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Supporting youth-led community geography on the impacts of neighbourhood social infrastructure on young people's lives: a case study from East Scarborough, Canada

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Abstract This paper is a reflection on 3 years of youth engagement in neighbourhood-based geographic research on the state of social infrastructure in East Scarborough, Toronto, Canada. It revolves around the evolution of LIFT, a youth-led advocacy group with the mandate to engage youth in community-based research to identify gaps in resources and inform local organizations about youth priorities. Using critical reflection as research method, we explore how community geography can be a responsive approach to the needs of youth to analyze their lived experience and collect data to influence decision-making in their communities. We articulate a series of propositions and core assumptions to inform a non-adultist, youth-focused community geography, highlight the ethical dimensions of this work, as well as discuss the often-complicated institutional and interpersonal dynamics that shape the success and sustainability of youth-led community geography.

Keywords Community geography · Community-engaged learning · Participatory research · Children and youth

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Introduction

In recent years, there have been calls to practice more engaged and community-relevant forms of scholarship. Responding to this call, community geography, "a small but growing subfield in human geography" has emerged, which, "in team with community members, … applies geographic methodologies to community problems" (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 5). Building on public participation GIS, participatory action research (PAR), critical geography, and other fields (Hawthorne et al., 2014), community geography is committed to participatory and equitable forms of research and teaching and holds the promise for community-relevant geographic knowledge production. Over the past decade, a group of primarily U.S.-based geographers has contributed to the field (Robinson, 2010, Hawthorne et al., 2015, Robinson et al., 2017; Block et al., 2017; Boll-Bosse & Hankins, 2017; Hawthorne & Jarrett, 2017; Rees et al., 2020, Shannon et al., 2020).

Community geography values knowledge that is co-produced with community actors, in particular those traditionally excluded from academic knowledge production, and that benefits both academic and community partners (Robinson, 2010). We share the general excitement about community geography, in particular its practical and political commitments and the re-imagination of accountability it demands from academic institutions and researchers. However,

despite its commitment to working with marginalized communities, the field has to pay more sustained attention to dynamics of social difference, including age, and how they might shape research projects and the relationship within research collectives. The issue of difference (and diversity) and its practical implications for community geography is emerging as an important site of reflective inquiry, for instance, community geographers have recently begun to think about diversity and inclusiveness with respect to neurodiversity in teaching and learning contexts (Atchison et al., 2021). There is also small and promising literature that discusses the involvement of youth in community geography (see, for example, Becker et al., 2015; Pearsall et al., 2015; Rees et al., 2016; Solís et al., 2018), yet relatively little attention has so far been paid to age-related difference within adult-youth research collectives, the broader ethical implications of youth engagement in community geography, and the practical dimensions of sustaining youth participation throughout a project's duration. We understand age as relational, for one's membership in a particular age group is defined in relation to others and confers advantages and disadvantages to its members (Barken, 2019; Jones, 2009), and suggest that community geographers' engagement of young people requires more sustained methodological reflection and, to this end, highlight the methodological importance of age-as-social location in community geography and provide practical insights for youth engagement in community geography projects. We link debates in children and youth geographies to community geography in an effort to help advance the theoretical project of the latter. In particular, discussions about children and youth as "competent social actors," and the structural limits of that agency, provide important epistemological and methodological insights, with implications for research practice. An engagement with these debates allows us to center questions of agency and power in community geography and interrogate how those might be produced, reproduced or transformed in research practice.

