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## Youth Speaks Up: Perceived Communication Changes Experienced by Grade 6 Participants in a Personal Development Program

*A nine-month program entitled Youth Speaks Up is delivered annually to grade 6 students from Sydney, Nova Scotia. One goal of the program is to provide an opportunity for the development of positive communication skills in participants. The purpose of this project was to determine if students participating in the program perceived changes in their communication ability and comfort level as a result of participation in the program. Qualitative focus groups were conducted, and responses suggest that many participants experienced positive changes in their communication comfort levels in public and interpersonal communication contexts, and specifically in their ability and willingness to express their ideas. Participants believed factors such as consistent practice and interaction with new people influenced the changes. Students' recommendations for program development are also presented.*

*À chaque année, les élèves de la 6e année à Sydney, en Nouvelle-Écosse, participent à un programme d'une durée de neuf mois intitulé Youth Speaks Up (La parole aux jeunes). Le programme vise, entre autres, le développement d'aptitudes en communication positives chez les participants. L'objectif de cette étude était de déterminer si les participants croyaient que le programme avait entraîné des changements dans leurs aptitudes en communication et leur sentiment de bien-être. Les conclusions tirées à partir de sessions qualitatives avec des groupes de discussion indiquent que plusieurs participants constataient des changements positifs dans le sentiment de bien-être qu'ils ressentaient dans des contextes de communication interpersonnelle et en public, plus précisément dans leur habileté et leur volonté d'exprimer leurs idées. Les participants étaient d'avis que ces changements étaient en partie attribuables à des facteurs tels la pratique régulière et l'interaction avec de nouvelles personnes. Nous présentons également les recommandations qu'ont faites les élèves pour le développement du programme.*

Public and interpersonal communication competence is often perceived as a key element of successful living and happiness. Communication skills are presented as essential components of healthy relationships (Aylor, 2003; Burleson, Kunkel, & Birch, 1994; Burleson & Samter, 1990; Burleson, Samter, & Lucchetti, 1992; Kunkel & Burleson, 2003), in finding employment (Buback, 2004; Case & Branch, 2003; Peterson, 1997; Ramsay, Gallois, & Callan, 1997), and in having successful careers (Clutterbuck & Hirst, 2002; Hindle, 2000; Lazorchak, 2000; Messmer, 1999). Research has looked at relationships that exist between communication and self-esteem and self-identity (Coover & Murphy, 2000; Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 1989), as well communi-

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cation skills and academic performance (Ayaya, 1996; Boohar & Seiler, 1982; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989).

Similarly, a lack of communication skills can make it difficult to meet daily human needs, let alone to be able to tackle common challenges—and the same holds for children. Bullying and peer pressure, for example, are two realities in the lives of children and two problems that often call for solutions that require communication skills (Duncan, 1996; Lickona, 2000; Mueller & Parisi, 2002). Some children are not comfortable in some communication situations and many experience varying degrees of communication apprehension (Civikly, 1992; Mladenka, Sawyer, & Behnke, 1998). Communication apprehension (CA) can be defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). It is a major, if not the most significant, factor in ineffective communication (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). Communication apprehension among school-aged children has been deemed worthy of study (Kridler & Schneider, 2003). Comadena and Prusank (1988) found that elementary schoolchildren with high CA showed lower levels of learning than those with low CA. Whether it be a lack of communication skills, a low level of communication comfort, or communication apprehension, when the effect of communication on the lives of school children is considered it can be argued that programs that aim to help young people develop as communicators may have great value.

As a communication educator and researcher in both the university environment and the community at large and as a parent, I am particularly interested in programs and initiatives that aim to help children become more comfortable and competent communicators. I conduct many volunteer communication workshops in classrooms throughout my community, a small urban center on the eastern side of Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. A former industrial community, the region experiences social and economic challenges as it works to redefine itself in the face of issues such as out-migration and high unemployment. Part of my motivation when working with young people is to help them foster the communication skills that can help them to assist in the reshaping and strengthening of our community. Through my work I became aware of a local program. For the past eight years *Youth Speaks Up* has been delivered to grade 6 students from the area. Its purpose is “To promote and foster discussion among group members that gives them the opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions on any number of relevant topics” (*Youth Speaks Up: What Is Youth Speaks Up*, para. 1) The *Youth Speaks Up* motto is “I can say no to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, violence, racism and peer pressure” (para. 2). The *Youth Speaks Up* program was designed with five objectives and goals in mind. They are:

