



W2A Embrace Life process evaluation: Learning from the experiences of youth hosts and planning team members

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Bringing People and Knowledge Together to Strengthen Care.

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The history of Wisdom2Action and W2A events

Wisdom2Action (W2A), formerly known as the Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts Network (CYCC) is a national knowledge mobilization network that supports researchers, community-based organizations, educators, policy makers, and others working to improve the mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable children and youth. As part of their work, W2A hosts participatory knowledge sharing events on issues of national importance that are impacting the lives of vulnerable children and youth (W2A, 2017a).

These W2A events are held in communities across Canada and bring together academics, policy makers, service providers, youth leaders, and others. W2A events promote local promising practices, spark conversations on how to use evidence to enhance programs and services, and help to strengthen regional networks of community-based service providers and those who share a passion and commitment to improve the well-being of children and youth (W2A, 2017b).

W2A events are unique from other conferences and workshops in that their guiding principle is that everyone in the room has important knowledge to share. The *Art of Hosting* is used to create a participatory and interactive platform where all participants have the opportunity to influence the agenda, present their ideas or programs and host conversations that are meaningful to them (W2A, 2017b).

The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health is a Hub partner of Wisdom2Action, providing strategic advice as members of the Knowledge Mobilization Steering Committee, as KMB mentors, and close allies. Staff at the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health have prepared this report on behalf of Wisdom2Action. The Centre brought their strong evaluation expertise and commitment to youth engagement in undertaking this review.

Overview of the W2A Vancouver Embrace Life event

On February 21 and 22, 2018 over one hundred young people and adult allies from across Canada convened at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society to participate in youth-led discussions around suicide prevention and embracing life. Suicide remains a leading cause of death for young people in Canada, accounting for 24 percent of all deaths among young people ages 15 to 24 (Centre for Suicide Prevention, n.d.). Additionally, suicide disproportionately affects some areas and populations in Canada including our Indigenous populations and those living in rural and remote areas (W2A, 2017c). As such, it was of great importance that youth and service providers from these impacted areas and populations were well represented at this event.

While communities, organizations and health care professionals are working to address suicide through programs, services and research, the role and impact of youth is often overlooked. Youth, however, know the pathways to wellness and life enhancement and we know that they are leading programs in their communities that support other young people. They provide important informal and formal peer support and they are advocates for themselves and their communities (W2A, 2017c). This event was therefore designed to bring youths' perspectives, ideas and efforts to the forefront.

W2A events are designed to be participatory and engaging and this begins during the planning phase. In the months leading up to the event, members of the planning team, who represented diverse organizations across the country, participated in regular phone calls to provide support to W2A staff and the lead facilitators. Planning team members provided consultation around logistics, event themes and speakers, and event promotion.

A youth host planning day was also held the day before the official event, where a group of 11 youth, members of W2A's Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) and the lead facilitators gathered to discuss and deliberate how to bring the event to life. Time was spent getting to know one another, learning about the *Art of Hosting* and the different





facilitation techniques, finalizing the agenda, and agreeing upon everyone's different roles and responsibilities for the two-day event.

After every W2A event, an online evaluation survey is disseminated to participants to elicit their feedback about the event and their overall experiences. With the Embrace Life event, however, W2A also wanted to capture the specific feedback and experiences of youth hosts and planning team members.

Evaluation process: Who we spoke to and why

The evaluation was qualitative in nature focusing on the experiences and feedback of individuals involved in the planning, design and facilitation of the W2A Vancouver Embrace Life event. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes were conducted with members of the youth host team and planning team to assess the alignment between their experiences and the goals of the W2A event. Questions specifically focused on the issues of: diversity, the participatory/youth-led process, event highlights and opportunities for improvement, personal impact and change, and event knowledge mobilization. The list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

In total, 18 interviews were conducted. Participants include:

- 10 youth hosts (including three YAC members)
- six planning team members including W2A staff
- two lead facilitators

Over the course of the event, however, there was great crossover and flexibility in the roles and responsibilities of the different teams and their members. The questions asked of some individuals were therefore adapted to reflect their involvement in multiple components of the planning, design and facilitation process.

