance to express themselves and share in a way that is not necessarily possible in other classes. Overall, 44% of grade 9 students *agreed* that they got to know people in their class better. In rural schools, where most students have been with their same classmates for ten years, this is a significant increase. Several grade 9 students felt that the respectful classroom environment was the biggest thing that stood out to them in the program. The following is a sample of their survey responses:

- I learned that our class actually can get along and be a big family if we try.
- I feel the HRY sessions influenced the way i think, feel and act because I got to learn a lot about other students in my class and how they deal with their problems. I could really relate to them.

The youth facilitators also observed how the grade 9 students warmed up to them as older students and with each other over the course of the program. They commented on these changes in focus groups:

- It made them trust each other a little bit
- It has made me feel more connected to the younger grades
- It allowed them to maybe loosen up and be comfortable with each other.
- I liked seeing the transformation of the grade 9's through the sessions. At first, they were extremely shy and didn't want to talk. But as the sessions went on, they felt more comfortable around us and they began to share more. It was good to be able to get off the regular school routine to have a good time with them."
- I find that the grade 9 students are far more open with responding to the activities now than in the beginning. They seem less self conscious about responding in front of their peers and expressing how they really feel. They have also grown comfortable with us as facilitators.

Various methodologies are used throughout the program to build trust, participation and community within the classroom: check-ins, circle discussions, separate gender sessions and community standards. The following chart shows teacher responses to the effectiveness of the various methodologies.

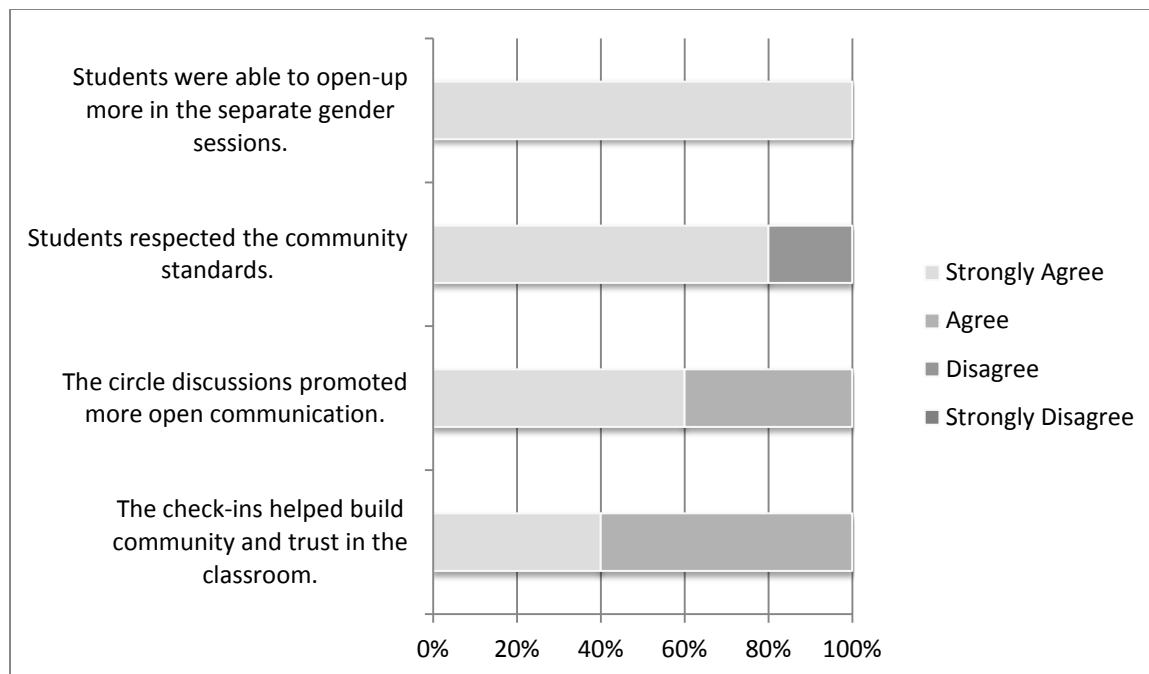


Figure 1: Teacher opinions on methodologies for peer support

A methodology that stands out the most for teachers, youth facilitators and grade nine students is the **separate gender sessions**. One-hundred percent (100%) of the teachers *strongly agreed* that students were able to open up more in the separate gender sessions. During three of the twelve sessions, students have discussions in groups of all guys and all girls then come together and share highlights anonymously. Separate gender topics include: gender stereotypes, media analysis and relationship needs and expectations. The separate gender sessions provide a different space for participation around issues that affect both males and females but may affect them differently.