The empirical focus of the paper revolves around LIFT (Let's Inspire for Today), a youth collective in the Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park (KGO) neighbourhood, a low-income community in close proximity to the university campus, about 20 km northeast of Toronto's Downtown (East Scarborough Storefront, 2014). Since its inception in 2012, LIFT has been a youth-led organization that leverages partnerships, delivers leadership programming, and supports the inclusion of youth in decision-making spaces in East Scarborough. By reflecting on our shared experience in a research project on the state of community infrastructure led by LIFT involving undergraduate students and high-school aged youth, we explore the potential of community geography as an approach to youth engagement in community development. We discuss the conditions that led to a collaboration between the university and community and highlight the dynamics of youth engagement in community geography. Our goal is to contribute to the development of a framework for youth-focused, youth-led and non-adultist community-based geographic research.[1]

The paper is divided into five sections. We first trace some of the theoretical roots and epistemological affinities between children and youth geographies and community geography and foreground key insights on questions of power and agency. Second, we outline the policy context of LIFT's emergence; the concentration of poverty in Toronto's inner suburbs and the roll-out of neighbourhood regeneration policies that place youth in a contradictory role of active neighbourhood agents and passive policy targets. In the third section, we describe the emergence of LIFT and the research the youth collective undertook. In the fourth section, we discuss our reflective research approach that forms the basis of our analysis in this paper. The final section discusses the project centering on what we identify as core assumptions and opportunities and challenges of a youth-focused community geography.

Locating 'youth' in community geography

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive review of recent geographic work on young people (for an overview, see Holloway, 2014). Rather, our intent is to bring this scholarship into dialogue with community geography. We do so because, despite its aim to include a "diverse set of positionalities" (Shannon et al., 2020), age has not received sufficient theoretical attention in community

[1] For the purpose of this paper and in our community work, we understand adultism as "all the attitudes and actions that flow from the idea that adults are superior to young people" (Bell 2018).

geography and we believe community geography would benefit from an intentional engagement with geographic work on young people, specifically as it relates to the development of flexible epistemologies and methods and their practical implications.

In the 1970s, geographers began to think about the specificity of children. With his work on the spatial oppression of children, Bunge (1971) laid the foundation for a critical children and youth geography (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). His "impassioned call for a revolutionary new social and spatial order that privileges children" (Del Casino, 2009, p. 191) was a demand to overcome the adult-centric structures of cities and the forces that sustain them. Bunge showed how urban environments are *adult-centric*, limiting the mobility and circumscribing the spatial practices of youth. Bunge (1971, p. 205) writes:

> The adults provide plenty of places for their own amusement, numerous taverns, supper clubs, and even go-go houses, but the teenagers have none. They are the neighborhood nomads. As long as they keep moving down the street or stay in their home they are not harassed. What is "their place," to which they must keep? The teenager population has literally gone underground, in the basements of some of their friends whose parents are not too hostile toward them, or are not at home or are simply indifferent. ... The teenagers have a whole secret geography of their own, of little places they have found, a garage here, an abandoned car there. The teenagers' lack of territory means a lack of freedom and a suffocation of dignity. Every teenager in the community is a foreigner.

Drawing from Bunge, a youth-focused community geography would be a two-pronged endeavour: First, it would foster the creation of spaces that foreground youth knowledge about the urban environment. Second, its goal would be to link youth knowledges to policy and make city-building more accountable to the lives and needs of young people.

The concern of geographers with issues relevant to children and youth must be seen in the larger context of a critique of developmental psychology and associated conceptions of childhood. Rejecting dominant developmentalist understandings of children as "adults in the making," the *New Social Studies of Childhood* emerged and, emphasizing the social construction of age categories, proposed a fundamental reconceptualization of children as "actors in their own right" (Prout & James, 1990; James et al., 1998; James, 2010). Geographers engaged with this literature as there was a desire to better understand children's spatial practices and everyday life worlds (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). This engagement peaked in the 1990s and 2000s and had important implications for research with young people, particularly because of its methodological affinity to participatory methods.