- 1) To develop positive self-esteem among grade 6 students before they reach junior high school, 2) to develop strong decision-making and problem-solving skills among grade 6 students that will be of great assistance before they enter the junior high school level, 3) to generate a sense of responsibility among these students as they prepare for adolescence and then adulthood, 4) to empower and strengthen the integrity of students when faced with the stresses of peer

pressure, 5) to develop strong communication skills and assertiveness training among these students. (*Goals and Objectives*, para. 1)

Each year approximately 60 student participants meet once a month from October to June with guest speakers who present issues relevant to young people. Topics include communication, leadership, peer pressure, and healthy lifestyle choices. Guest speakers have also included Holocaust survivors, people living with disabilities, and recovering alcoholics and drug addicts. An interesting component of these sessions is that, with the exception of one field trip, they are arranged as luncheon meetings held outside school hours in a hotel conference room. Students dine in a quasi-formalized setting with other students and teachers (many whom they do not know at the beginning of the year). Hence they are given the opportunity to develop social interaction skills that include effective speaking and listening skills while in a semiprofessional context. Following lunch, guest speakers make their presentations. Then students are given an opportunity to come to a microphone in front of the entire group and respond to the speakers and/or ask questions. Although students are not forced to speak, this expectation is presented to them before they begin the program and they are strongly encouraged to so during the meetings.

Each month a student from one of the seven or eight schools involved is responsible for booking a speaker and hosting the meeting. This includes introducing and thanking the speaker, as well as leading the group in the reading of the program motto and the singing of the national anthem. All participants serve as liaisons with their classes and are expected to go back to their own schools and share what they have learned during the *Youth Speaks Up* meetings. On some occasions the program is recorded and played on a local cable station on a later date.

Students who wish to participate in the *Youth Speaks Up* program inform their teachers the year before they enter grade 6. Depending on the number of students interested, individual schools may be able to enroll all interested students into the program. Otherwise each school devises a system to choose participants randomly. Each student raises \$30 before he or she begins the program, and at the end of the year the group donates the money to local charities of their own choice. The idea is that through the process of raising the money and deciding as a group how to donate the money, the students are engaging in activities that work toward the objectives of the program. Program founder, local businessman, and community volunteer Jack Yazer ensures that the program costs are covered through donations and sponsorship.

After conducting two volunteer sessions on communication with *Youth Speaks Up* participants (two years before the start of this research), engaging in informal conversation with the program founder and organizers, and observing meetings, I felt that this program was worthy of more formal inquiry. Although the fifth objective of the *Youth Speaks Up* program specifically focuses on communication, elements of effective communication play a role in the achievement of the other objectives. For this reason, coupled with my own theoretical and practical background in communication, I decided that a preliminary exploration of the students' perceptions of their own communication as a result of their participation in the program would be an appropriate study.

Many personal development programs for youth with varying specific goals exist and have been discussed (Jacobsen-Webb, 1985; Littlefield & Littlefield, 1989; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997). Some are long-term programs that involve students from various grade levels (Elias & Friedlander, 1994; Hammer & O'Bar, 1989; Silbert & Silbert, 1991). Target participants for these programs are sometimes specific to children and/or youth who are considered to be at risk, exhibit shyness (Haynes-Clements & Avery, 1984), come from minority or disadvantaged groups (Meredith, 1990), or are exceptional learners (Court & Givon, 2003). Yet it appears that no substantial research unearths the benefits derived from programs that operate in the luncheon meeting format that requires students to speak publicly at each session. Although the success of *Youth Speaks Up* appears evident from students' increased participation at each monthly meeting and their personal feedback, the communication benefits experienced by the student participants have not been formally investigated.

The research objective of this project was to determine if students in the *Youth Speaks Up* program perceived changes in their communication and if they felt more comfortable in various communication settings as a result of their participation in the program. This research is useful to educators and researchers who are interested in investigating the communication benefits derived from participation in various models of personal development programs for children. It may also serve as evidence of the value of the *Youth Speaks Up* model for those interested in spearheading similar endeavors. This preliminary study can form a basis for further investigations exploring the relationship between participation in personal development programs such as *Youth Speaks Up* and communication skills development in young people. Therefore, the research question for this study was: What are the perceived communication changes experienced by participants in the *Youth Speaks Up* program?

