

Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future is a youth engagement and research initiative that involves students as partners in school and in community change. This study examines how young people's confidence in their learning affects their aspirations, their confidence in the future and their belief that they can act on the world to have a positive impact. This initiative is influenced by a report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century called "Learning: The Treasure Within". The Commission proposed the Four Pillars of Education as the foundations of learning throughout life:

To know; To do; To live together; and To be.

The Four Pillars of Education still have tremendous currency. A 2007 European conference on "Learning to Live Together: Impact and Future of the Delors Report" identifies key issues, addressed in "Learning: The Treasure Within" that are highly relevant to the Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future initiative. These include:

- Two major purposes of learning:
 - To develop key competencies based on the *ability to learn*, rather than on the *accumulation* of learning; and
 - To accept that there are multiple identities.
- The acknowledgement that young people's role in their learning is rapidly changing from one of "absorbers of information" to one of "social change agents" in light of shifting definitions of what is knowledge and who defines knowledge (Carneiro and Draxler 2008).

For the purpose of this study, the Canadian Education Association has developed five dimensions pertaining to confidence with the intent of facilitating our interpretation of the Four Pillars of Education, and our ability to measure youth confidence in learning and the future in a consistent manner. These five dimensions emerging out of the Pillars are:

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| 1. | <i>Trust:</i> | Both in relationships and in institutions |
| 2. | <i>Engagement :</i> | Deep connection with learning, with school; personal relevance |
| 3. | <i>Efficacy and Empowerment:</i> | Belief that you can act to make a difference, either alone or with others |
| 4. | <i>Fit:</i> | Between in and out of school learning |
| 5. | <i>Future:</i> | Being aware of/thinking about the future |

The **Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future Study** aimed to answer:

- A. Do young people have confidence in learning (in and out of school) and the future?
- B. Based on the five dimensions of confidence (Trust, Engagement, Efficacy and Empowerment, Fit, Future) emerging from UNESCO's 4 Pillars of Education, how do young people feel about their learning experiences and their learning environments?

A review of potential sites in the Halton Region was conducted in the initial phase of the Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future initiative and after careful consideration Milton was identified by Community Development Halton as a prime site for this study. Community Development Halton released a report, *A Social Profile of Milton 2009*:

A Changing Social Landscape, demonstrating the changing face of Milton. The report indicates that after years with no significant growth, the population of the Town of Milton soared from 31,470 to 53,900 between 2001 and 2006. The addition of 22,430 persons represents a 71% increase over a 5-year period.

The introduction of the study took place on Monday, February 28, 2011; the launch of the on-line survey for Milton took place on Tuesday, March 1, 2011. We exceeded our goal of 150 completed surveys and realized a total of 166 grade 10 students including 68 (41%) females, 96 (57.8%) males and two students who did not identify their gender. Students who elected to attend the debriefing session came for lunch and participated in an informal discussion on Wednesday, March 2, 2011. The Community Development Halton research team received the preliminary results of the on-line survey for Milton at the beginning of May 2011. By mid-May, the initial findings were reviewed and shared with the Halton District School Board, the Canadian Education Association and the students interested in the survey results.

The *Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future* initiative has revealed that the more confident a youth feels about the future, the more likely they will feel confident about their future aspirations. There are strong relationships between *efficacy* and *empowerment*, and *fit in and out of school*. The survey findings confirm that youth in this Milton school feel confident in learning (in and out of school) and in the future. Additionally, youth who share certain characteristics and conditions are predisposed to score more positively than others.

A few specific examples include:

- Female youth report a higher level of efficacy and empowerment out of school, as well as overall efficacy and empowerment than their male counterparts.

- Immigrant students demonstrate a higher level of confidence in learning and the future and have a more positive outlook on their learning experiences as well as their learning environment than their peers who were born in Canada.
- Youth whose primary language spoken in the home is not English or French demonstrate a higher level of understanding of how to connect their in and out of school learning experiences than those who speak an Official language.
- Students whose mothers have less than high school education show a decrease in trust in school.

In reference to the question “Based on the five dimensions of confidence, how do youth feel about their learning experiences and their learning environments?”, the study points out that when trust, efficacy, empowerment and confidence are present, youth have a stronger sense of self, a higher level of engagement in and out of school and, also make the connection between what they are learning in and out of school.

Community Service Learning:

When students were asked to respond to the following statement: “I found the 40 hours of community service involvement was a useful learning experience”, a slight majority (53%) strongly agree/agree. The students were then asked if they think the 40 hours of community involvement makes a useful contribution to the community, of which 66% of the students strongly agreed/agreed. Although it is reassuring that the majority of students responded favorably to this section of the survey, it leaves tremendous opportunity to engage even more youth in meaningful community service learning since over 40% of the students strongly disagree/disagree with the statements. There is a large portion of students (44%) who strongly disagree/disagreed that there are enough interesting things for young people to do in their community. A number of them also indicate that they do not take part in community programs that are outside of their school (35%). Overall, an average of 52% of students recognize and are able to identify that a relevant link exists between their in and out of school learning.

Our interest in continuing the work of the *Youth Confidence in Learning and the Future* study grows out of our desire to inspire youth and support their learning; to create safe, healthy and engaging environments; and to provide them with opportunities for challenge and choice.

We believe the *Youth Leaders in Community* movement will create the conditions for youth to: participate meaningfully to community in areas they are passionate about; to incrementally gain experiences that will enable them to connect the relevance of their

learnings in and out of school; and to acquire transferable skills that will prepare them as they confidently advance into their future.

Youth Leaders in Community will assist in the creation of a broader learning environment that allows the voice and energy of youth to be channeled into a vibrant and inclusive community. We are committed to the continuance of this work, recognizing that it is organic in nature and will be primarily shaped by the youth who participate in the initiative. The past two years have provided a strong foundation from which to progress. We are motivated to empower youth in shaping their community and influencing the direction of their future in an effort to achieve positive social change.