Unfortunately, the themes and findings below do not reflect the opinions of all youth hosts nor planning team members. Some never responded to requests to be interviewed, and some interviews did not take place due to scheduling conflicts. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the opinions and experiences of those who did not respond and take part in the interviews may differ from those who did.

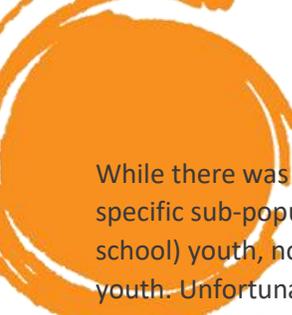
The feedback provided through the interviews, however, provides great insight into the W2A event planning and facilitation process. This information helps to solidify what is working well, but also sheds light on how the process can be continually improved for future events.

Overarching findings of what worked well and what can be improved

Interviews were structured to touch upon issues of diversity, the participatory/youth-led process, event highlights and areas of improvement, personal impact and change, and event knowledge mobilization. These issues are reflected in the themes below.

1. The W2A Vancouver Embrace Life event successfully brought together diverse young people and adult allies and brought forth the perspectives of those that are too often silenced or marginalized.

There was overwhelmingly positive feedback from the youth hosts and the planning team regarding the intentional diversity and representation among the youth hosts and participants. Considering the event was held on the west coast in Vancouver, there was great geographic representation, and those interviewed acknowledged and appreciated how hard W2A staffed worked to get everyone, from across the country, there. The representation from northern and Indigenous communities was also highlighted. Given the topic and the space in which the event was held, this was deemed important, and was considered authentic and non-tokenistic. The smudging ceremony on the first morning was appreciated by many, as was the fact that elders who regularly access the event venue for programming were able to walk-in and participate, having found value in the topic and discussions.



While there was great diversity among the youth hosts and the event participants, certain areas of Canada, or specific sub-populations were identified as “still missing”, including: young people with disabilities, younger (high school) youth, non-university educated youth, and members of other visible minorities such as Black and Muslim youth. Unfortunately, not all provinces and territories were represented either. It was highlighted that the “missing youth” might have different perspectives to bring to the table, which is why it is so important to be intentional about diversity when recruiting youth hosts, and when promoting the event to youth participants. It was also suggested that a map of Canada showing where all participants are from would be a great way to represent the geographic diversity in the room and spark conversations and connections.

It was also noted that the diversity among the planning team could be enhanced, as there was a lack of strong and consistent youth voice as well as diverse Indigenous representation. One person cannot be expected to represent or speak for all Indigenous youth. With greater representation, it was felt that Indigenous ways of knowing and sharing could have been better woven into the event, instead of feeling somewhat separate at times.

When asked about the importance and value of diversity and representation, participant responses were in clear alignment with the intention and goals of W2A events and their approach. Interviewees spoke about how context and culture impact the issue of suicide and therefore need to be considered when discussing suicide prevention and embracing life. There was strong consensus that diverse voices need to be at the table because there is no one size fits all approach to addressing the issue of suicide. Having diverse perspectives in the planning process and diverse individuals among the youth host facilitation team was also understood to create a sense of authenticity, relevance and safety for the participants, where they could see themselves and their backgrounds represented and valued.

2. The youth host planning day and the facilitation of the W2A event was authentically youth-led and participatory.

For the youth hosts, the planning day was an overwhelmingly positive experience and learning opportunity. There was high praise for the two lead facilitators and the flexible, responsive, hands-on and youth-led approach they employed. According to the youth hosts, the approach was non-tokenistic, there was space for all ideas and perspectives, and all input was valued and integrated into the event. For example, the need for a peer support team during the event was identified and addressed by youth hosts during the planning day.