#### *Method*

Researchers speak of the importance and value of conducting research with children and adolescents that creates spaces for them to express their own feelings in their own words (Porcellato, Dughill, & Springett, 2002), which was the intent of this study. Qualitative focus groups offer such an opportunity (Morgan, 1996; Nabors, Reynolds, & Weist, 2000). Focus groups have been used effectively when conducting research with children and adolescents (Brice, Lamb, & Bang, 1999; Charlesworth & Rodwell, 1997; Harnish & Henderson, 1996; Hoffman, 2003; Porcellato et al., 2002) and when exploring educational issues (Desimone, Payne, Fedoravicius, Henrich, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004; Lederman, 1990; Nabors et al., 2000). It is argued that one of the benefits of focus groups for children and adolescents is that they model social environments that they are used to at school (Mauthner, 1997). Wilkinson (1999) notes, "A focus group participant is not acting in isolation. Rather, participants are members of a social group, all of whom interact with each other. In other words, the social group is itself a social context" (p. 227). Hence focus groups were chosen as the method of inquiry for this study.

### *Participants*

Participants were 40 grade 6 male and female students aged 11-12 years who were enrolled in the 2002-2003 *Youth Speaks Up* program session. Although some students chose not to participate and others were not available, all students enrolled in *Youth Speaks Up* during the 2002-2003 program session were invited to participate in the study. An oral and written invitation was extended, and students and their guardians were provided total disclosure. Both participants and guardians also read and signed informed consent forms before the focus group sessions. This method of participant selection is typical in qualitative focus group research (Krueger, 1998; Morgan, 1997).

### *Focus Group Format*

Eight focus groups consisting of four to seven participants were conducted during the final few weeks of the *Youth Speaks Up* 2002-2003 program session. Social science research often uses focus groups of this size in order to assist with the generation of descriptive data (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). To avoid transportation and scheduling challenges for the participants, permission was received from all the school principals to conduct the focus groups at the students' schools during school hours. The schools were also familiar settings for the participants, a factor other researchers deem important (Porcellato et al., 2002). Empty classrooms, libraries, and spare rooms were the sites of focus groups. One concern noted during this project was the challenge of setting up suitable times for the focus groups. Sufficient time had to be allotted to gain permission from principals to enter the school grounds and conduct the sessions and from teachers to excuse the children from classes. In some instances sessions had to be rescheduled at the last minute because of a change in the school schedule. It proved useful to have back-up dates scheduled to deal with these changes.

The sessions were audiotaped. A research assistant set up the tape-recording equipment and monitored it throughout the sessions. To reduce any apprehension about the use of the tape-recorder, the reason for its use was explained in detail and students were given a chance to hear their voices before the start of recorded session. Porcellato et al. (2002) point out that this also helps to create rapport among the group. Oral and written field notes were recorded during and after each session. These included observations of non-verbal cues that were exhibited by participants, group rapport, and generalized comments about participants' responses. Group dynamics varied from group to group. Although there was an overall sense of enthusiasm across the groups, in some instances it was more overt than in others.

### *Questions*

As the researcher I conducted the focus groups, and a moderately scheduled question sequence (Rolls, 2000) was used to guide the sessions (see Appendix). The question sequence was discussed with colleagues who engage in similar kinds of research and one of the organizers of the program before it was finalized. Three main question areas were designed to determine: (a) whether participants perceived any changes in how they communicated (specific skill development) and whether the program played a part in the change or lack of change; (b) whether they perceived any change in their level of comfort when

communicating (how they felt about having to communicate with others) with others and whether the program played a part in the change or lack of change; and (c) if they could recommend how the program could be altered in order to allow for more positive communication changes. During each focus group, discussion was encouraged, probing questions were used when necessary, and internal summaries (Lederman, 1990) were provided to ensure proper interpretation of responses. Ample opportunities were given for all participants to respond and comment, in particular before moving from question to question and at the end of the sessions. These steps were intended to help ensure a valid reflection of the participants' responses, something Krueger (1998) notes is crucial in order to ensure validity in the collection and analysis of qualitative focus group data.

