

Evaluation of Urban Rez Solutions Social Enterprise's (URSSE) Reality, Education, Applied, Life (R.E.A.L.) School Project

Document Review Report

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1.0 Introduction

This Document Review Technical Report was conducted as part of the evaluation of the Reality, Education, Applied, Life (R.E.A.L.) School (“the project”) led by Urban Rez Solutions Social Enterprise (URSSE) and funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC) over a 12-month period. This evaluation is part of the broader Strategic Evaluation and Learning Support for FSC, for which Goss Gilroy Inc. (GGI) was engaged to capture program knowledge and generate learning reports for a number of FSC-funded projects.

This report contains findings obtained from project documents, aligned with evaluation questions and indicators. Background information about the project as well as the purpose, scope and objectives are also included.

1.1 Background

Urban Rez Solutions Social Enterprise (URSSE) is a Toronto-based not-for-profit organization that delivers “comprehensive conflict management, mental health wellness, community engagement strategies, entrepreneurship training, tools to fight anti-Black racism, and diversity and inclusion training.”¹ It “also facilitates programming with service providers, corporate organizations, community groups, and individuals to bring about various aspects of positive change and pro-social development, education, and widespread community advancement.”² Its areas of work are centred around four areas: community, schools, facilitation, and justice.³

Project Description

URSSE’S Reality, Education, Applied, Life (R.E.A.L.) School is a 54-session project-based learning project that aligns Black, Indigenous and racialized (BIPOC) youth with careers based on their interests, personality traits, and skill sets (IPSS).⁴ R.E.A.L. School’s emphasis on employment training and social support engages youth through the lens of popular culture as an accessible entry point to discover careers within the industries in which they are already interested.⁵

Project Objectives

The objectives of the project are as follows:

- Recruit and retain participants in the R.E.A.L. School project;⁶
- Help identify participants’ lifestyle goals that encourage their success;⁷

¹ Urban Rez Solutions Social Enterprise (n.d.). About us. <https://urbanrezsocialenterprise.com/#services>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Application for Innovation Project Funding

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.



- Help participants develop long-term career plans;⁸
- Develop the professional and interpersonal skills necessary for participants' future careers;⁹ and
- Develop community capacity for prosocial engagement.¹⁰

Theory of Change

A theory of change explains how an intervention is expected to produce its results.¹¹

The Problem

BIPOC youth in the GTA are regularly excluded from professional development and face a number of issues in the labour market, compounded by systemic factors. Therefore, R.E.A.L. School was initiated to fill the gap for culturally competent and comprehensive support programs that empower BIPOC youth to attain actionable career goals by combining professional development, education and crime prevention in a single project-based learning program aligning BIPOC youth with careers based on their ISPs.

Target Groups

This project primarily targets BIPOC youth in four priority neighbourhoods in the GTA: Canlish, West Hill, Oshawa and Glamorgan. The families and communities of BIPOC youth/participants are also a target group, as they benefit both from directly targeted neighbourhood community-building sessions as well as long-term outcomes of reduction in community violence.

Mechanisms of Change

This project posits that culturally competent and comprehensive support programs combining professional development, education and crime prevention can empower BIPOC youth and develop the necessary goals and skills to attain gainful employment through a Reach-Teach, individualized coaching and weekly workshops. As a complement, community-building sessions can increase prosocial youth engagement and reduce antisocial behaviours by developing the capacity for prosocial engagement.

In planning this evaluation, a logic model was developed to outline the project's activities and expected results.

The logic model (see page 6) shows the activities that the project planned and undertook. At the top are management activities undertaken by URSSE to pave the way for the main activities of the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Q2 2021 Progress Report

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Theory-Based Approaches to Evaluation: Concepts and Practices*, <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/audit-evaluation/evaluation-government-canada/theory-based-approaches-evaluation-concepts-practices.html#toc4>

R.E.A.L. school project: overnight retreats with prospective participants, outreach efforts in priority neighbourhoods in the GTA, and engagement with relevant partner organizations. These allowed URSSE to then develop the project's main activities: weekly workshops/experiential learning sessions, individualized participant coaching, and neighbourhood community-building sessions.

Outputs

The outputs are the 'products' of the above activities, or those primarily impacted. As mentioned, these are R.E.A.L. School participants (BIPOC youth) in the four priority neighbourhoods of Canlish, West Hill, Oshawa and Glamorgan, as well as their families and communities.

Immediate outcomes

The **immediate outcomes** are the changes that are expected to come from these activities and outputs, in a short period, and largely attributable to the project. The expected immediate outcomes of the weekly workshops and individualized participant coaching are that participants complete a Declaration of Change; participants identify goals and develop long-term career plans; and participants develop professional and interpersonal skills. The immediate outcome of neighbourhood community-building sessions is that community capacity for prosocial youth engagement is increased.

Intermediate outcomes

The **intermediate outcomes** are the changes expected in the medium term to which the project is expected to contribute, at least in part. It is expected that participants will have increased opportunities to attain gainful employment and higher education and that communities will see an increase in prosocial youth engagement and a reduction in antisocial behaviours.