Differences between youth hosts, and their participation and involvement during the event, was raised during the interviews. While most stated that they took on roles they were comfortable with and which emphasized their strengths, those who played a more quiet, supportive role felt their participation and commitment questioned and judged at times. In the future, it may be important to reinforce amongst the youth host team that there are various ways to contribute and participate and that all are appreciated and valued within W2A events.

3. Greater communication in advance of the planning day and throughout the event is needed to support youth hosts and provide clarity around their roles and responsibilities.

While flexibility and responsiveness are key features of an authentic youth-led process, they also come with some challenges. A number of the youth hosts only became youth hosts in the days or week leading up to the event. As such, many arrived at the planning day still unclear about what was expected of them. For example, one youth host thought they were there to simply provide input and said it wasn't until the end of the planning day when they realized they were expected to facilitate and help run the event. Expectations about attendance were also unclear with some youth hosts missing a few hours of the planning day and/or part of the event.

It was suggested by a few that a package of materials be created and disseminated in advance to outline the various roles and responsibilities of youth hosts and to familiarize them with the different Art of Hosting facilitation techniques and why they are used. Having a few planning calls with the youth host team in advance of the planning day was also suggested. This would help take the pressure off the planning day and trying to cover everything in a





short amount of time. The value of having materials and handouts for participants, i.e. posters about the different techniques and copies of the agenda was also discussed to help orient them to the event and its approaches.

During the event, greater communication among organizers, facilitators and youth hosts is also needed. Ideally, youth hosts will be involved in all decision-making and have input on any changes that occur throughout the event. Realistically, though, some decisions have to be made quickly. When this happens, it is important to communicate not only the changes, but why they were made, to all youth hosts to ensure everyone is on the same page. More frequent and intentional check-ins with youth hosts was also suggested to keep track of how they are doing and feeling and to ensure they are prepared for their roles.

4. Enhanced recruitment and engagement strategies are needed to attract and retain members of the planning team.

Both staff and other members of the planning team acknowledged the difficulty of engaging stakeholders early-on in a meaningful and productive way. Participation on the planning team fluctuated with different people on different calls and the conversations were often limited. While there was great acknowledgement of W2A's efforts in reaching out to partners, some suggestions on how to enhance the planning team and their active participation were offered:

- Involve more youth at this stage
- Ensure different partners and sectors are represented
- Be intentional about diversity in recruitment strategies
- Provide materials in advance of planning calls and ask for specific feedback and critiques (e.g. not everyone felt they could adequately contribute on the spot and over the phone)

5. Through the event and their participation, youth hosts gained valuable skills and developed strong connections with each other and other stakeholders.

When asked about their experiences and what they learned, all youth hosts spoke about the facilitation skills and methods they will use in the future. Being part of the planning day and leading activities throughout the event helped build youth hosts' confidence in themselves and their capacity to facilitate and lead initiatives back in their home communities. One youth host specifically spoke about how they are now seen as a leader in their community as a result of their participation in the W2A event and are being asked to speak to the issue and provide guidance around suicide prevention. The Fish Bowl activity was particularly impactful, with many youth hosts saying it allowed for more in-depth and "meatier" conversations and provided space for "productive conflict" and many look forward to facilitating it again in a different context.

The most significant takeaway for the youth hosts, by far however, were the relationships they created with each other and the connections they made with stakeholders from across the country. As one youth host mentioned, some of the best moments of the planning day and the event itself were during the breaks, the lunch, and back at the lodge in the evenings when the youth hosts could informally share and learn from one another. Having everyone stay at the same hotel and organizing a social activity were therefore recommended as youth hosts would clearly appreciate more opportunities to socialize, network, and develop plans to stay connected afterwards.

6. Frequent and engaging follow-up, primarily through social media, is needed to foster the connections and momentum created by W2A events.

