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Soft skills as a workforce development strategy for Opportunity Youth

A proposed service
delivery model

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT ABOUT?

This document aims to provide an evidence-based practice guide to working with youth to develop soft skills through employment support and training. The term “soft skills” describes a range of skills related to emotional intelligence, inter- and intra-personal abilities, and personal traits or attributes favourably associated with career development.^{1,2} This document includes a preliminary employment service delivery model informed by the latest evidence on the value of soft skills in the modern economy, including a focus group discussion with youth and interviews with service providers and agency staff. We also highlight strategies, tactics, and promising practices that youth participants and agency staff said they found effective in soft skills training.

WHO WILL FIND IT USEFUL?

This document is intended for different providers working with youth such as employers, employment support programs, and other innovative training programs. Our goal was to develop a service delivery model that guides employment for youth facing multiple barriers to employment including Opportunity youth who are not enrolled in school/vocational training or currently employed.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN POINTS?

- Soft skills are recognized by employers as critical for employment success and are among the top sought-after skills yet are reported as often lacking in younger job candidates. Among Opportunity youth, there is emerging evidence that a lack of soft skills may be one of the key barriers limiting their employment success.^{3,4}
- The value of soft skills is not promoted *in place* of technical or job-specific skills, but rather *in addition* to these, to enhance job opportunities.⁵ Employment-specific interventions alone are unlikely to be sufficient to support Opportunity youth and may need to be accompanied by interventions to access health resources, mental health supports, housing services, or other social services.

- Based on our analysis of both the interviews and existing research, we identified six guiding principles used by service providers when working with Opportunity youth:
 1. Build relationships
 2. Address essential needs to contribute to safety and stability
 3. Provide flexible, client-centred programming
 4. Provide strength-based and capacity-building approach
 5. Celebrate all forms of success
 6. Leave the door open for continued support.
- Organizations embedding soft skills training into their programming emphasized the importance of learning these skills in practical contexts and prioritizing applied learning with youth.
- Skills training is an important part of positive youth development and can be a key connection to community supports. Dedicating program time to checking in on overall well-being and mental health can give youth a chance to seek help and resources that can have lasting benefits for their development and continued engagement in skills training.
- Program flexibility and accessibility can be enhanced by providing options for in-person, online, or hybrid programs depending on individual circumstances, while also aligning with the growing demands of the 21st century workforce.

GLOSSARY

Asset-mapping: The process of identifying existing strengths or skills as well as assets that one can build on to advance further towards one's goals. The process allows for an individual to see themselves in a more positive light and think more strategically about enhancing their existing strengths and developing new ones.⁶

Barriers to employment: Obstacles or challenges that a person can experience when looking for employment. As an example, typical barriers encountered by newcomers to Canada can include a lack of Canadian accreditation, lack of Canadian work experience, and/or gender.⁷

Employment or work readiness: To possess the foundational skills required to meet minimum qualifications for an occupation or position.

Experiential learning: Learning obtained by being directly and practically involved in a learning experience (as opposed to being the recipient of ready-made content delivered through lectures or notes).⁷

Opportunity youth: Young people who are not enrolled in school/vocational training and not currently employed, and who are facing barriers to education and/or employment.⁸

Social emotional learning (SEL): The process of acquiring certain core competencies that allow an individual to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, and appreciate the perspectives of others, allowing them to establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions.⁹

Social emotional skills: Competencies or life skills that allow people to manage their emotions, establish good relationships and solve problems effectively.¹⁰

Soft skills: A broad skill set of competencies, attitudes, and personal qualities (i.e., communication skills, social skills, etc.) that allow individuals to effectively navigate different environments and social situations, perform well, and achieve their goals. Soft skills often complement other skills, including technical, practical, or academic skills.¹¹ Alternate terms include 21st century skills, foundational skills, or interpersonal skills.

Strength-based approach or practice: A collaborative process where the recipient of services and support and the person providing the support work together to identify the individual's strengths and use this to inform and develop action plans for further skill development.¹²

INTRODUCTION

The employment landscape in Canada is rapidly changing. Compared to previous generations, there is more emphasis today on non-technical soft skills as the economy becomes more knowledge-based.¹³ Employers identify the greatest demands in soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking.¹⁴ In addition, the federal government has recently incorporated soft skills into its new *Skills for Success* framework for employment training and skills development.ⁱ

Building and developing young people’s soft skills is paramount since adolescence and young adulthood is a critical time for social, cognitive, and psychological development, and when young people explore different employment and educational opportunities.¹⁵ Yet because of the ways in which soft skills are typically learned (e.g., through informal, experiential learning), many youth are disadvantaged in their access to the coaching, training, and role models needed to develop these skills. Cultural and other biases may also play a role in the definition and assessment of soft skills.¹⁶

Marginalized or “Opportunity youth” represent one group of youth facing multiple barriers to employment and the risk of long-term social and economic disadvantage.^{13,17,18} Consequently, there is a lack of – and growing interest in – service delivery models for soft skills to better support young people, such as Opportunity youth, along their employment journeys.¹³ There is an increasing preference for the use of the term “Opportunity youth” as opposed to alternatives such as “NEET”ⁱⁱ since it better represents youth who may be actively seeking opportunities to succeed other than employment or education (i.e., volunteering, transitioning from school to work).^{19,20} Organizational representatives with whom we spoke for this project work with youth from many different social and demographic backgrounds who face barriers to employment, including those who are racialized, newcomers to Canada, Indigenous, in care, experiencing homelessness or unstable housing, survivors of violence, and single mothers. Many of them pointed to the structural and social barriers to employment and training these groups encounter, including poverty and difficulty in accessing financial assistance and support.