Grade 9 student participation and comfort levels in the separate gender sessions varied considerably by gender. When asked to respond to the statement “I talked more during the separate gender sessions,” 59% of females *agreed* (28% *somewhat agreed*) and 29% of males *agreed* (41% *somewhat agreed*). However, during the focus groups with the grade nine students both male and female students mentioned how breaking into separate gender groups allowed them to learn and participate differently. Some examples of what grade nine students said during focus groups include:

- In separate gender sessions we learned new stuff. We were more open to say things without being yelled at.
- It was interesting to hear what guys thought about what girls thought. We presented back to each other and nobody knew what person had said what.
- We learned each other’s expectations in relationships.
- I liked the group of all guys
- In the HRY program, I really liked the split gender classes. I think it is a great way of talking as a group and to see what both genders think, like, and care about.

Youth facilitators also observed that more students participated when they were divided into groups of all guys and all girls. In meetings, we often discussed the benefits and risks of dividing the class into two separate gender groups. The following comments represent some of their thought around separate gender groups:

- The separate gender sessions were the best because the grade nines felt more comfortable with their own gender. That it is way better than all in one group.
- I loved the separate genders because girls and boys feel more comfortable with each other, though that may not always be the case due to different sexual orientations.

In the program guide, male and female students are told they can go into whichever group they feel most comfortable with. For the broad majority of students this binary gender choice works but this approach may have negative effects for gender queer, questioning or transgender youth. Youth facilitators and teachers are encouraged to be considerate of divergent genders. However, by dividing into groups of guys and girls, the HRY program conforms to a binary gender view. Although a continuum of gender identity is discussed during the session on sexual orientation and gender identity, physically dividing the class does not provide a safe or comfortable environment for everyone. A recommendation from the Youth Project that was discussed by youth facilitators is to offer three groups during the separate gender sessions: a group for people most comfortable with all guys, a group for people most comfortable with all girls, and a mixed gender group for people most comfortable in a mixed setting.

Youth empowerment

Youth empowerment ties together all the objectives of the program. Therefore, examples and indicators that contribute to youth empowerment are throughout the various sections of this report. This particular section focuses on youth responses to the survey statement “HRY influenced the way I think, feel and act for the better.” Sixty percent of **youth facilitators** *agreed* and 40% *somewhat agreed* to this statement. Forty-four percent of **grade 9 students** *agreed* and 43% *somewhat agreed*. Overall, the majority of youth facilitating or participating in the program believe that HRY influenced the way they think, feel and act for the better.

Youth adult partnerships

By working with youth facilitators, teachers can get to know the grade 9 students and the youth facilitators better. Teachers support the leadership skill development of the youth facilitators and can take a step back from the front of the classroom and observe how the grade 9 students learn from other youth. Teachers most often just observed the sessions and intervened when discipline or motivation was necessary. They played a leadership role in coordinating the session schedules, assisting youth facilitators and communicating with the program coordinator. The following comments from teacher surveys describe their positive relationships with students:

- I think this program has made my relationship with my students even better because they know they can come talk to me about anything.
- I feel this program enabled me to get to know the students more on a personal level (and vice versa). This makes teaching and learning easier for all of us.

The youth facilitators expressed increased empathy towards the teachers as they too faced challenges of working with a large group of grade 9 students. As one youth facilitator said, “It was fun and made me realize how hard being a teacher would be.”

The youth facilitators also work in partnership with the program coordinator who provides support through training, regular in-school meeting and sharing other youth development opportunities. Youth give formal and informal feedback to the coordinator in helping to problem solve and shape program review. This year, two HRY youth facilitators were selected as advisors to the Canadian Women’s Foundation’s national learning strategy on teen healthy relationship programs. They shared their HRY experiences with other youth and adults from across the country at the Canadian Women’s Foundation National Skills Institute, a four day event in Toronto in February 2012.

Experiential learning

Through the act of facilitating sessions for the grade nines, the youth facilitators are actively developing skills in leadership, public-speaking, communication, organization, social analysis and empathy as well as reviewing the content of the program. Youth use these skills to help inform their personal, social and educational choices. These skills are part of the initial training and follow-up sessions with the coordinator. The support helps youth to reflect and solidify what they are learning in their leadership roles.

One of the biggest changes that youth facilitators talk about in focus groups is their ability and confidence **speaking in front of a large group**. Each facilitator teaches anywhere from two to twelve sessions, giving them plenty of practice in public speaking. While facilitating sessions, students speak from prepared notes and more spontaneously. The following quotes from youth facilitators speak to the skills they gained:

- Public speaking, understanding and teaching
- Being an HRY facilitator made me better at speaking in front of a group, planning out what I was going to say and how. I benefited because I dealt with tough situations
- I feel more confident speaking in front of an audience and engaging in conversation.
- I feel like I am more comfortable with peers and it has made me much more outgoing and much better at public speaking.