Long-term outcomes

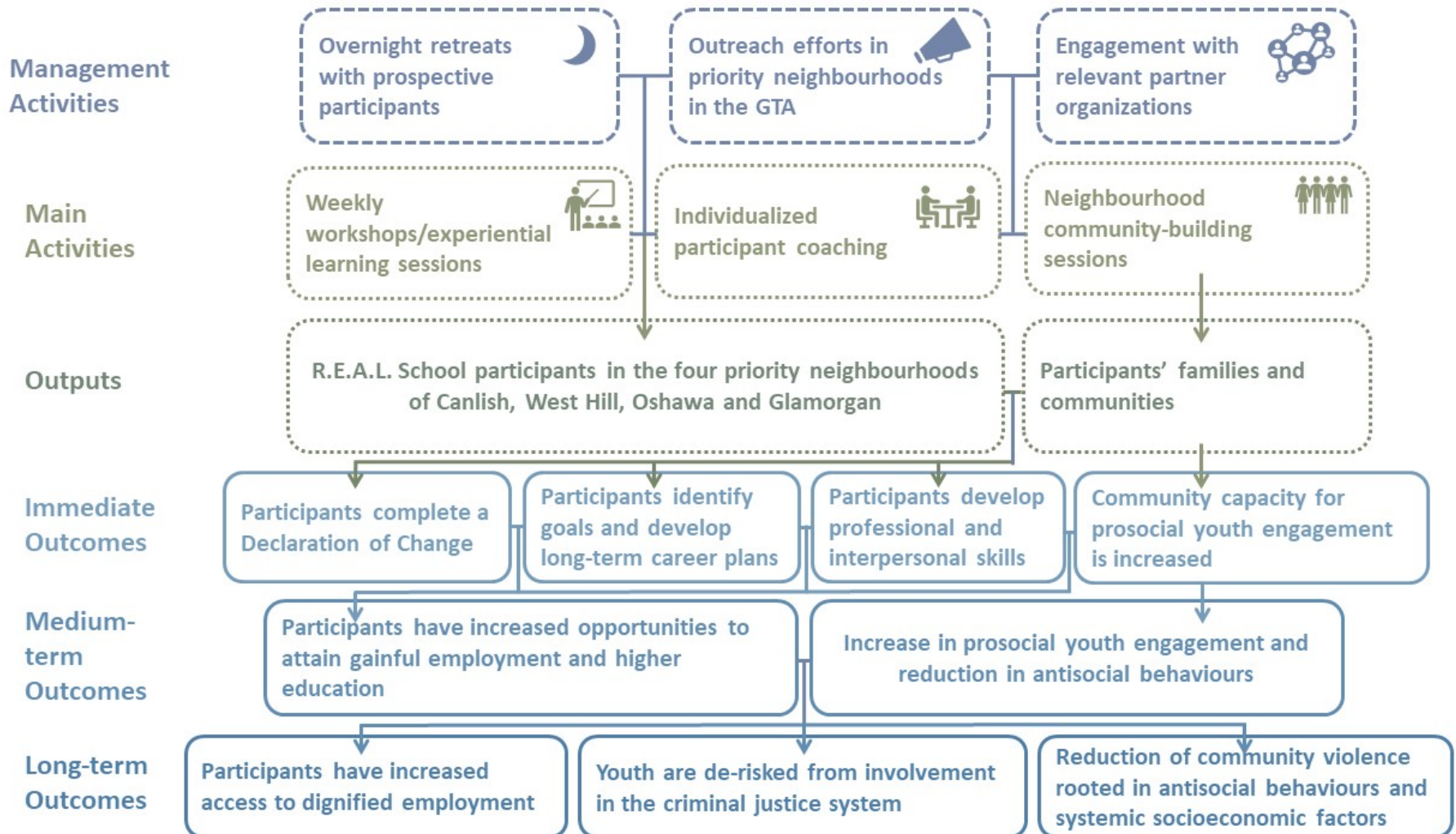
Finally, the long-term outcomes are the changes that may result at a later time in the future. As a concept, medium and long-term outcomes are less directly attributable to an intervention (i.e., the project) alone, since other intervening factors play a role over time. In this case, it is expected that the project may make some contribution to participants having increased access to dignified employment, that youth are de-risked from involvement in the criminal justice system, and that there is a reduction of community violence rooted in antisocial behaviours and systemic socioeconomic factors.

Assumptions

There are a few key assumptions identified within this results chain. First, that families and communities will benefit from the neighbourhood community-building sessions and that they are sufficient to increase community capacity for prosocial youth engagement; in addition, that increase in community capacity is sufficient to increase prosocial youth engagement and reduce antisocial behaviours (in other words, youth have to be willing to engage). In addition, the model assumes that there is an availability of opportunities in participants' desired fields, for which many have developed industry-specific skills. Finally, with respect to long-term outcomes, the

model assumes that the influence of other systemic, socioeconomic factors on community violence will be lessened with increase in gainful employment and increased social engagement.

Logic Model for the R.E.A.L. School Project



1.2 Contextualization – BIPOC Youth, Labour Market Participation and Professional Development

Canadian youth—in particular BIPOC and racialized youth—face higher levels of unemployment than the rest of the population (Cukier et al., 2023). 2016 data shows that the unemployment rate for non-racialized persons stood at 7.3%, whilst the rate for racialized persons was 7.7%, with the rate higher than 10% for Arab, Black and West Asian populations (Cukier et al., 2023). In addition, racialized youth make up a significant proportion of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET) compared to other groups, and therefore “require particular and tailored assistance to make their transition into the workforce” (Cukier et al., 2023). In addition, NEET youth face higher instances of a number of issues such as depression, anxiety and drug use (Cukier et al., 2023).