We embrace notions of youth as actors in their own right and aim to develop a community geography that reflects our commitment to *youth-as-co-researchers*. Yet various debates have pushed forward the evolution of the field and can support the ongoing theoretical development of community geography. Research emanating from geography's engagement with the *New Social Studies of Childhood* has been critiqued for its often-exclusive focus on the local, the everyday spaces of children, the micro-geographies of everyday life, "at the expense of a macro analysis" (Holloway, 2014, p. 381, citing Ansell 2009). This tension also relates to questions of children and youth and how they might exercise their (political) agency in participatory research and what the potential structural limits of that agency are in a given political-economic context. With perhaps an inflated emphasis on children and youth as "competent social actors," what is neglected is what this agency means in community-based research and what its potential impact might be. Holloway (2014) argues for moving beyond romantic ideas about the "all-knowing child" and see children as both actors and structural category. This raises important ethical challenges for community-engaged geography, especially related to managing expectations of impact among participants.

Because of the affinity between children and youth research and participatory methods, we need to mind the potential pitfalls of the notion of participation, especially when integrated into top-down policy-making processes. Too often, participation becomes either tokenistic or offloads responsibility for social change onto the shoulders of marginalized communities, without addressing underlying structural conditions. Cooke and Kothari (2001) labelled the omnipresent discourse of participation in development discourse as a "tyranny of participation." (For a related discussion on whether participatory methods

really shift power relations between researcher and researched, see Gallagher, 2008; Kesby, 2005). It is therefore important that we are explicit in our discussions of participation and what it might mean. Cahill (2007) makes the important distinction between participation-as-approach and participation-as-method. A non-adultist community geography must integrate both aspects in purposeful ways and not reduce participation solely to the development of particular tools or techniques. Here, the Freirian roots of critical participatory action research (Freire, 1997) are particularly relevant as they provide axiological anchors for a refined research practice. Freire proposed a re-imagining of popular education as a "practice of freedom" characterized through an ongoing process of dialogue and critical reflection (Cahill, 2007, p. 301).

Recently, partly in response to a growing body of scholarship applying new materialist ideas and non-representational theory to geographic work on young people, there has been a re-assertion of socio-structural interpretations and approaches, in particular from a feminist political economy perspective, offering new insights on questions of how the micro-geographies of children and youth are shaped by larger structural forces and macro-geographies. New materialist and non-representational approaches have been critiqued for paying insufficient attention to questions of power and power differentials (Holloway, 2014, p. 382; Mitchell & Ellwood, 2012). We take from these insights a commitment to an ongoing project of advancing a theoretical framework for geographic work on and with young people, which, we believe, has the potential to enrich community geography's own theory development.

Locating 'youth' in Toronto's neighbourhood policy framework

As community geographers, we are mindful that our work does not occur in a political vacuum and is not detached from the material reality and policy discourses and practices that shape everyday geographies in the communities we work in. In this section, we position the emergence of the LIFT in the historical context of neighbourhood policy in Toronto. Over the past three decades, Toronto has become a divided city (Hulchanski, 2010; United Way of Greater Toronto, 2004). Income polarization and spatial concentration of poverty have become defining features of Toronto's social geography. In 2005, the United Way of Greater Toronto and the City of Toronto launched a place-based framework focusing on "communities with poor access to services that face significant challenges" (United Way of Greater Toronto, 2005) and identified "priority neighbourhoods" using GIS buffering to measure social need and the proximity of neighbourhood residents to community infrastructure (City of Toronto, 2005).

Discourses of *at-risk youth* have been central to Toronto's neighbourhood policy. The city witnessed a significant rise in gang-related gun violence during the summer of 2005 (known as Toronto's "Summer of the Gun") and gun violence became an additional factor in identifying priority neighbourhoods. Kingston-Galloway was originally one of 13 priority neighbourhoods identified. After initial meetings of the Kingston-Galloway Neighbourhood Action Partnership (NAP), a network of community actors supported through the City's neighbourhood policy, the boundaries were expanded to include neighbouring Orton Park to address rising tensions among local youth living in the two areas, ultimately creating the Kingston-Galloway/Orton Park (KGO) priority neighbourhood (Fig. 1).