A potential limitation with the use of focus groups is the possibility of conformity (Porcellato et al., 2002). Participants in this study did appear comfortable expressing different views from each other; however, it is still possible that some participants may have been influenced by others in the group. Although recognizing the risk of conformity, it should be noted that it has been suggested that the focus group format allows children to listen to each other and help each other express themselves. Consequently, the format may actually help children formulate their ideas and articulate them in a clearer fashion while enabling them to take more control of the discussion (Mauthner, 1997; Porcellato et al., 2002).

Another issue with focus groups is keeping the groups on topic. This could be a problem, particularly with children. As an experienced small-group facilitator, I was prepared for this, and at times it was necessary to help the group refocus. It seemed that participants were more likely to become distracted when the sessions were conducted close to breaks in the school day. They were able to refocus when they were assured that they would not miss recess or lunchtime.

### *Analysis*

As explained by Desimone et al. (2004), the goal of qualitative focus-group research is to search for recurring themes in the data, not to find definite causal relationship. Hence qualitative focus groups should be conducted until a researcher is satisfied that theoretical saturation has been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Krueger, 1998). This was evident when the same themes began to emerge in each session.

For the purpose of this study, I adapted an analysis method from those described by Krueger (1994, 1998), and Bloor et al. (2001) and similar to the approach used by Brann-Barrett and Rolls (2004). It consisted of three phases: transcription, organization, and interpretation.

After a transcription-based copy (Krueger, 1994, 1998) of the focus groups was made, the large volume of data was organized. As is suggested by Krueger (1998), the responses were first organized by question in a new file. Next a computer color codebook was developed, and initially observed themes were color-coded in three categories: (a) perceived changes (or lack of changes) in communication; (b) perceived reasons for the changes; and (c) recommendations. Group-to-group validation (Morgan, 1997) was used to determine if data represented an emerging theme. In other words, data were considered a theme

when they emerged time and again in each group. This file was labeled the *initial thematic analysis file*. Further analysis and regrouping ensured the themes best reflected the original responses. From this analysis a new file was created and was labeled the *second thematic analysis file*. During the final phase of analysis, themes were once again examined to ensure that they had been effectively organized. The transcripts and the field notes were reviewed in order to ensure that the participants' responses had been analyzed in the contextual framework in which they were stated. In the following section common themes are presented as well as dissenting opinions, an important element of focus group reporting (Kitzinger, 1995).

### *Results*

Results appear under three dominant headings: (a) perceived changes as a result of participation in *Youth Speaks Up*; (b) influential factors that account for the changes; and (c) students' recommendations. In the following section, each category is explained and divided into the themes that emerged. Themes are presented with explanations and the students' own words.

#### *Perceived Changes*

The final analysis depicts numerous perceived changes among participants in the public and interpersonal realms of communication. Participants also articulated greater comfort levels and ability with self-expression in both public (in front of groups or audiences) and interpersonal (interactions between and among individuals) communication contexts. Changes were identified first in terms of how they manifested in the *Youth Speaks Up* program and then in other contexts where the participants felt the changes were apparent. Thematic categories, presented here are: (a) changes in public communication comfort; (b) changes in interpersonal communication comfort; (c) changes in self-expression; and (d) no changes indicated. Although many overlaps exist between public and interpersonal communication, these are two distinct aspects of the human communication field, and people often express varying levels of comfort in each area and respond variously in each type of setting. Hence each realm is examined separately.

#### *Changes in public communication comfort*

Participants indicated that they felt more comfortable speaking and presenting in a public format than they did before starting the *Youth Speaks Up* program. Changes included an increased comfort level both at *Youth Speaks Up* meetings and in other public speaking contexts.

Participants spoke about the nervousness they experienced during the first *Youth Speaks Up* meetings and how to varying degrees the nervousness waned throughout the year. As one girl stated, "One thing's changed: I can stand up and say something out loud to people and before I couldn't. I was too shy." And another enthusiastically claimed, "When I first went into the program I really didn't want to speak or anything, but in the middle of it I really wanted to."

As well as feeling more comfortable speaking in front of people at the *Youth Speaks Up* meetings, many students expressed increased levels of comfort in other public communication contexts. One girl said,

I feel more comfortable. I had to read a few things in church and stuff and I don't find that as hard. I used to get really upset. I really like to read but I'm not really the best at reading out loud ... but I feel more comfortable about it now.