ⁱ See <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success.html>

ⁱⁱ NEET stands for Not in Employment, Education, or Training.

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH NEED ENHANCED EMPLOYMENT SUPPORTS

Employment support and training programs exist in Canada and around the world to help young people on the path towards employment; many of these can lead to positive labour market outcomes.^{21,22} Service providers with whom we spoke for this project emphasized critical thinking, communication, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, ability to navigate big systems, and creativity as the key soft skills they aim to develop in youth to support their career development. Interviewees noted the high value they place on employer feedback to support decisions on which soft skills to focus on in their programming. They also stressed that they are guided by employer needs to help identify and prioritize both hard and soft skills relevant to the current labour market.

“We made a very intentional push to become highly involved with the needs of employers, and the needs of those employers help us shape the on-the-job training programs. What we find works well is not our [service provider] voice in training telling youth what they need to be doing, it’s the person writing their cheque.”

– Vice President of an employment services organization

Research evidence shows that overall, the success of these programs may in large part be due to factors such as the local labour market and participant characteristics, and may not lead to better outcomes for all young people.^{22,23} While there is limited evidence for the effectiveness of interventions designed to develop or enhance soft skills, our previous evidence review²⁴ showed a relationship between soft skills – particularly positive self-concept and high conscientiousness – and favourable employment outcomes.^{11,25-27} Research also suggests that programs designed to provide flexibility, build on strengths, and develop confidence can be effective at supporting youth to succeed on their path to employment.^{21,28,29}

The results of our earlier evidence review²⁴ revealed that many youth are currently struggling to find sustainable and long-term employment as a result of trends such as an increase in digitization and automation in the economy, shifts in the labour markets to more service-oriented jobs, and higher educational requirements for entry-level positions.^{5,14,30} Without adequate supports, Opportunity youth represent a group whose potential may not be fully realized, which becomes a missed economic and social opportunity for society.^{8,31}

The review also indicated that despite the different ways in which soft skills are defined, conceptualized, and measured,¹¹ they are recognized by employers as critical for employment success and are among the top sought-after skills; yet they are often reported as lacking in younger job candidates.³²⁻³⁴ The value of soft skills is not promoted *in place* of technical or job-

specific skills, but rather *in addition* to these, to enhance job opportunities.⁵ Among Opportunity youth, there is emerging evidence that the lack of soft skills may be one of the key barriers limiting their employment success.^{3,4} Soft skills gaps may carry significant burden for Opportunity youth in particular, given the confluence of other barriers and challenges these youth face in their lives.

Opportunity youth may need enhanced supports in overcoming the challenges they face before they are able to become connected to school or the labour market. Employment-specific interventions alone are unlikely to be sufficient to support Opportunity youth and may need to be accompanied by interventions in health, education, and social environments. Indeed, several interviewees noted that if funding were unlimited, the first step in their service delivery would be to address the removal of these barriers so youth could fully engage with training, education, or employment opportunities and services.

In summary, there is emerging research that subgroups of youth such as Opportunity youth are not well served by existing models of training and employment support in their development of soft skills, despite their importance for employment success. There is a need to develop clear service delivery models to help such programs align their practices with the latest research on effective ways to support Opportunity youth. This document aims to address this gap, thereby supporting enhancements in service delivery to better support young people such as Opportunity youth along their employment journeys.

HOW THIS REPORT WAS DEVELOPED

The goal of this project was to develop an employment service delivery model informed by the latest evidence on the value of soft skills in the modern economy, and to provide recommendations for operationalizing soft skills training. We aimed to produce an evidence-based practice guide that could be used by different service providers working with youth, including those providing employment support and training programs, as well as employers.

More specifically, the project sought to address the following research questions:

- What are soft skills and how are they important for finding and succeeding in employment? What is the value of and need for these skills in the current economy for youth in general, and specifically for youth facing multiple barriers, like Opportunity youth?
- What approaches are being used by employers and employment support programs to foster these soft skills among youth with multiple barriers, in Canada and other similar contexts? Are there any notable examples that provide useful guidance for developing programs?

- According to Canadian service providers, what are the enablers, challenges, and opportunities for operationalizing soft skills? What specific approaches and leading strategies can employers and employment support programs implement to enhance soft skills development among Opportunity youth?

METHODS USED

Our approach included a review of academic and grey literature on the value of and need for soft skills within the employment training context.²⁴ Building on this evidence review, we conducted a focus group with six youth and 14 interviews with representatives from a wide range of employment and training organizations across Canada (see Appendix A). Interviewees were practitioners in different roles, providing training or employment supports directly to youth.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom between February to April 2021 and lasted approximately sixty minutes each. The interviews used semi-structured questions focused on the experiences of providing soft skills training and supports to help Opportunity youth succeed in the labour market. We also explored how employment and training providers address the broader systemic challenges to employment faced by Opportunity youth.