Whilst lack of experience is a frequent cause of high levels of youth unemployment, racialized youth face a number of additional societal barriers such as “socioeconomic status, differential access to social and financial capital, as well as systemic discrimination and implicit biases” and individual barriers such as “limited visible role models, a lack of peer support in pursuing career and educational goals and inadequate support from teachers and educational institutions” (Cukier et al., 2023).

In addition, programs targeting youth and racialized youth to redress this dynamic have been described as “fragmented” and their impacts poorly reported (Cukier et al., 2023). A recent report by FSC and the Ted Rogers School of Management Diversity Institute therefore emphasize the need for “targeted employed programs that address the barriers facing racialized youth and their distinctive employment needs” (Cukier et al., 2023).

2.0 Objectives, Scope and Methodology

2.1 Evaluation Objectives and Scope

Objectives

The review primarily focuses on the project's relevance, reach, design and delivery as well as the effectiveness of the project.

Scope

The scope of the review includes the period from the start of the current contract between URSSE and FSC until the present (i.e., ending March 31, 2023).

2.2 Evaluation Questions:

The document review's lines of evidence examine issues of relevance, reach, design and delivery, and effectiveness. The review also examines any lessons learned.

The following evaluation questions were considered in the review of the project:

Relevance:

1. How does the project address the needs of Black, Indigenous and racialized (BIPOC) youth?

Reach:

2. In what ways and to what extent did the project reach its intended target population?

Design and Delivery:

3. To what extent was the project implemented as intended?
 - 3.1 To what extent were weekly sessions provided to assess skills, build rapport, develop career goals, and teach skills to participants?
 - 3.2 To what extent was individualized coaching provided to participants for purposes of professional development and to address conflicts and difficulties?
 - 3.3 To what extent were community-building sessions organized in neighbourhoods to increase community capacity to foster prosocial engagement between youth and prevent violence?
4. Were modifications made to the design or delivery of the project?
5. How were equity, diversity and inclusion considered in the project's design and delivery?



Effectiveness

6. To what extent was the project meeting its intended outcomes?
 - 6.1 How effective was the project in meeting its target participation and retention?
 - 6.2 How effective was the project in identifying participants' lifestyle goals that encourage their success?
 - 6.3 How effective was the project in developing participants' long-term career plans?
 - 6.4 How effective was the project in developing the professional and interpersonal skills necessary for participants' future careers?
 - 6.5 How effective was the project in increasing community capacity for prosocial engagement?

Table 1: Evaluation Matrix

Questions	Indicators	
Relevance		
EQ1: How does the project address the needs of Black, Indigenous and racialized (BIPOC) youth?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of the needs of BIPOC youth • Evidence that the format and activities of the project support these needs 	
Reach		
EQ2: In what ways and to what extent did the project reach its intended target populations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies to reach the target population • Intended number of participants 	
Design and Delivery		
EQ3: To what extent was the project implemented as intended?	EQ3.1 To what extent were weekly sessions provided to assess skills, build rapport, develop career goals, and teach skills to participants?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 54 weekly workshops/experiential learning sessions delivered to youth in priority neighbourhoods in Scarborough and Oshawa, covering professional and life skills • Final projects developed with youth cohorts and presented in local showcases
	EQ3.2 To what extent was individualized coaching provided to participants for purposes of professional development and to address conflicts and difficulties?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individualized coaching provided to participants
	EQ 3.3 To what extent were community-building sessions organized in neighbourhoods to increase community capacity to foster prosocial engagement between youth and prevent violence?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community building sessions held in neighbourhoods to foster prosocial youth engagement

Questions		Indicators
EQ4: Were modifications made to the design or delivery of the project?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence that the design or delivery of the project changed over time
EQ5: How were equity, diversity and inclusion considered in the project's design and delivery?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of the inclusion of EDI in the project
Effectiveness		
EQ6: How effective was the project in meeting its intended outcomes?	3.1 How effective was the project in meeting its target participation and retention?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% participant retention
	3.2 How effective was the project in identifying participants' lifestyle goals that encourage their success?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased clarity of participants' career goals Interests, personality traits and skills sets were identified
	3.3 How effective was the project in developing participants' long-term career plans?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants worked to develop a business plan
	3.4 How effective was the project in developing the professional and interpersonal skills necessary for participants' future careers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants developed an understanding of basic business language and etiquette Participants acquired at least 3 critical employment skills Increased confidence in skills and navigating workplace environments, labour markets, project management, and interpersonal conflict
	3.5 How effective was the project in increasing community capacity for prosocial engagement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased community capacity for prosocial engagement between youth Reduction of community violence

3.3 Methodology

GGI implemented the evaluation based on a document and data review. The document and data review contributed to evidence for all evaluation questions. Specifically, it provided background information on the origin and initial design of the project. The review of documents was key to understanding how the project was intended to operate and how it was implemented. Moreover, administrative data were considered in order to evaluate the reach of the program.