When asked what can be done to foster the connections made through the W2A event and build on its momentum, most responses involved social media and a strong online presence. It was recommended that information and resources from the event should be sent out on a weekly basis in lead up to the final report (e.g. notes from the open space, the images, and the polaroid wall). Incorporating actionable questions and comments, to motivate





participants to engage was also suggested. An example given was asking participants “Who did you want to follow up with from the event? Have you?”

Other suggestions on how to capture or share the event and its impact include:

- Conduct case studies to capture impact at the participant and community level
- Leverage partners to share final knowledge products
- Host webinars to interactively share materials and outcomes

For the youth hosts themselves, a number of suggestions were offered for how W2A could continue to support them, their connections, and their work, such as:

- Schedule a debrief call shortly after the event to provide proper thanks and closure
- Create a Facebook Group to stay connected, share materials and ideas, and build a community of practice around youth-led suicide prevention
- Have youth hosts commit to and report on one follow-up activity within their communities
- Host webinars for youth hosts to support their use of the facilitation methods
- Co-create reports, articles and products with youth hosts and participants

Emergent findings

Through the conversations with youth hosts and planning team members, some interesting themes emerged that were not directly related to the questions asked. The three emerging themes include: the adult/service provider and youth balance, holding space for stories, and speaker safety and messaging.

1. The learning needs and expectations of youth and adults allies/service providers differed throughout the event.

When speaking to youth hosts and members of the planning team about the highlights of the events, some clear differences emerged. For example, a number of adults referenced the Pecha Kucha presentations as highlights for them since they offered a lot of content in a short amount of time. The same adults, however, recognized that a lot of youth disengaged during these presentations. Other members of the planning team and youth hosts echoed these sentiments highlighting that there were too many Pecha Kucha presentations, that they went on too long, and they weren't always the best format for presenters, i.e. they were an intimidating way to present information or a story.

Many youth hosts and planning team members also expressed how they wished more youth would have participated during the event. Some felt like there were too many adults in the room, and that some adults were dominating the conversations. As such, some interviewees expressed that parts of the conference got away from being truly “youth-led”. Youth hosts and planning team members alike spoke about the importance of being vigilant about the dynamics in the room and being intentional about always creating a safe space for youth.

It was acknowledged that while it is difficult to meet the learning needs and expectations of all youth and adult participants, there are still great benefits for having them learn alongside each other at these events. As one staff member explained, it is still considered revolutionary to engage youth at this level and to have service providers, researchers, and academics listen to, and learn from, youth. Likewise, by being in the room together, staff have found that youth can gain valuable insight into the perspectives and experiences of adult allies and service providers. While it may be impossible to “hit the mark” for everyone, it was suggested that there be clear communication about the goals and learning objectives of W2A events, so that participants can decide if it's the right fit for them.

2. Participants need a respectful and safe space to share their stories, and youth hosts need support in facilitating stories and responding to them.

It was clear to many youth hosts and members of the planning team that most participants came to the event with stories of suicide and loss, that some participants wanted to share these stories, and that there was great value in listening to these stories. Not everyone, however, felt there was enough space created for this process. When some participants did share their stories, there was also a sense that they weren't fully explored, "handled" or respected. Once stories were shared with the larger group, some felt we quickly moved onto the next agenda item. Suggestions from interviewees for facilitating respectful storytelling include: allowing stories to take precedence over other activities, having a proper debrief or response when stories are shared, making stories part of the agenda, and focusing stories and questions on individual and community resilience and what came from loss, e.g. some of the conferences and activities the youth were part of back in their home communities were in response to suicide.

3. All speakers involved in the event, i.e. elders, presenters, and guests should understand and be in alignment with W2A's values around youth engagement, mental health, inclusion, and diversity.

There was some unfortunate messaging and potentially damaging comments and stories shared by some of the speakers at the event. While it did not take away from the overall positive feedback and experiences, many youth hosts and planning team members raised the issue of "speaker safety" during the interviews. Ensuring all speakers are provided materials about the event and its focus, are involved in planning calls, and are interviewed in advance was suggested.