The focus group was conducted in July 2021 on Zoom and lasted for approximately ninety minutes. Participants were recruited from amongst the clientele of agencies involved in the interviews. The discussion was semi-structured and facilitated using a focus group guide that prompted participant to share their experiences in skills training programs as well as to provide feedback on the proposed service delivery model.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES TO WORKING WITH OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

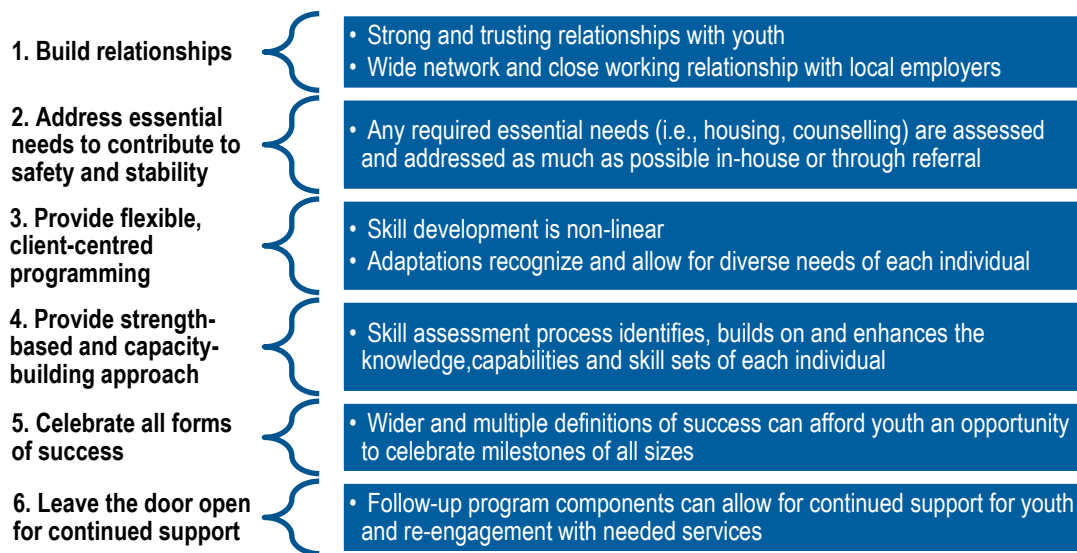
A key goal of the project was to identify what approaches are being used by employment support and training programs to foster soft skills development among Opportunity youth. In interviews, service providers stressed that considering the unique challenges and barriers faced by Opportunity youth is critical to implementing programming and working with this group. Some interviewees reported a preference for the term Opportunity youth because it offers opportunities to build on youth's strengths while acknowledging youth face systemic challenges to pursuing their employment and educational goals, and to finding sustainable employment.

"I think (the term) 'Opportunity youth', when it comes down to it, feels so much more strength-based that we have latched on to it in a more positive way."

– Director of an employment and education initiative program

Based on our analysis of both the interviews and existing research, we discerned six guiding principles used by service providers when working with Opportunity youth, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Guiding principles for working with Opportunity youth on skill development



We then validated these six guiding principles with youth during the focus group discussion. Below we outline the six guiding principles as well as what youth said about them and how they might be considered by service providers to be applied in practice in their programs.

1. Build relationships

Opportunity youth are more likely than less marginalized youth to contend with a confluence of barriers and challenges such as homelessness, poverty, substance use, mental health issues, or physical disabilities. Due to these complex barriers, Opportunity youth may have fewer opportunities to build skills and professional networks in educational, employment, or other spheres of their lives. Service providers we spoke with emphasized the importance of building trust with Opportunity youth, and reported staff's ability to develop strong relationships with youth to be key to facilitating skill development and retaining them in the program.

The principle of building relationships also resonated with youth in the focus group as they described what helped them to establish connections with staff and how important it was to have a support network. Participating youth shared that they felt most comfortable and ready to learn when program staff related to and empathized with the challenges they were facing. Youth appreciated when facilitators could recognize and empathize when they were having difficulties, and offered flexibility or other supports. For example, focus group participants described how difficult it could be to participate in virtual programs at home where they faced different distractions due to family and personal responsibilities. Providers explicitly building in dedicated time for breaks in online spaces was very important so youth could maintain their focus throughout the day.

Service providers also noted the importance of creating a sense of community for Opportunity youth as a way of fostering stability and building a network of support within and beyond the youth's attendance in a program. As one youth participant explained, part of fostering a safe learning environment involves staff sharing personal experiences of adversity to establish and build a connection with them. This was key to making them feel more comfortable when making mistakes and to seeking help.

"Feeling like they truly want to form a connection is so important. Honestly, I feel the most encouraged when working with someone who is patient with me and supports, understands my situation. Someone who says, 'let me connect you with other resources, let me find out who can help you.' Just saying, 'Oh sorry, that sucks' isn't good enough."

– Youth focus group participant

The need to build strong relationships extended to creating close working relationships with local employers as well. Organizational representatives we spoke with emphasized their role in ensuring that employers know what it means to work with Opportunity youth, and providing support to both youth and employers during work placements. This process was thought to work best when service providers and employers worked together to support youth in the program. Wage subsidy programs were described as one of the ways to build connections with employers.