Key documents reviewed included:

- URSSE’s application for Innovation Project Funding;
- URSSE’s quarterly reports (Q1 2021, Q2 2021, Q3 2021) and Final Report;
- URSSE’s Work Plan and Evidence Generation Form;
- FSC’s Reviewer Assessment Forms; and
- Other documents, including the project Funding Agreement, Amendment, and Project Information Form (PIF).

The methodology employed for the document review included:

- Review of all project documents inclusive of the Application for Funding and Work Plan Quarterly and Final Reporting, and other available documentation.
- Review of evidence was incorporated into the evidence matrix by Evaluation Question (EQ) and Indicator.
- Translation of the matrix findings into a concise narrative that was incorporated into the Evaluation Report, returning to the matrix or documents as necessary to fill in any gaps.
- Synthesis of findings and conclusions for each EQ.

Limitations

For some Evaluation Questions and Indicators, information provided in documentation—in particular quarterly and final reporting—is insufficient to assess progress. For instance, the project’s Final Report primarily presents project learnings and future project directions with non-FSC funding and does not indicate whether some outcomes (e.g., the development of participants’ long-term career plans or the development of community capacity for prosocial youth engagement) previously indicated as ‘on track to be completed’ were indeed met. Moreover, some project elements outlined in the Application for Innovation Project Funding, such as the final group project that participants would showcase in their neighbourhoods, were not addressed in any other documentation such as the Project Work Plan or reporting.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Relevance

EQ1: How Does the Project Address the Needs of Black, Indigenous and Racialized (BIPOC) Youth?

Summary: BIPOC youth in the GTA are regularly excluded from professional development and face a number of issues in the labour market, compounded by systemic factors. R.E.A.L. School fills the gap for culturally competent and comprehensive support programs that empower BIPOC youth to attain actionable career goals by combining professional development, education and crime prevention in a single project-based learning program aligning BIPOC youth with careers based on their ISPs. Its Reach-Teach-Attain pedagogy engages BIPOC youth through the lens of popular culture, exposes participants to the infrastructure of attainable careers in industries in which they are already interested, and develops the necessary goals and skills, supported through individualized coaching and weekly workshops. Furthermore, the needs of the communities of BIPOC youth are also met through the integration of community-building sessions to develop the capacity for prosocial engagement to reduce violence.

Needs of BIPOC Youth

According to the Application for Innovation Project Funding, BIPOC youth are “the most vulnerable (MVP) youth in the Greater Toronto Area” (GTA). As a result, and in combination with a number of systemic factors, BIPOC youth are regularly excluded from professional development and fulfilling career goals and experience a number of issues in the labour market.¹² These issues not only hinder the individual personal and professional development of BIPOC youth but also their wider communities—for instance, the lack of access to dignified employment (as well as decent living conditions) are important factors explaining why the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted Black and other racialized neighbourhoods in the GTA.¹³

However, according to URSSE, there is a “sector-wide lack of culturally competent youth programs that integrate professional development, education opportunity, and crime prevention into a singular mode of delivery.”¹⁴ Furthermore, although there are many youth development programs delivered across the GTA, they often “struggle to reach and retain MVP youth” due to their inability to make connections and foster genuine engagement.¹⁵ Therefore, BIPOC youth “need comprehensive support programs” that not only “speak their language” and empower them to

¹² Application for Innovation Project Funding

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.



attain actionable career goals but also that “[recognize] the correlations between joblessness, antisociality, systemic racism, and perceived lack of opportunity.”¹⁶

R.E.A.L. School and the Needs of BIPOC Youth

R.E.A.L. School is a 54-session project-based learning project that aligns BIPOC youth with careers based on their interests, personality traits, and skill sets (IPSS). As mentioned above, the School fills a major gap in youth programming by integrating professional development, education opportunities, and crime prevention into a singular mode of delivery, which has already proven to be successful in meeting the needs of the many youths, families and communities with which URSSE has worked.¹⁷

Along with the above, there are a few key elements of the School’s format demonstrating the extent to which the project has been designed to meet the needs of BIPOC youth.

First, the School’s **curriculum** is designed to connect youth to the support they need to achieve their goals by promoting youth potential, developing realistic career goals, and honing skills transferable to contemporary and future job markets, including social functioning and prosocial behaviours as a factor of career preparedness.¹⁸ To meet the need of BIPOC youth who require that their existing interests are channelled into future-focused skills, the School exposes them to the infrastructure of attainable careers in the industries in which they are *already* interested. The School is founded upon a three-pronged Reach–Teach–Attain pedagogy, delivered over the course of a full year through weekly workshops through which participants’ ISPs are assessed and project leaders build rapport to bridge the “youth trust hump.”¹⁹ This approach, refined through several iterations of the School in several GTA priority neighbourhoods, centres end-users (youth and families) in the identification of personal competencies, educational and career goals, and work-ready skills.²⁰

Second, the **format** of R.E.A.L. School is further designed to meet the needs of BIPOC youth by engaging them through the lens of popular culture as an accessible point of entry. Although popular culture is commonly used to engage BIPOC youth, project documentation notes that “most youth development programs only expose youth to the most idolized and least attainable popular culture careers,” rather than the infrastructural, administrative, and technical roles that offer attainable career paths.²¹ School and project leaders therefore use popular culture to expose participants to an array of attainable and fulfilling career possibilities and develop directly applicable skills that are extensions of the ISPs identified at the project’s outset.²²

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.