A number of students commented that they wanted to get involved in school debate and public speaking programs because of their experiences with *Youth Speaks Up*. One boy claimed, "I found lots of change because after a couple of [*Youth Speaks Up*] meetings I joined the debating team at our school, so [*Youth Speaks Up*] helps me a lot in debating." Another stated,

This year I entered the French public speaking [event], and I think that was mostly because of *Youth Speaks Up*, because before I could talk a lot but I couldn't talk in front of a lot of people. I was always too shy and embarrassed.

And another, "One reason I went in public speaking was *Youth Speaks Up*. I was more comfortable speaking." Students also revealed a new sense of comfort in their classroom environments: "Presenting projects is a lot easier [since taking part in] *Youth Speaks Up*" and "If you're trying to talk to your teacher or if your teacher asks you a question in school then you might be able to answer it without getting scared or afraid or nervous."

Participants mentioned numerous contexts (such as choirs, dramatic productions, and dance recitals) where they felt more comfortable communicating in front of people. Another interesting point made by participants referred to how they may use their *Youth Speaks Up* experience later in life: "When you're older and if you are in a business ... and you have to give them a little speech or something, I think it would be a little easier." This newfound comfort may prove beneficial for the participants. Anderson (1997) argues that children must learn to be effective communicators in a variety of contexts as this will be key to their life successes and development of their leadership skills.

#### *Changes in interpersonal communication comfort*

As well as becoming more comfortable in public communication forums, the focus group participants indicated that they felt more comfortable in interpersonal communication contexts. Again, they experienced an increase in comfort levels at *Youth Speaks Up* meetings and in other settings.

Participants were pleased to say that they had become more comfortable communicating with other students and teachers in the *Youth Speaks Up* program. Other participants claimed they felt less shy. One student stated,

When I started *Youth Speaks Up* I felt shy, sort of, because I was going in a thing with a bunch of different people that I'd never even seen or met before, and they're all from different schools, and I didn't know them at all. I guess just being around them and watching them helped me not be so shy.

The change in communication was also apparent to the participants in settings outside *Youth Speaks Up*. One student remarked,

I think it really helped me a lot because before I wouldn't talk to anyone. If someone said hi to me in the mall I'd just kind of roll my eyes away but now I'll say hi back and 'how are you?'

Participants noted that the challenge is often initiating interactions with new people, and *Youth Speaks Up* helped them become more comfortable with this

aspect of communication as is evident in the following quotation: "When you're in a new group of people, you don't really know them, so you just try to start a conversation, and *Youth Speaks Up* helped me a little so I can start a conversation with anyone, almost." A male participant added, "This is going to sound kind of weird, but I can talk to girls a little better now. Because I used to stutter a lot, and now I find that I'm confident."

The transition from elementary school to junior high is a topic of inquiry throughout the educational literature (Allan & McKean, 1984; Berndt & Mekos, 1995; Mekos, 1989), and it was a consideration for participants in this study. Participants indicated that the opportunity to meet students from other elementary schools during *Youth Speaks Up* would have a positive effect on their transition to junior high school. The participants are all from a relatively small community, and there are fewer junior high schools than elementary schools. There is a strong possibility some participants will attend the same junior high as some of their new friends. They indicated that this would be helpful because it was going to be difficult to leave elementary schools where they knew everybody and move to junior high where they would not know as many people. One participant happily stated, "We went to see [the junior high school], and there were people there from different elementary schools, and [some of them] were people that were in *Youth Speaks Up*." Another responded, "You can go up to someone [in junior high] and say, 'Hey, you were in my *Youth Speaks Up*,' and you might get to know them." Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, and Midgley (1991) found that changes in self-esteem and self-perception that occur during the transition to junior high school are linked to changes in young adolescents' social lives. The fact that students may have a head start on the formation of relationships with future junior high peers could be an asset. Berndt and Hawkins (1985) suggest that the development of close friendships early in grade 7 may positively influence students' adjustments to junior high school.