“Everything we do is about relationships – if any of our programs have failed it is due to a lack of relationships. If we do not build a relationship with employers on the ground, it always flops. This can be challenging because there are two components to building relationships – one with the youth and another with employers, where we try to help them understand what it means to hire Opportunity youth.”

– Program Coordinator at a youth services organization

Considerations for service providers for applying the principle in practice

Strategies and tactics for building relationships

Suggested by youth:

- Facilitators who role model vulnerability by sharing experiences of challenges and failures are more approachable and make youth feel safer about sharing their own experiences;
- Deliberately building in time for breaks or space for reflection can go a long way to making youth feel safe and supported;
- Make a point of continuing to follow up and check in with youth, even after leaving the program. During communications, re-iterate that staff can help connect youth with available supports and resources.

Suggested by service providers:

- Assign a staff member or case worker to work with a youth *throughout* the program, through one-on-one coaching and/or mentoring;
- Dedicate staff to recruiting local employers and working closely with them to build and maintain relationships, and understanding their industry’s needs;

- Build relationships with youth who come in for short-term support (i.e., for resume-building) as a way to get to know them, and establish their comfort in coming back to seek more services;
- Use social media to reach and communicate with Opportunity youth. Direct messaging may be a more reliable way to stay in touch with Opportunity youth than using cell phones.

2. Address essential needs to contribute to safety and stability

A holistic assessment that considers the essential needs of Opportunity youth (e.g., for housing, counselling, identification documents) was found to be an important initial step towards helping them engage with programming. Service providers stressed the need to address any required essential needs first to ensure youth's safety and stability, either in-house or through referral to another agency. Organizations that have in-house services for housing, healthcare, counselling, etc., seek to streamline services while staff continue to build and maintain relationships with youth. One service provider explained their housing-first approach by pointing out that youth need a safe place to live before they can focus on skill development.

“We always integrate the wrap-around services into our funding, which is primarily childcare or even just groceries. Some women come to class with one dollar, and how can you focus in class if you don't have your basic essentials?”

– Manager of a youth employment program for women

In other cases, service providers offered only employment support services and used referrals for other services. To this end, we heard it is critical for staff to have an awareness of other community service providers and strong relationships with them. As interviewees highlighted, collaboration with local organizations within the community and a strong knowledge of their services and processes is central to avoiding a patchwork model. This in turn can significantly enhance the efficiency and timeliness of the services organizations can offer youth, and tailor supports to meet youth's needs as they work towards their employment and training goals.

Youth in the focus group noted that openly discussing mental health and well-being and being offered related supports showed them that staff truly cared about their overall well-being. They described how vulnerable they felt throughout skills training and job searching, and the pressure they felt to put only the best version of themselves forward for employers and program staff. Feeling comfortable with staff was foundational to feeling safe and supported, and to being able to connect with broader community resources for skills development, employment, and overall well-being.

“Having a support system; when people communicate that again and again. We had time blocked off for mental health and resiliency. The instructor kept repeating that, ‘If you have challenges, let me know.’ In person we sometimes don’t want to come off as being weak. For me, the top win was [staff] creating that safe space for everyone.”

– Youth focus group participant

Considerations for service providers for applying the principle in practice

Strategies and tactics for building safety and stability

Suggestions from youth:

- Be proactive and inquire about participants’ mental health and well-being;
- Train staff to listen to problems disclosed by participants and to be aware of resources and mental health supports available in the community;
- Use language that emphasizes collaborative problem-solving (e.g., ‘we can do this together’) and helps youth feel supported in connecting with resources, rather than being left to address a problem alone.

Suggestions from service providers:

- Use a combination of formal and informal, holistic assessments to understand youth’s needs, beyond only employment;
- Dedicate staff to connecting youth with in-house and community supports to address any essential needs – both at intake and over time – considering youth’s changing needs or circumstances as they work through the program;
- Ensure all staff have knowledge of local community services and professional connections, so they can quickly and effectively refer out for wrap-around services and supports and do the necessary follow-up.

3. Provide flexible, client-centred programming

The guiding principle of providing flexible, client-centred programming was noted as foundational to working with Opportunity youth, and one that recognizes that skill development

is non-linear. Since youth may be at different stages in their journey towards employment and may face different life events or circumstances over the course of the program, staff use flexible, adaptive approaches to identify and address youth's diverse needs and goals. We heard from interviewees that after the initial step of assessing for and ensuring youth's essential needs are met, service providers typically conduct assessments of their soft skills, which are then used to develop tailored action plans. Service providers noted that part of this process involves ensuring youth are active participants in developing their action plans, determining their goals, and tracking their own progress towards meeting them.

Promising practice spotlight

OnyxWorks is a program designed to provide meaningful employment and mentorship to youth. In response to a number of their clients having lost their paid job placements in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and not considered eligible for Employment Insurance (EI), OnyxWorks service providers developed an EI-mirroring program. This adapted programming allowed youth who had lost their jobs to receive EI mirroring benefits as long as they committed to connecting with employers weekly and participating in job readiness training. This meant that youth who were not eligible for EI were paid for every hour they spent participating in training or meeting with employers. Funds were a combination of re-directing funds from in-person employment support and placement programs that were no longer possible to offer during COVID-19-related restrictions and applying for other identified funding opportunities.