Furthermore, throughout the project, participants receive **individualized coaching** with Leaders, two adult Black men with a combined three decades of experience working with BIPOC youth in the GTA. These project leaders are able to apply their own experiences to each participant to profoundly impact every participant on a personal and professional level.

Finally, R.E.A.L. School also integrates community-building sessions in each project neighbourhood, which meets the needs of BIPOC communities by increasing their capacity to foster prosocial engagement between youth and prevent further incidents of violence that are rooted in antisocial behaviours and systemic socioeconomic factors. The community-facing aspect allows participants to share lived experiences in a safe space.

Therefore, R.E.A.L. School was specifically designed to meet the needs of BIPOC youth both in its curriculum and format, and delivered through strong and meaningful engagement with youth. As a result, the School intends to have participants reach a high level of career identification, acquire greater decision-making skills, effectively channel interests into employable skills, and augment prosocial capacities with their peers, families and communities. The objective is that participants leave with actionable steps toward attainable career goals, prosocial interpersonal skills, and a supporting network of peers. Furthermore, in helping each participant attain gainful employment opportunities and higher education experience, the School has a role to play in de-risking youth from involvement in the Criminal Justice System.

3.2 Reach

EQ2: In What Ways and to What Extent Did the Project Reach its Intended Target Populations?

Summary: The project reached BIPOC youth through a number of successful outreach strategies. A working outreach and project implementation model was first implemented in the Glamorgan priority neighbourhood and then replicated in the remaining three. This model consisted of weekly community Zoom meetings and individual in-person meetings with youth; the hiring of outreach workers and a community liaison with lived experience; the establishment of partnerships with relevant organizations and stakeholders; and the provision of wraparound community support to address immediate needs and build rapport with prospective participants. As a result, rapport, relationships, and trust were successively built, which were then consolidated in two overnight retreats with prospective participants. This allowed the project the ability to recruit a total of 25 participants across all neighbourhoods in the first quarter, followed by 40 and 33 participants in the second and final quarters, respectively.

Outreach Strategies and Progress

URSSE identified key community assets and partners in four priority neighbourhoods in the GTA: Canlish, Glamorgan, West Hill and Oshawa. Outreach efforts were first focused on Glamorgan, which already had a more developed outreach and partnership infrastructure as a result of prior

efforts, and in order to develop “a working outreach and program implementation model to then scale and replicate to the other three priority neighbourhoods.”²³

URSSE held weekly Zoom meetings for two months with all communities to engage prospective youth; however, due to challenges engaging virtually, the organization began to meet with youth individually in the evenings outside of their units, which was described as “much more effective due to the importance of human connection”. This allowed recruitment to the School to begin and provided referrals to other community resources.”²⁴ To further overcome pandemic-related challenges in accessing youth, contract outreach workers with lived experience in the neighbourhood were hired for the first two months, as well as a former community resident well-connected with local youth to act as community liaison of the project, who “substantially boosted recruitment.”²⁵

According to the project documentation, URSSE also intended to engage with relevant partner organizations such as the Carpenters Union, the Delta Family Resource Centre (DFRC) and Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) for the purpose of referrals (e.g., the Carpenters Union as a referral source for trades and youth pursuing carpentry as a career),²⁶ as well as the Toronto District Schoolboard (TDSB) and other local community groups and agencies.²⁷ In the project’s first quarter, partnerships were established with TCHC, Toronto Police Services, Durham Housing, West Hill Collegiate Institute, and Agincourt Community Services Association.²⁸

Finally, URSSE identified as its most effective outreach strategy the provision of wraparound supports such as food security programs and community barbecues to both address immediate community needs and build rapport with prospective participants. URSSE also responded to a fatal incident of violence in the Glamorgan community by providing victim services support, financing the funeral reception, and providing spaces for the community to grieve and seek assistance, described as “crucial” in building community rapport.²⁹ This rapport was sustained to then establish relationships and trust, identified as a particular challenge for any institution in communities “jaded by experiences of anti-Black, systemic and institutionalized racism.”³⁰ This strategy was also employed as it had already proved successful for URSSE in other communities with similar socio-economic challenges.³¹

²³ Q1 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Project Work Plan and Evidence Generation Form

²⁷ Project Funding Agreement Appendix A

²⁸ Q1 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Final Report

³¹ Ibid.

Cohort Retreat

Once outreach efforts were concluded, URSSE also organized overnight retreats with prospective participants in order to finalize recruitment to the project. In the first project quarter, the Glamorgan cohort of 14 was taken on a retreat to Adinkra farms to introduce the project, gauge needs and job readiness and identify skills and professional and entrepreneurial interests.³² Following the retreat, the R.E.A.L. school model was introduced and case management files were created for all youth, across all four neighbourhoods.³³

In the second quarter of the project, a women’s retreat comprised of two communities, entitled “Dear Black Women,” was also held to not only identify career ambitions but also advise women of the benefits of the R.E.A.L. School to their personal and professional goals.³⁴

Participants

As a result of its extensive outreach efforts, URSSE was able to assemble in the first project quarter a cohort of 14 BIPOC youth in Glamorgan for R.E.A.L. School.³⁵ These efforts were then modelled in all neighbourhoods, resulting in a total of 5 participants in Canlish, 11 in West Hill, and 8 in Oshawa. The School assembled a total of 25 participants across all four neighbourhoods, as intended.³⁶ By the second quarter, URSSE stated that “the popularity of the program has generated double the amount of the intended participants,” amounting to a total of 40; however, none were excluded due to the “critical nature of applicants’ needs.”³⁷ The final total number of participants at the project conclusion was 33.³⁸

3.3 Design and Delivery

EQ3: To What Extent Was the Project Implemented as Planned?