#### *Changes in self-expression*

Not only did participants indicate changes in their interpersonal and public communication comfort, some noted specifically that their ability and willingness to express their own feelings, ideas, and thoughts had changed. This may be significant, as Anderson (1997) points out, there is great value in children's ability to express their own opinions.

Some students took note of specific behavioral developments in their personal communication styles. Some comments included "[I'm] speaking more clearly, and I make good eye contact. Before I'd look down at the paper," and "I remember last year, even in a [small] group, I used to stumble on my words and everything that I'd try to say, and now I find myself more clear, and I can talk a little better in front of people." Another stated,

Sometimes when I was asking a question, I'd accidentally word it wrong, and I'd kind of stutter half way through it, and it's really embarrassing. I find I don't do that as much. Before I'd just go up, now I think of the question a bit more carefully, like how I'm going to word it.

Other improvements participants noted included knowing where to stand while using the microphone, where to look, and how to reduce nervous be-

aviors such as laughing, choking, and excessive smiling. The skills development indicated by the students are the types of positive communication cues that are emphasized in communication theory (Rolls, 2003; Tuman & Fraleigh, 2003).

Students also said that one of the challenges of *Youth Speaks Up* was coming up with a question or comment about the topic addressed by the guest speaker. Many said that in the beginning they were afraid their questions would be deemed silly or wrong. As the program progressed, these doubts began to dissipate. One participant said that she felt a little more confident: "I used to be afraid people wouldn't think that I was going to say the right thing and now I don't really mind if people think that [what I have to say] is not right if I think it's right." Other students shared a lesson they had learned from *Youth Speaks Up* as is expressed in these quotes: "If you have a question or something, just express it, don't hold it back," and: "Don't care what people think of your question, if you want to know, just ask." Another commented, "I think as you get older it might get easier to say what you think, but you can say what you think when you're little too, because it doesn't really matter what other people think." Again, participants indicated that being comfortable with expressing their viewpoints was helpful when they met new people; they worried less about how others perceived them. This comfort may be extremely beneficial when these young people are faced with peer pressure. Hollander, Wood, and Hebert (2003) claim that,

According to Fetro and Drolet (2000), students who possess a variety of communication skills, including the ability to initiate conversations and to express their feeling and values, are more likely to have a higher level of self-efficacy and a greater ability to deliver effective refusal statements. (p. 46)

One participant claimed, "I feel better going into junior high knowing that I can say no to smoking if I get asked and how I can stop bullying and stuff; [*Youth Speaks Up*] helped me."

#### *No notable changes*

Some students said that they did not notice significant changes. These participants can be divided into two groups: the students who (a) felt extremely comfortable communicating when they entered the program and who felt they maintained that comfort level; and (b) those who felt nervous when they began and still felt nervous at the end. These students indicated that they spoke in front of the entire group at least once. No students said that they had experienced a negative change in their communication. Further research to investigate why these groups perceived little or no change in their communication may offer valuable information. Specific suggestions are offered in the discussion and conclusion.

#### *Influential Factors*

Although it is useful to examine the perceived communication changes experienced by *Youth Speaks Up* participants, it is similarly beneficial to determine what in particular the students felt precipitated the changes. The focus group participants indicated that three key factors influenced their positive communication changes: (a) regular and consistent practice speaking up, (b) regular and consistent interaction with new people, and (c) regular and consistent

opportunities to observe and listen to others (including speakers and fellow students).

*Regular and consistent practice speaking up*

From the first meeting, *Youth Speaks Up* participants are expected to get up and ask a question or make a comment. They are given a brief time to reflect on what the speakers have said and to discuss the topic with the other students at their table. Also, a teacher at each table encourages the children to get up. According to the participants, this format, repeated at monthly meetings, contributed to the positive communication changes. It should be noted that many students referred to this part of the *Youth Speaks Up* meetings as “asking the questions” or “going up to the mike.” Students said, “It really helped when they made us go up. The first time they made us, it felt good,” and “When you’re going up to the microphone more often you’re getting used to it. We all got used to it.”

*Regular and consistent interaction with new people*

Focus group participants mentioned that the program organizers made sure that participants sat with different students at every meeting. They described this as unsettling in the beginning, yet in time it became easier. They indicated that it contributed greatly to their increased comfort when interacting with new people. One student reported,

There are different people at your table every week, and you’re there for a long enough time that you start to get to know them. Then you know them at the next meeting, and you can still talk to them and meet more people. I know almost all the people in the program now because of all the different tables I was sitting at.