To learn more about OnyxWorks, feel free to contact Camila Jimenez, Program Manager at PLEA Community Services at cjimenez@plea.bc.ca or 604-708-9936.

Participants in the focus group emphasized the importance of flexible and adaptable programming with options to participating online, in-person, or both. The youth had different preferences for the type of programming shaped by their personal circumstances (e.g., privacy at home, access to technology, commute times) and priorities. Flexibility and adaptability were crucial to being responsive to the changing contexts of their lives, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“One program had an online consultation but also an option for in-person meeting with them, where you could schedule appointments. I liked the fact that they were more accommodating.”

- Youth focus group participant

Focus group participants also said they were looking for guidance on how to navigate the rapidly changing nature of work including networking (e.g., at job fairs) and job searching which have also moved online. Some youth felt interacting online made it more difficult to communicate because they were no longer able to read body language or initiate individual conversations.

They found workshops were more intimate in-person and facilitators could more easily identify when an individual was having an issue and address it. However, other youth said they felt more confident, in control of their environment, and comfortable interacting at their own pace online.

Considerations for service providers for applying the principle in practice

Strategies and tactics for providing flexible, client-centred programming

Suggestions from youth:

- Provide options for both online and in-person program components when possible. These can include online consultations followed by in-person meetings, in-person working sessions, or drop-in times;
- When adapting programs online, build in structured breaks and create opportunities for youth to connect with each other individually and/or in small groups;
- Address online etiquette for networking and job searching. Provide opportunities to practice soft skills online, such as how to present yourself in virtual interviews.

Suggestions from service providers:

- Provide one-on-one coaching for youth to work on areas they find challenging or barriers they may encounter during programming;
- Consideration of youths' interests and goals and, when possible, aligning these with potential work experience placements.

4. Provide a strength-based and capacity-building approach

Strength-based approaches aim to set up conditions for a person to see themselves at their best. They aim to capitalize on people's strengths rather than focus on gaps or negative characteristics.³⁵ These approaches explicitly value the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections, and potential in individuals and communities. Practitioners using this approach work in collaboration with clients, helping them do things for themselves so they can become 'co-producers' rather than consumers of support.¹²

Providing strength-based and capacity-building approaches to support coping and resilience was identified by service providers as another key guiding principle of working with Opportunity youth. This principle promotes programming that recognizes, appreciates, and builds on youth's strengths, starting with a skill assessment process that identifies and enhances the knowledge,

capabilities, and skills of each individual.³⁶ Skills assessments were found to be valuable to establishing an environment conducive to learning. Service providers we spoke with discussed the ways in which a strength-based approach helps youth understand and recognize the skills they already have, aiding the process of reframing how Opportunity youth view themselves.

Opportunities to practice skills in different contexts was identified as particularly valuable for the youth in the focus group. After participating in skills training, these youth said they wanted to see more opportunities for experiential learning. Whether online or in-person, they felt programs could be more engaging and should explore formats beyond didactic workshops. They described feeling more motivated to attend programs when they felt like they were being engaged and had the chance to practice skills in simulated real-world environments, such as interviewing online.

Considerations for service providers for applying the principle in practice

Strategies and tactics for a strengths-based, capacity-building approach

Suggestions from youth:

- Incorporate program components that engage youth and provide chances to interact with each other, practice, and ask questions, both in-person and online;
- Create opportunities to practice job skills in-person and/or online through mock interviews, networking events, practicing money management, and getting guidance on social media platforms for employment and networking (e.g., LinkedIn);
- Invite subject matter experts or other mentors to speak with youth about their industry experience.

Suggestions from service providers:

- Use one-on-one coaching to acknowledge and validate an individual's strengths and existing skill sets, and to support youth feeling comfortable and confident communicating their needs and interests during this process;

- Use asset-mapping exercises to give youth an opportunity to practice self-exploration, identify goals and strengths, and plan for further asset development or acquisition.

“Trust that [youth] know what they need most and that giving them the tools to achieve it is the best way for any youth to be developing their capacity.”

– Manager of skill and employment program with community organization serving women

5. Celebrate all forms of success

Our research found that a focus on a limited number of narrowly-defined program outcomes such as job placement, without consideration of the nature of the job or training opportunity (e.g., whether it is culturally safe or meets broader social and community goals), can have direct negative effects on advancement and retention of disadvantaged groups.^{37,38} For example, programs that focus on narrow outcomes like employment status or wages would miss outcomes critical for Opportunity youth, such as developing self-efficacy, a sense of belonging to city and community, more integration of social networks, and enhanced well-being.

According to youth we spoke with, support and encouragement from mentors and staff strongly influenced their decision-making. Having someone believe in their skills and qualifications was a decisive factor in how they chose to pursue employment opportunities. As staff validated their skills, youth felt more confident to apply for a job or more motivated to continue training.

Building on positives was another way to show youth empathy and acknowledge their perseverance. By celebrating small wins, youth shifted their focus from feeling criticized or “falling short” to contextualizing their learning experiences as part of their employment journey. Celebrating their persistence and small steps forward was key to fostering resilience and connection. Continuous reflection and communication about evolving goals was also important as youth gained experiences in different workplace settings.