Summary: The project was implemented as planned. Workshops were first delivered to youth in all priority neighbourhoods three times a week, followed by twice a week in the third quarter, where ISPs were identified and translated into attainable career goals, and participants were taught professional and interpersonal skills. However, although original documentation states the intent to translate skills into final group projects that would be showcased in neighbourhoods, the latter reporting does not mention or identify progress towards this element. Furthermore, individualized coaching was provided to participants throughout the project and, in the third quarter, participants made formal Declarations of Change. Finally, a variety of community-building sessions were organized in each project neighbourhood in the second project quarter

³² Q1 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Q2 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

³⁵ Q1 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Q2 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

³⁸ Final Report

with the objective of increasing community capacity for prosocial engagement. Delivery of weekly sessions to participants

As previously mentioned and indicated in the Application for Innovation Project Funding, R.E.A.L. school intended to deliver 54 weekly workshops/experiential learning sessions to youth in four priority neighbourhoods in order to assess and teach professional and life skills, build rapport, and develop career goals.³⁹ These sessions were described as “R.E.A.L. School’s centrepiece, through which objectives and outcomes are primarily pursued.”⁴⁰ Through these weekly workshops, facilitators engaged participants through its Reach–Teach–Attain pedagogy to build rapport, assess participants’ IPSs and translate them into attainable career goals by exposing them to career opportunities available in related industries, and then teach professional and interpersonal skills that would be applied to a final group project. It was also intended that these projects be showcased in each neighbourhood, to which “URSSE’s network of culture and entertainment professionals” would also be invited;⁴¹ however, documentation does not report on progress towards these projects nor states that this objective was modified.

By the second project quarter, this project component was 25% complete based on initial orientation sessions, one-on-ones and three sessions per week over a 20-week time span.⁴² IPSs were identified for each participant and interpersonal skill development—including transferable skills such as effective communication and social contracts—was introduced, workshopped and consistently practised during each session.⁴³ Participants were introduced to the ‘7 Cs’: conscious choice, curiosity, courage, challenge, change, and communication.

By the third project quarter, this project component was 85% complete, and sessions were reduced from three to two a week with a total of 33 participants.⁴⁴ The teaching of professional and interpersonal skills was on track to be completed, and participants were also introduced to the “rudimentary requirements to preparing a business plan alongside a life plan and career plan,” which were noted as being facilitated by the organization’s ability to “build rapport, momentum, trust and relationship with the cohort.”⁴⁵

Provision of Individualized Coaching to Participants

Individualized coaching with both project leaders, who have extensive experience with BIPOC youth in the GTA, is the second component of R.E.A.L. School. According to the initial documentation, key delivery partners would also provide additional interpersonal coaching and case management support as needed by participants. Coaches, in accordance with URSSE’s

³⁹ Application for Innovation Project Funding

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Q2 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Q3 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Prevention–Intervention–Reinvention theory of change, would apply their experiences to coach each participant through project milestones, personal difficulties, interpersonal conflict, and professional development as a form of building professional and prosocial capacity. Individualized coaching sessions would also rely on findings from each participant’s IPS assessment.⁴⁶

These coaching sessions were successfully established at the project's outset and would continue throughout the project.⁴⁷ During the third project quarter, one-on-one sessions were held where participants made formal Declarations of Change and acknowledged that the issues requiring change were holding them back from progressing and succeeding.⁴⁸

Organization of Community-Building Sessions in Neighbourhoods

The third element of R.E.A.L. school comprises the organization of community-building sessions in each project neighbourhood in order to integrate the families and communities of participants. According to the Application for Innovation Project Funding, these sessions would increase community capacity to foster prosocial engagement between youth and prevent further incidents of violence that are rooted in antisocial behaviours and systemic socioeconomic factors.⁴⁹ The community-facing aspect allows participants to share lived experiences in a safe space.⁵⁰

In the second project quarter, a variety of social and programming initiatives such as retreats, barbecues, and workshops, among others, were held.⁵¹

EQ4: Were Modifications Made to the Design or Delivery of the Project?

Summary: The project’s engagement strategy was altered to individual engagement with youth outside of their units to rectify the challenges of engaging virtually. In the third quarter, all programming was moved virtually due to community violence, and was sustained throughout the project due to COVID-19 restrictions; however, this had a negative impact on momentum and participant engagement.

As previously indicated, the project’s engagement strategy was altered in the early stages of the project due to challenges associated with engaging youth using a virtual platform. As a result, URSSE began to meet with youth individually in the evenings outside of their units, which was noted as being much more effective due to the importance of human connection.⁵²

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Q2 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁴⁸ Q3 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Q2 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁵² Q1 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

In the third project quarter, all programming was moved virtually due to community violence; virtual programming was sustained throughout the remainder of the project due to COVID-19 restrictions. Unfortunately, the project’s final report notes that this had a negative impact on the momentum built during face-to-face interactions and on the engagement of participants.⁵³ To counter this, attendance was made contingent on participants being on camera during sessions.⁵⁴

EQ5: How was Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Considered in the Project’s Design and Delivery?