In line with the above, it was highlighted that the opening and closing activities need to be very intentional and thoughtful. For the opening, it is important to ensure the workshop starts off with a strong and clear purpose and that the space quickly becomes welcoming and safe. Likewise, the closing activity needs to be satisfying and provide the right amount of closure and inspiration to help wrap-up an intense yet momentous two days.

A note of thanks

This small process evaluation demonstrates Wisdom2Action's commitment to learning, improvement, and growth. While the feedback from youth hosts and planning team members was overwhelmingly positive, some great insight and critiques were also shared. W2A takes this feedback seriously and will use it to improve upon future events.

This evaluation was also an opportunity to highlight the impact W2A Embrace Life had, not only on the participants, but also the youth hosts, and all those involved in planning and delivering the event. This event provided a platform for youth to share their knowledge, skills and experiences. It was clear from the interviews that the event also helped build youths' capacity and networks so they are more confident and connected when leading activities back in their home communities.

Wisdom2Action would like to thank all those who participated as youth hosts and planning team members and who took the time to be part of this evaluation. The success of the W2A Embrace Life event is due to the perspectives and passion they brought to this work.



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Appendix A: Interview questions

Planning Team – Interview Guide

Intro – About W2A, unique process of organizing and facilitating events. Want input from those involved about their experiences and how they can be improved.

Background information – age, community, profession/role

- 1) How did you get involved with the Planning Team? i.e. what was your connection to the event or W2A?
- 2) Why did you get involved – what was your interest?

Diversity and representation of knowledge

- 3) Who was on the planning team?
- 4) Was anyone, i.e. a role or organization missing?
- 5) How did having diverse roles, and organization's and their knowledge on the Planning Table help to shape the event?

Planning team processes and work

The planning team is responsible for helping to determine the scope, need and context for the event, and to determine the logistics, i.e. the agenda, the location.

- 6) How did this process work with the Team?
- 7) Did you feel you could contribute to these conversations and decisions?
- 8) How were decisions made?
- 9) Do you have any suggestion for how to improve the process?

The event

- 10) What role did you play during the event? How did that go?
- 11) What were some of the strengths/highlights from the event?
- 12) Any learning opportunities?

Overall experience

- 13) What did you gain, in knowledge or experience, from participating on the Planning Team?
- 14) Do you see opportunities to apply this experience to other contexts/events?

Follow up

These events generate a lot of energy, discussions, plans, etc.

- 15) What can W2A do to continue to foster and mobilize that energy into action?
- 16) Do you have any suggestions for how the learning and change from these events can be captured and shared?
- 17) Anything else you would like to add or comment on?





Youth Host Team – Interview Guide

Intro – About W2A, unique process of organizing and facilitating events. Want input from those involved about their experiences and how they can be improved.

Background information – age, community, profession/role

- 1) How did you get involved with the Youth Host Team? i.e. what was your connections to the event or W2A?
- 2) Why did you get involved – what was your interest?

Diversity and representation of knowledge

- 3) Who was on the planning team?
- 4) Was anyone, i.e. a role or organization missing?
- 5) How did having diverse roles, and organization's and their knowledge on the Youth Host Team help to shape the event?

The youth host team processes and work

The youth host team helps to design the agenda, take a leadership role, and help facilitate the event.

- 6) How did this process work with the Team?
- 7) Did you feel you could contribute to these conversations and decisions?
- 8) How were decisions made?
- 9) Do you have any suggestion for how to improve the process?

The event

- 10) What role did you play during the event? How did that go?
- 11) What were some of the strengths/highlights from the event?
- 12) Any learning opportunities?

Overall experience

- 13) What did you gain, in knowledge or experience, from participating on the Youth Hosting Team?
- 14) Do you see opportunities to apply this experience to other contexts/events?

Follow up

These events generate a lot of energy, discussions, plans, etc.

- 1) What can W2A do to continue to foster and mobilize that energy into action?
- 2) Do you have any suggestions for how the learning and change from these events can be captured and shared?