In interviews, service providers emphasized that working with Opportunity youth requires adopting flexible definitions of success and recognizing that progress is non-linear. They stressed that wider and multiple definitions of success tailored to each individual are critical to affording youth an opportunity to celebrate milestones of all types and sizes. They also advocated for a positive youth development lens to evaluating success of the program, such as by how well it advances youth's self-efficacy, well-being, and self-determination.

“Two of our core values are that 1) success is fragile and 2) making sure that youth get to celebrate their success. A lot of our youth haven't had the chance to celebrate their successes in life, so it is important. As an organization, we strive to create that space and make sure we are available to the youth the best we can.”

– Program Coordinator at a youth services organization

Recognizing that Opportunity youth may need to move back and forth between work placements, focus more on pre-skilling, or take longer at different parts of the process, key informants stressed that tracking progress should be holistic, learner-centred, and culturally responsive. The organizational representatives with whom we spoke sought to use outcomes that are adaptable, tailored to individuals, and identified in action plans developed with youth. Allowing youth the flexibility to move back and forth through the process and celebrate all successes, including their perseverance and resilience along the way, can serve to highlight and reinforce continued success through the program.

Considerations for service providers for applying the principle in practice

Strategies and tactics for celebrating success

Suggestions from youth:

- Build and focus on positives to create a safe environment for youth to explore and practice new skills;
- Celebrate small wins individually or as a group when possible;
- Continue to check in about goals.

Suggestions from service providers:

- Use a milestones approach – completions of any significant task, event, occurrence or decisions made in the process of achieving longer-term goals – as measures of progress and opportunities to highlight and reinforce continued success;
- Involve youth in tracking and measuring success against their own goals;
- Use narrative descriptions as an indicator of success, capturing youth’s journeys, process, milestones achieved, and skills gained;
- Allow time to celebrate success with youth and their communities.

6. Leave the door open for continued support

Leaving the door open for continued post-program support is the final guiding principle of working with Opportunity youth, and one that recognizes the non-linear nature of progress. Follow-up program components allow for continued support to be offered to youth when their circumstances suddenly change, or new challenges arise in their lives that affect their employment trajectories. Allowing for a continued connection with youth can be critical to supporting their ability to cope with changing life circumstances, and lay the foundation for re-engagement with needed services to continue moving forward.

Young people in the focus group said that maintaining connection with community and social support networks was important for them, particularly during transitional periods of their lives. They valued the personal connection they developed with mentors and staff and wanted to maintain communication with them. The youth noted that offering continued support and inviting them to return even after completing a program was crucial to reassuring them that they still have a community to rely on. Moreover, leaving the door open helped maintain a safe environment to which youth can go back for help or further skills training. In summary, proactive follow-up with youth after program completion can be a powerful way to help them stay connected, supported, and welcome to continue exploring and building on their skills.

Considerations for service providers for applying the principle in practice

Strategies and tactics for continued support

Suggestions from youth:

- Use follow-up check-ins six months to a year later to maintain a connection with youth and to see how they are progressing through their action plan;

- Provide further support if needed, such as advanced training, resources, or referrals (an open-door policy).

Strategies and tactics from service providers:

- Allocate staff resources to follow-up, regardless of the outcome of the youth's participation in the program;
- Provide opportunities for youth to return and become involved in programming as a peer.

“I think it’s important that programs embed post-program supports. We do follow-up with them at 6 months and 1 year where we do check-ins with them and make sure they’re still able to follow their action plan. We follow up to make sure they get the resources that they need and so those check-ins are instrumental to helping them carry on.”

– Manager of a youth employment program for women

HOW ORGANIZATIONS EMBED SOFT SKILLS TRAINING INTO THEIR PROGRAMMING

Service providers we spoke with all used different models or approaches to assessing and developing soft skills among youth. While teaching generally took place in a classroom setting, several organizations emphasized the importance of learning soft skills in practical contexts and sought to prioritize applied learning with the youth. The following sections describe how service providers embed soft skills in each element or phase of their programming.

ASSESSING SOFT SKILLS

Service providers said they typically used both in-depth, formal, and less formal methods to assess soft skills. In-depth assessments could include a combination of approaches, such as a pay-per-use Higher Skill assessment, personality dimensions, or learning style inventory. Less formal assessments relied more on one-on-one interviews or meetings with counsellors involving shorter written assessments, similar to a case management approach; these were used to capture youth's stated goals and interests. Regardless of the approach, the common goal of these assessments was development of an action plan that youth could use to move forward and track their progress throughout the program.

Promising practice spotlight

The **Young Women's Christian Association of Greater Toronto (YWCA Toronto)** is a registered charity and offers a range of services from housing, employment and training to community and family supports. YWCA Toronto's **Building Sustainable Futures (BSF) model** uses a positive asset-based approach coupled with mapping processes to support youth as they explore their existing strengths, build confidence, and develop resilience while they identify which strengths they can build on that will help them advance in their future. The nine essential skills, developed by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES)ⁱⁱⁱ, are embedded in components of YWCA Toronto's Skills Development Centre (SDC) programming, which is designed to go beyond just supporting youth find employment. With emphasis on a holistic approach, the BSF model was designed to offer a number of programs and services that will contribute not just to career advancement, but to lifelong learning as well. Through YWCA Toronto's Essential Skills for Employment program, the BSF model is well documented in a compendium of promising practices with an accompanying toolkit, found online at www.ywca-toronto.org/buildingfutures.