Summary: Through its aim to mitigate sector-wide inequalities that exclude BIPOC youth, EDI and anti-racism are “at the core” of the design and delivery of R.E.A.L. school. In providing participants with a safe space to discuss their own experiences with racism and providing anti-racist social skills, the School aimed to increase the representation of BIPOC talent in the workforce and mitigate racism and discrimination.

EDI and specifically anti-racism is described in the documentation as being “at the core” of the School’s “pedagogy and theory of change,” which “aims to mitigate and, ultimately, eradicate sector-wide inequalities that exclude the demographics who URSSE serves” (i.e., BIPOC youth).⁵⁵ Ultimately, it is intended that through R.E.A.L. School, representation of Black and racialized talent from underserved areas across the GTA will be significantly increased in the Entertainment and Culture sectors in particular.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the development of participants’ professional and anti-racist social skills, in combination with their lived experience, will also allow them to further EDI in their own place of work, mitigating racism and discrimination. In large part, the School makes this possible “by providing a safe, non-judgmental space for participants to discuss uncomfortable and emotionally charged topics—including their own experiences with racism.”⁵⁷

3.4 Effectiveness

EQ6: To What Extent Did/Does the Project Meet its Intended Outcomes?

Summary: The outcomes of participation and retention and identification of goals were fully met. The School saw a 90% retention rate (higher than the target of 80%) and a 100% completion rate of Declarations of Change. Goals and ISPs were identified, and participants proved highly committed to making the necessary change to meet their goals. There is insufficient documentation to assess whether the outcomes of the development of professional and

⁵³ Project Final Report

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Application for Innovation Project Funding

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

interpersonal skills and the development of community capacity for prosocial youth engagement were fully met. Nonetheless, participants did increase their business acumen, financial literacy and decision-making and were taught transferable skills and conflict management skills; moreover, community capacity was increased to some extent.

Participation and Retention

By project conclusion, R.E.A.L. School had an over 90% retention rate (higher than its target of 80%) and a 100% completion rate of Declarations of Change. Despite the introduction of a stipend as an incentive, the retention rate and overall “level of enthusiasm and participation” were described as “surprising.”⁵⁸

Identification of Goals

By the second project quarter, all participants had identified their ISPs through the School’s workshops and individualized coaching.⁵⁹

By the third project quarter, URSSE reported that participants had not only identified goals but were highly committed to working on their own area of change necessary to meet these goals through a ‘Taking Small Steps to Accomplish Big Moves’ approach. Participants’ dedication and progress in “becoming a better version of themselves” were described as “exhilarating” and “moving,” particularly for those participants who at the project’s outset were shy and intimidated.⁶⁰ Furthermore, participants were reported to have attributed the project to their own personal growth, described as a “highlight” of the project to that point.⁶¹

Development of Long-Term Career Plans

By the third project quarter, participants were being introduced to the rudimentary requirements of preparing a business plan alongside a life plan and career plan.⁶² There is insufficient evidence in the documentation to assess any further progress.

Development of Professional and Interpersonal Skills

The project’s final report identifies the effective increase in participants’ business acumen, financial literacy and decision-making capabilities. Participants’ increased knowledge was demonstrated in responding to specific key questions. Furthermore, participants were also taught transferable skills and conflict management skills, the latter of which was described as “very effective in helping participants recognize” the potential consequences of anger and conflict on

⁵⁸ Project Final Report

⁵⁹ Q2 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁶⁰ Q3 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

personal success.⁶³ No further information is provided in the documentation on the extent to which these skills were successfully developed in participants.

Unfortunately, as before, documents do not provide any further insight into the extent to which participants developed an understanding of basic business language and etiquette, the acquiring of 3 critical employment skills, or increased confidence in skills and navigating workplace environments, labour markets, project management, and interpersonal conflict.

Development of Community Capacity for Prosocial Youth Engagement and Reduction of Violence

The project's 2021 Q2 progress report indicates that community capacity was increased and 'on track to complete' through a variety of social programming initiatives.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the report notes that although any reduction in community violence could not yet be measured, URSSE was "confident that workshops serve as a form of distraction and new sense of purpose for participants."⁶⁵ There is insufficient evidence in the documentation to assess any further progress.

3.5 Project Learnings

Over the course of the design and implementation of R.E.A.L. School, URSSE identified a number of project learnings, as follows:

- **Engagement during COVID-19:** The COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant barrier to public engagement and outreach, in particular with harder-to-reach youth. However, being persistent and varied in terms of measures of support proved an important strategy, in particular connecting with family members, relying heavily on the project's community liaison, and directing outreach efforts towards food security programs.⁶⁶ This is especially important as it was found that face-to-face contact is necessary for rapport and relationship building while, conversely, virtual meetings have been referred to by youth as "boring."⁶⁷
 - For this project, providing food security and distribution allowed for a higher level of community engagement and rapport-building than traditional outreach.⁶⁸ Therefore, "attending to the high priority needs of the community from a solutions-based perspective" was found to be the most effective approach.⁶⁹
- It is necessary for **relationship-building** to occur prior to formal data collection to allow for participant information sharing as, prior to establishing trust, youth are often reluctant to