Along with public speaking skills, youth facilitators gain experience working with a large group of people. They facilitate sessions to maximize participation by everyone and manage time between content and group discussions. The following quotes represent the **organizational, facilitation and leadership skills** gained:

- HRY has benefited me in a lot of ways ever since the first class I taught. It has definitely impacted me in a positive way in the sense that I have gained responsibility and even more confidence. In doing sessions on my own I have gained independence.
- I learned how to speak more politically correct from the information I teach.
- I learned the ability to create a comfortable environment.
- I know how to gain the attention of people and make them feel more confident.

Each session is led by a pair of youth facilitators. Students get the opportunity to plan and deliver sessions with people they may not spend time with socially. During training and meetings, the group gets to know one another and develop friendships. HRY helps develop **social and teamwork skills**:

- I believe that HRY gave me better leadership skills. It has built new friendships and I'm able to get along with people I wouldn't usually.
- I have learned how to work well with others in a group.
- It has influenced my personal relationships with the people I facilitated with and the people I do it with, feel more closer with them and they find it easier to talk to me and get along with.

In working with other facilitators and with the grade 9 students, youth gain a **better understanding of others**. They learn about diversity and how it relates to a social analysis of forms of violence. This knowledge reminds students to learn about others as well as to question assumptions and judgements. The HRY youth facilitators invite grade 9 students to share their experiences with the goal of self-expression and social analysis, not for judgement. This storytelling helps develop empathy within the classroom and the youth facilitators. The following quotes represent some of the youth facilitator's thoughts on understanding and caring about the younger students:

- Not to judge others. And be more accepting and be a leader.
- I've been a better leader through HRY. I've gained many communication skills through the time I've been facilitating. I love interacting with the students and hearing their stories.
- It taught me to respect and accept everyone and not to judge them based on the sexuality, etc.
- I've been able to speak more comfortably with younger students that I normally wouldn't find myself talking to. It adds some unity.
- You have to study more on the facts of healthy relationships, and diversity within the school & your surroundings.

Aside from practicing and acquiring skills, the youth facilitators- like the grade 9 students- learn information that contributes to their **personal growth and development**. For youth facilitators, sometimes that growth is in the form of newfound confidence and other times it is the direct application of information they are teaching to their own personal lives. Youth facilitators go through the program as grade 9 students themselves but the information really sinks in when they are reviewing and teaching it in subsequent years. As one student said, "It benefits us and the grade nines because they learn new stuff and we may also get refreshed on it." Youth facilitators made the following comments about the personal affect on their lives:

- HRY opened my eyes to the issues that were in my life and how I could change them for the better.
- I have learned a lot about being passive, assertive and I have learned not to be so passive.
- It made me realize that it is better to talk about your problems and not keep them inside.
- It made me more knowledgeable on the subjects that were gone over during the sessions and it personally helped me to be able to assess situations properly.

- Our HRY facilitator has influenced me in personal way because while working with the grade nines I have learned numerous things that I hadn't known before. HRY has made me think about my relationships in my personal life also.

As the preceding quote mentions, HRY helps the youth facilitators make **better choices in their personal relationships** (friendships and dating). Although the content is directed at the grade 9 students, the youth facilitators apply the program personally to create healthy relationships and reduce unhealthy relationships. In focus groups, youth facilitators commented on the effect HRY had on their personal relationships:

- It taught me a lot about relationships and how important it is to make wise decisions.
- Made me realize I was in an unhealthy relationship the skills I taught others helped me in preventing violence and negativity in my own personal relationships.
- Made me realize I was in an unhealthy relationship and now I'm SINGLE!!!
Wooooooooooooooooo!
- I feel like I'm a better friend because I am taught what the affects would be if I was in unhealthy relationships.
- It gave me good insight on current relationships and things to do in the future to better relationships.

The leadership experience gives youth an opportunity to explore different interests and skills linked to a variety of **future education or career choices**. Some youth facilitators become passionate about the topics and decide to pursue careers related to social justice or youth social services. Others really enjoy the classroom leadership component and look towards the field of education. Others mentioned benefitting from particular skills that can help them as their future choices. All the youth facilitators agreed that at the very least, HRY was an excellent experience for their resumes and post-secondary education applications. The following quotes demonstrate a sample of the variety of ways HRY influenced youth facilitator's career and education choices:

- I've thought more about working with younger students as a guest speaker or a public service worker
- It made my educational choice a lot more to think about. I am actually considering working with students
- Not only does HRY look great on a resume but also helped me decide if I'd like a job which included presenting in front of others.
- I want to go into business management of international business, leadership really benefits me, make me think about my personal relationships with others."
- I have become a better leader and have opened up more to new ideas and experiences. HRY has gotten me involved in so many other opportunities.
- HRY has taught me responsibilities that I will take with me in life and when I go to university next year I am sure it will help with social and speaking skills. Being in it for 3 years was awesome!