To learn more about the asset-based approach and asset mapping methodology, feel free to contact YWCA Toronto at buildingfutures@ywca-toronto.org or ywcatrainingcentre@ywca-toronto.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/jobs/training/initiatives/skills-success/understanding-individuals.html>

SOFT SKILLS IN THE CLASSROOM

Service providers typically embedded soft skills training into their programming through a combination of classroom-based instruction and group learning, as well as by offering opportunities for paid work experience for Opportunity youth. Most service providers noted that classroom or workshop-based learning was a core part of their programming because it was more affordable and less resource intensive than other work placements.

Several service providers discussed the importance of pro-social activities in the classroom and then during work placement. Learning in a social environment was especially important for Opportunity youth to offer as many chances as possible to practice building relationships with peers and to develop a sense of community. All service providers went on to note that a central challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic and transitioning to remote learning was finding a way to substitute in-person social activities and finding alternative opportunities to the classroom for building relationships.

CONTEXTUALIZING SOFT SKILLS THROUGH APPLIED LEARNING

Service providers highlighted the need to contextualize learning for Opportunity youth. Giving Opportunity youth different ways to apply their learning to real-life situations – either simulated in classrooms or during supported work experiences – was seen as critical to creating safe spaces for youth to explore and develop their skills. Connecting skills to practical scenarios was noted in interviews as key for building employment readiness and supporting essential life skills.

One strategy some organizations used to this end was to ask youth who they would like to hear and learn from and then inviting those community members and/or employers to come in as guest speakers. Conversations with the invited guests were used to create positive connections, and to provide youth a better understanding of why certain skills were important and how they could be applied for employment success.

“From our perspective, it is much easier to teach critical thinking on the job than from a book – it’s contextualized. So, we really feel that the on-the-job component surrounded by peers in a lot of cases helps foster those thought processes to move the participant from being solely reliant on precise instructions for everything to understanding what the world of work looks like and really what the world can look like as we play roles as responsible citizens.”

– Vice President of an employment services organization

Most service providers stressed the usefulness of supported work experience, such as paid work placements, volunteering, or job shadowing to helping youth gain real world experience. The ability to offer supported work experiences often depended on existing relationships the program had with employers and on employers' willingness and ability to work with Opportunity youth. A few service providers provided in-house opportunities for youth to practice and build skills relevant to their current placement, but in a safe space, without the presence of an employer.

PRELIMINARY SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

Based on the evidence gathered over the course of this project, and closely informed by the practices of youth-serving employment and training organizations, we developed an employment service delivery model for embedding soft skills development within employment and training programs working with Opportunity youth. Specifically, the model provides recommendations to employment and training providers and other organizations working with youth for operationalizing soft skills training within their programming. It highlights strategies and activities that can be used throughout program delivery, from intake and assessment to program completion and follow-up.

INTAKE AND ASSESSMENT

Intake and assessment should be flexible, ensuring that youth's basic needs are being met directly, or that there are supports in place to help them address these essential needs (e.g., housing, food, income support). If possible, assign each individual a case manager and allow them to take the time to get to know the youth, building trust and safety, and identifying holistic supports required. Make referrals for wrap-around services in-house (if available) or with trusted community service providers.

Ensure that staff assess youth's soft skills and assets using in-depth formal (e.g., Higher Skill assessment) and/or informal approaches (e.g., one-to-one meetings) grounded in a youth-centered, strengths-based approach. Build in ample opportunities for youth to lead and/or be engaged in discussions about their goals and priorities, building an individualized action plan that integrates soft skills.

EMPLOYMENT READINESS

Create opportunities for youth to explore, apply, and practice skills in safe learning environments. Options for applied learning in different situations can be offered through a combination of classroom workshops, group work, and one-to-one coaching. Soft skills training should be embedded within technical training as much as possible. Engaging with classroom guest speakers who are positive role models, such as local employers and community members, can be a valuable experience for youth to learn from industry experience. As youth develop both technical and soft skills, finding opportunities for them to showcase and celebrate their work and strengths can foster leadership skills and build confidence.

Figure 2 A proposed service delivery model for soft skills development with Opportunity youth



PAID SUPPORTED WORK EXPERIENCE

Supported work experience for Opportunity youth through paid placements are ideal; however, volunteering and job shadowing can also be valuable learning experiences. When possible, wage subsidies for work placements can be important for employer buy-in as well as youth motivation. Ongoing relationship building with employers is critical to building a network of diverse opportunities for youth with different goals. Providing employer training on how to work with different groups of youth as well as seeking employer feedback on needed soft skills can support ongoing program development that is aligned with industry needs, and build capacity amongst employers for working with Opportunity youth. It is critical that program staff continue to work closely with youth and employers throughout supported work experiences to address any challenges or barriers that may arise.