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Q2 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Q1 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.



share names and contact information.⁷⁰ Therefore, data collection for R.E.A.L. school was “pushed back until the first day of programming.”⁷¹

- Patience is also integral to rapport- and relationship-building to allow trust to “develop organically.”⁷²
- In order to **affect change**, the culture of a particular community must first be observed and understood “before introducing anything that is deemed to be corrective in any way”—hence, it is important to first focus on “consistent reinforcement of basic fundamentals and life skills” until there is evidence of positive change and development.⁷³ In doing so, it is also important to “meet the participants” where they are at, with attentiveness to “communication style, cultural sensitivity and social sensitivities.”⁷⁴
 - For example, URSSE found there to be a “clear and important distinction between the chronological age of an individual participant and the various stages of the life and social cycle that they have experienced,” e.g., a 20- or 30-year-old male from a “socioeconomically challenged environment with limited positive influence” may function akin to a “16-year-old with respect to basic financial, social and emotional literacy.”⁷⁵
 - In addition, URSSE found that as a result of the “nature of the interactions between community residents,” participants were often “oblivious to the skill sets” of other participants/community members⁷⁶ and do not recognize the “true depth of character and potential in one another” (e.g., their intellectual inclinations).⁷⁷ Initiatives such as R.E.A.L. school that have a focus on group dialogue allows to “expose these abilities,” thereby impacting the “collective self-esteem of the cohort,” increasing commitment to the program and attendance and participation.⁷⁸
- Finally, in addition to rapport and relationship building, participant incentives were shown to be necessary to “encourage and ensure participation,” in particular for male youth, whereas female youth were more likely to participate for the learning benefits.⁷⁹ However, as the training progress, “the consistency of the messaging increased retention.”⁸⁰

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Q3 2021 Quarterly Progress Report

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Q3 2021 Quarterly Report

⁷⁷ Q1 2021 Quarterly Report

⁷⁸ Q3 2021 Quarterly Report

⁷⁹ Project Final Report

⁸⁰ Ibid.

4.0 Conclusions

EQ1 – Needs of BIPOC Youth: BIPOC youth in the GTA are regularly excluded from professional development and face a number of issues in the labour market. R.E.A.L. School fills the gap for culturally competent and comprehensive support programs that empower BIPOC youth to attain actionable career goals by combining professional development, education and crime prevention in a single project-based learning project aligning BIPOC youth with careers based on their ISPs. Engaging youth through the lens of popular culture, the School exposes them to the infrastructure of attainable careers in industries in which they are already interested and develops the necessary goals and skills, supported through individualized coaching and weekly workshops. Furthermore, the needs of the communities of BIPOC youth are also met through the integration of community-building sessions to develop the capacity for prosocial engagement to reduce violence.

EQ2 – Reach to the target audience: The project reached BIPOC youth through a number of successful outreach strategies. A working outreach and project implementation model was first implemented in the Glamorgan priority neighbourhood and then replicated in the remaining three. This model consisted of weekly community Zoom meetings and individual in-person meetings with youth; the hiring of outreach workers and a community liaison; the establishment of partnerships with relevant stakeholders; and the provision of wraparound community support to address immediate needs and build rapport. Two overnight retreats were held with prospective participants, allowing the project to recruit a total of 25 participants across all neighbourhoods in the first quarter, followed by 40 and 33 participants in the second and final quarters, respectively.

EQ3 – Implementation of the project as planned: The project was implemented as planned. Workshops were first delivered to youth in all priority neighbourhoods three times a week, followed by twice a week in the third quarter, where ISPs were identified and translated into attainable career goals and participants were taught professional and interpersonal skills. However, although original documentation states the intent to translate skills into final group projects that would be showcased in neighbourhoods, documents do not identify progress towards this element. Individualized coaching was provided to participants throughout the project and, in the third quarter, participants made formal Declarations of Change. A variety of community-building sessions were organized in each project neighbourhood with the objective of increasing community capacity for prosocial engagement.

EQ4 – Modifications to delivery and design: The project's engagement strategy was altered to individual engagement with youth outside of their units to rectify the challenges of engaging virtually. In the third quarter, all programming was moved virtually due to community violence, and was sustained throughout the project due to COVID-19 restrictions; however, this had a negative impact on momentum and participant engagement.

EQ5 – Evidence of EDI: Through its aim to mitigate sector-wide inequalities that exclude BIPOC youth, EDI and anti-racism are “at the core” of the design and delivery of R.E.A.L. school. In providing participants with a safe space to discuss their own experiences with racism and providing anti-racist social skills, the School aimed to increase the representation of BIPOC talent in the workforce and mitigate racism and discrimination.

EQ6 – Meeting of outcomes: The outcomes of participation and retention and identification of goals were fully met. The School saw a 90% retention rate (higher than the target of 80%) and a 100% completion rate of Declarations of Change. Goals and ISPs were identified, and participants proved highly committed to making the necessary change to meet their goals. There is insufficient documentation to assess whether the outcomes of the development of professional and interpersonal skills and the development of community capacity for prosocial youth engagement were fully met. Nonetheless, participants did increase their business acumen, financial literacy and decision-making and were taught transferable skills and conflict management skills, and community capacity was increased to some extent.