Youth facilitators teach the grade 9 students valuable skills and information and in doing so they are actively learning as well. The experiential learning influences young facilitator's skill development, self-worth, social views and future aspirations. Their learning is a crucial piece to the success of the HRY program.

Meaningful experience

Youth Facilitators like HRY because they feel like they are making a difference in the lives of the younger students. Throughout the program, they share exciting learning moments that happen for the grade 9 students like sharing new vocabulary terms or making space for people to talk who don't usually speak in class. These moments are what keep the youth facilitators motivated and engaged. In focus groups, they commented directly on these meaningful experiences:

- I liked teaching and working with the younger students the best and getting to know them better. I liked this the best because I enjoy working with other people and teaching them important things for their life to come that will be beneficial.
- It gave me a new sense of self, by bringing new issues to light. I feel as though I've really helped some kids and it's a great sense of pride for me.
- One time some students told us that we did a really great job at our own sessions, it really made me feel that they learned what I was trying to teach them.
- Felt good to help; hopefully we taught them something. I got to try something new, spread some advice from my own experience. I've been through a lot in the past few years.
- I've become closer with students in other grades and had the opportunity to make a difference in someone's life.
- I liked being able to make a difference in students' thought processes when thinking about violence prevention.

Youth facilitators care about the topics they teach and about the future of youth in their communities. The HRY program provides an opportunity to get engaged and take action.

Summary

Youth development is one of the biggest strengths of the HRY program because of the tiered peer education approach. On one level, the grade 9 students are feeling more confident in being themselves with their peers and are gaining valuable skills. And on another level, the youth facilitators are putting their knowledge into action as they practice and gain further skills of leadership, public speaking and social justice through the meaningful experience of supporting each other and the grade nine students.

The two most effective methodologies used for youth development are youth facilitators and separate gender sessions. Both of these strategies change the way students relate to each other and participate in the classroom.

Conclusions

This year 346 grade 9 students, 101 youth facilitators, 10 teachers and 8 high schools participated directly in the HRY program. The knowledge shared and skills gained will help all the participants to prevent violence in their lives, their schools and their communities.

For the grade 9 students, the topics that stood out the most to them ranged from teambuilding games and self-respect to signs of unhealthy and abusive relationships. Overall, the peer-facilitated approach combined with several separate gender sessions and regular check-ins helped students feel more comfortable with one another and increased participation.

Students gained skills for creating and maintaining healthy relationships such as self-expression, assertive communication, personal boundaries, conflict resolution and self-esteem. They also gained a better understanding of the symptoms and root causes of violence such as homophobia, racism and sexism. Through this diversity lens, students broadened their social analysis and increased their capacity to challenge violence.

When examining the responses from only grade 9 HRY participants, the female students appear to have a better understanding of the topics compared to the males and therefore there could be the assumption that females benefited more than males from the program. However, in comparing the gender analysis from the students who participated in HRY with the students who did not participate, it is clear that male students benefited greatly from the program. The female students showed a greater understanding of the topics in both of the groups however there was a giant improvement in the male respondent's understanding with the HRY program. The gap between males and females was much larger with the students who did not do the HRY program than with students who did participate in the program. This means that while supporting students of all genders, HRY is also addressing a gap in male students' understanding of healthy relationship topics.

For the youth facilitators, the highlight was in the meaningful experience of working with the grade 9 students to develop skills and knowledge. The leadership opportunity gave them more confidence, public-speaking experience and the awareness that they could make a difference. Facilitating the sessions also allowed students to review information they had learned in previous years and to hear new perspectives on issues. The training workshops were successful in that they prepared students for their roles and also allowed them to get to know other young people from different communities.

The evaluation process is important to learn about the successes and gaps in meeting the program objectives. Even more crucial was the youth voice and participation in the process. The HRY program greatly appreciates the all the participants who make the program happen and who provide feedback so that the program can grow and adapt to best fit the needs and interests of youth.

Finally, the program would not be possible without the partnership of the Strait Regional School Board and the financial contributions from the following organizations: Canadian Women's Foundation, Nova Scotia Department of Justice and Telus Atlantic Canada Community Board.