PROGRAM COMPLETION AND FOLLOW-UP

Celebrate milestones such as participation in classroom settings, supported work experiences, or returning to the program following a community support referral. Moving beyond narrowly defined outcomes, a holistic positive youth development lens to assessing success can aid in building youth self-efficacy, wellness, and self-determination. Champion flexible and open definitions of success, including through having a program graduate and peer-mentoring components. After program completion, use check-ins after six months or up to one year to follow-up to maintain a connection with youth, and support their coping through changing life circumstances. These types of strategies for continued connection to the program can help lay the foundation for re-engagement with needed services, including ongoing skill development, job exploration, and/or essential needs supports.

KEY ONGOING OPPORTUNITIES

As youth adapt to rapidly changing learning and employment contexts, training and supports that are flexible to the needs and priorities of Opportunity youth can allow them to benefit more from programs. The six guiding principles for working with Opportunity youth on skill development can be helpful for employment and training programs and their staff to embed soft skills training throughout key program components. We close this document by summarizing key ongoing opportunities for effectively supporting soft skill development among Opportunity youth in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

- There is an opportunity to recognize and take advantage of in-person, online, or hybrid programs depending on individual circumstances to enhance accessibility while simultaneously aligning with growing demands of the 21st century workforce;
- Experiential learning to practice relevant skills in a safe place keeps youth engaged and connected. Hands-on application of skills in real-world employment settings, both in-person and increasingly online, are valuable opportunities for youth to build confidence;
- Skills training is an important part of positive youth development and can be a key connection to community supports. Dedicating program time to checking in on overall well-being and mental health can give youth a chance to seek help and resources that can have lasting benefits for their development and continued engagement in skills training.

LEARNING MORE: RESOURCES FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

1. [Guide to workforce skills assessment instruments](#) – Prada, M. & Rucci, G. (2016)

A guide offering reviews of surveys and measurement tools used for assessing workforce skills. As a whole, provides an overview of the different types of tools available.

2. [Soft skills are hard: A review of the literature](#) – Cukier W., Hodson J. & Omar A. (2015)

A systematic review of soft skill-related academic and grey literature in Canada. This report focuses on themes such as soft skill definitions, methods available for measuring soft skills, soft skill development strategies, different types of stakeholders and challenges to collaboration and models that have the potential to serve as a basis for future work.

3. [What works in soft skills development for youth employment? A donor's perspective](#) – Youth Employment Funders Group (YEFG) & Mastercard Foundation (2017)

A report generated by a group of donors who collaborated to share evidence-based knowledge of what works in youth employment. Report offers a summary of areas of consensus on the subject of soft skills along with the identification of implementation and evaluation challenges and makes recommendations for enhancing soft skill development programs.

4. [Soft skill development in youth employment: A scan of the landscape](#) – Pratt, S. & Richards, J. (2014)

Report features review of the landscape of youth development and youth employment programs. This report specifically discussed: (1) what soft skills were being reported as importance and why; (2) the best practices in soft skill development in youth employment settings; (3) evaluation of soft skill development.

5. [Getting youth in the door: Defining soft skills requirements for entry-level service sector jobs](#) – International Youth Foundation (2013)

A review and analysis of the current soft skills training landscape. In their analysis they seek to identify which basic soft skills and competencies are required generally for entry-level employees.

6. [Helping youth develop soft skills for job success: Tips for parents and families](#) – *National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (2011)*

An InfoBrief directed at parent and families that discusses how soft skills are important for job success and offers strategies on how parents can help their children develop the skills needed for employment.

7. [Building a Pan-Canadian soft skills framework](#) – *Futureworx (2019)*

Report was the culmination of a literature review of current work on soft skills in Canada as well, a national survey completed by stakeholders and discussions with selected stakeholders. The information gathered from these methods was used to make recommendations for building a pan-Canadian framework of behavioural skills.

8. [Investigating soft skills program features with a gender lens: A global review of education and workforce interventions for youth](#) – *Martin, S., Kapungu, C., Goelz, M. & Fritz, K. (2019)*

Report analyzes studies and reports on the various features that they found to often characterize the most successful soft skill programs for young women.

9. [Job readiness skills for youth: A clear and actionable definition](#) – *Klein, R. (2018)*

Report identifies and discusses five main soft skills most frequently noted by youth service providers, employers and hiring managers in the Seattle and King County area. Recommendations for soft skill development and readying youth for job success are also given.

10. [Entrepreneurial soft skills for the future: A scoping study](#) – *Youth Business International (2019)*

A scoping study with the objective to help guide Youth Business International in their development of a soft skills training provision and to contribute to the wider conversation on soft skills. The study includes results from a literature review, surveys and interviews with stakeholders and entrepreneurship experts.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

| Organizations | # of individuals interviewed |
|--|------------------------------|
| YWCA Toronto | 1 |
| Kamloops-Open Door Group Jobs in Demand for Youth | 1 |
| YWCA Toronto (different program) | 1 |
| Get Youth Working (GYW) | 1 |
| Trellis (formerly Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary) | 2 |
| Aunt Leah's Place | 2 |
| Construction Foundation of British Columbia | 2 |
| Choices for Youth | 1 |
| RBC Youth Works | 1 |
| PTP Compass | 1 |
| ImaginationFX | 1 |
| Calgary After School | 1 |

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