Other students said, “I didn’t sit with anyone I knew, so I’d try to talk to them. I was really nervous and uncomfortable with it the first day, but as I kept doing it, I’m much more comfortable now,” and “We’d sit at tables and we’d all have to introduce ourselves, and we’d say what school we went to and everything. That helped.”

*Regular and consistent opportunities to observe and listen to others*

Participants in this study suggested that one of the reasons they experienced changes in their communication was because they had many opportunities to observe and listen to others. According to the students, they learned from the stories the speakers shared, they learned what to do and what not to do when speaking in public, and they gained more confidence by watching how others expressed themselves.

In certain cases students found that the speakers’ information was useful and practical. For example, participants indicated that learning about the ill effects of smoking and how to say no to peer pressure regarding smoking was beneficial. As one student put it,

When you go into junior high and if you get asked to smoke or something you can say no because [the program] taught you how to say no ... it would be easier [to handle the] peer pressure ... because it really taught you all kinds of stuff about it.

As well, students felt the information they garnered would help them when the topics covered in *Youth Speaks Up* came up in junior high school. For example, one of the speakers was a Holocaust survivor who shared his story with the participants. One student commented, "Like the Holocaust; we'll know what it's like when our teachers are talking about it in school, [listening to the speaker] you find out actually what it's like."

As a result of observing so many speakers, students were able to discuss what they perceived as effective and ineffective communication skills. One key factor many of the students felt was important when public speaking was the inclusion of visual aids. The following dialogue emphasizes the value of including pictures with a presentation,

A: [I like] when people show some pictures with their [presentation].

B: Just to sort of spice it up.

C: I think a [useful] topic that we had was the smoking one. That person showed a lot of great pictures.

All: Oh, yeah.

The students' recognition of the value of visual aids when presenting is well corroborated throughout the communication literature (Arnold & McClure, 1996; DeVito, 1997; Rolls, 2003). Nolen (2003) also supports the use of visual aids when she describes techniques that educators can use when developing teaching methods that support spatial intelligence. Another student said in reference to observing the speakers, "I learned if you should be looking at all the people, or if you should just stare at your paper [when you are public speaking]." Students indicated that they liked it when speakers shared not just their own story, but also related it to them (the students). They also suggested that it is most effective to have some type of activity for the students to do as opposed to simply talking the entire time. Finally, they noted that the room where presentations are made should be given consideration. They found that the most effective presentations were delivered in bright, spacious rooms. Interestingly, their comments illustrate their grasp of other effective communication skills such as the establishment and maintenance of eye contact, the importance of relating your topic to your audience, maintenance of audience interest, and an awareness of the physical space in which presentations are delivered (Rolls, 2003).

Participants suggested that it was encouraging to watch others express themselves. Students were impressed by the presenters' willingness to disclose personal experiences, even those that were negative. They added that this encouraged them to be comfortable sharing their own experiences. One student explained it thus: "The [speakers] say all these bad things that happened to them, but they're still talking to you and everything." The students also gained confidence by watching their peers speak. As one student said, "After I saw everyone else doing it and they could do it good, I just figured I should try."

#### *Students' Recommendations*

Focus group participants were asked to share any recommendations they might have to help enable future *Youth Speaks Up* students to experience positive communication changes because of their participation in the program.

Some general suggestions were: (a) incorporate some fun get-to-know-you activities (although they did not use specific language, they appeared to be referring to icebreaker and group trust-building activities); (b) give students more input into the topics; and (c) include more off-site meetings (one week the students visited a home for people recovering from substance abuse). These suggestions were not necessarily the views of all the students. When the suggestions were raised, some group members concurred. Other suggestions appeared to be more personal in nature, and some opposing suggestions were offered. For example, one recommendation suggested that students should be required to go to the microphone and speak at every meeting and that this should be strictly enforced, whereas another suggested that students should not be forced to go to the microphone. However, even students who made these suggestions indicated that they were happy with the current method of strongly encouraging students to speak without forcing them.

#### *Discussion and Conclusion*

Focus group participants indicated that the *Youth Speaks Up* program was a positive experience, that they would take part in it again, and that they would recommend it to others. Perceived positive changes on either or both a public and an interpersonal communication level were expressed. Other researchers (Anderson, 1997; Duncan, 1996; Hollander et al., 2003; Lickona, 2000; Mueller & Parisi, 2002) report that effective communication ability helps young people cope with challenges such as making transitions, dealing with bullies, and handling peer pressure. Participants in this study suggested that they felt better prepared to handle these kinds of situations because of their *Youth Speaks Up* experience.

This was intended as a preliminary study, and certain limitations and numerous potentials for further research need to be addressed. As indicated above, these results reflect common themes and voices of dissent that emerged from the focus groups. They are not intended to be generalized or to suggest causal relationship between the perceived communication benefits and the *Youth Speaks Up* program. However, these results may assist in the design of a quantitative instrument used in a more in-depth study to determine if specific changes in communication comfort can be significantly linked to program participation. Charlesworth and Rodwell (1997) recommend this use of focus group results.

Another possible study might look at reasons for the lack of perceived changes in those students who appeared to be on the extreme ends of the communication-comfort spectrum. Quantitative studies that measure pre- and post-session communication comfort levels could be conducted, followed by focus groups that, among other things, ask students to identify what types of sessions might have helped them experience positive changes. It may be worth investigating whether a session dealing with communication apprehension might help those who are uncomfortable communicating. As well, it could be determined whether a session that focuses on basic communication skills training might further help the nervous speakers, as well as the more confident students who might benefit from an opportunity to fine-tune specific aspects of their communication style.

Similarly, although some students mentioned specific improvements they noticed in *how* they communicate, this was not as common as comments that centered on more positive feelings experienced in varying communication contexts. *Youth Speaks Up* participants are given ample opportunity to communicate in public and interpersonal contexts, yet less attention is given to the development of specific interpersonal skills. At this stage, organizers are more interested in providing children with a forum to communicate and in helping them to feel positive about their ability to communicate. Further investigation could be made to determine if this may help to explain why communication comfort was emphasized more by participants than skills acquisition.

A follow-up study conducted at varying time intervals following students' completion of the program may unearth useful data. It could be investigated whether the perceived changes were long-lasting. A study that is extended into the first year of junior high school may help to determine whether the changes that the participants predicted would help them once they entered grade 7 actually will help to ease the transition.

Considering the role communication plays in the lives of young people, the results of this study send a positive message to educators, program organizers, and others who are interested in creating means to help young people become effective communicators. This study is a first step. A program with the goal of helping to foster positive growth and development in young people and that generates positive responses from its participants is most probably a valuable forum for future study in the hope that others may benefit from similar experiences.

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*Appendix*  
*Focus Group Question Schedule*

*Introduction*

*Background information and rapport building:*

Everyone will be asked to introduce himself or herself. Students will be given an overview of the purpose of the focus group. A few minutes will be spent explaining what I mean when I refer to communication. I will also explain what I mean when I refer to different communication settings. Participants will be told there is no right or no wrong answers to these questions and it is okay if they do not want to respond to a question. I will also review the subject of confidentiality and I will ask them to respect each other's privacy by not sharing other people's answers outside of the group. Initial discussion will center on the *Youth Speaks Up* program.

*Body*

1. Tell me if you feel or see any changes in how you communicate in different communication situations compared to before you began the *Youth Speaks Up* program. (Changes may be positive or negative)

Probe:

*If Yes:*

- a. Describe the changes.
- b. Do you feel *Youth Speaks Up* had anything to do with the change? If so, tell me about specific activities that played a part in the change.

*If No:*

- a. Do you feel *Youth Speaks Up* had anything to do with the lack of change? If so, tell me what specific activities.

2. Tell if you feel more or less comfortable in different communication situations compared to before you began the *Youth Speaks Up* program.

Probe:

*If Yes:*

- a. Do you feel *Youth Speaks Up* played any role in that change? If so, tell me what specific activities.

*If No:*

- a. Do you feel *Youth Speaks Up* had anything to do with the lack of change? If so, tell me what specific activities.

3. Is there anything *Youth Speaks Up* organizers could do differently in the program to help students become more comfortable in different communication situations.

*Conclusion*

An oral summary of the kinds of information that was shared will be offered and participants will be asked if they have anything else they would like to add.