In 2006, the Province of Ontario launched the Youth Challenge Fund (YCF), a $42.5 million neighbourhood-targeted funding strategy, the largest funding source that supported community investment across the priority neighbourhoods between 2006 and 2013. The neighbourhood policy framework entrenched youth-led organizing within the priority neighbourhoods and the city's social policy agenda more broadly. Community-based youth programming and services were seen to be foundational to building stronger communities (United Way of Greater Toronto, 2013). While this period was a catalyst for youth-led action in the city, critics pointed out that the approach relies on the labour of youth, often victims of systemic and structural inequities, to be responsible for neighbourhood change and challenged this as a neoliberal approach to systemic underinvestment in communities (Skinner, 2013). This aligns with other interventions that have critiqued "concerns over safety" and "at-risk youth" as a central part of a neoliberal politics of city-regional quality-of-life competitiveness" (Leslie & Hunt, 2013).

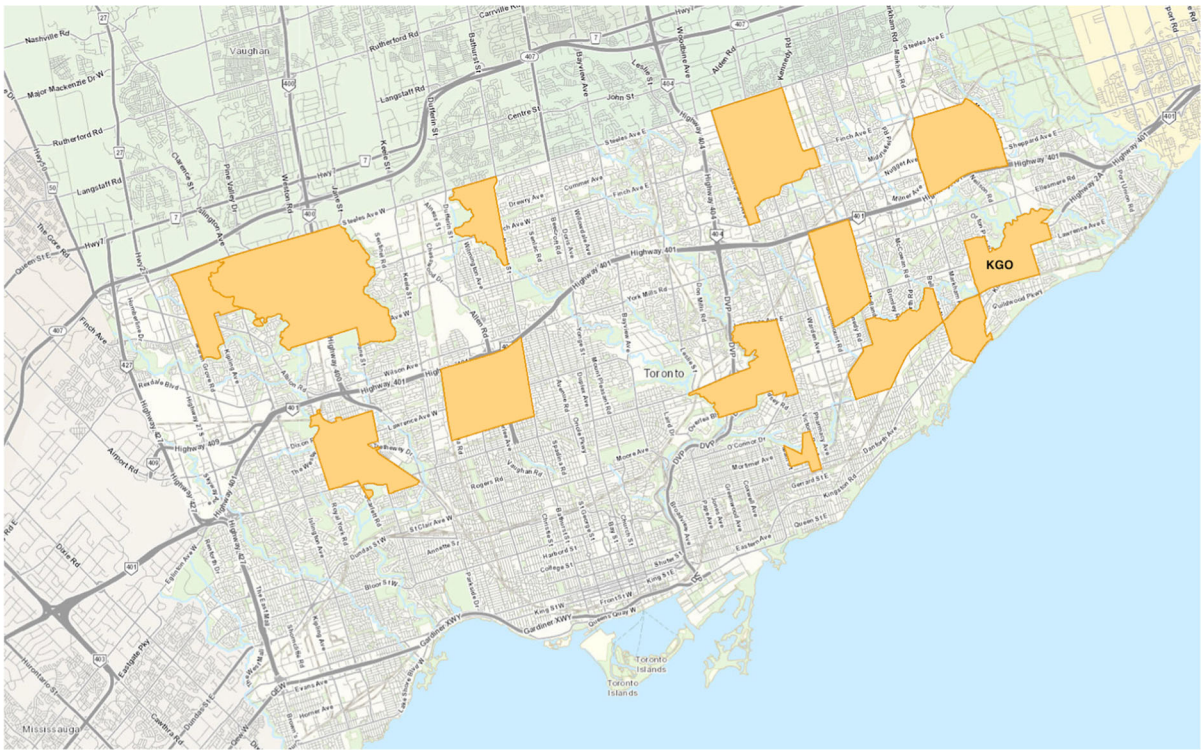

Fig. 1 Location of Kingston Galloway/Orton Park (KGO) and other priority neighbourhoods in Toronto (2005–2013) Source: Wellbeing Toronto (City of Toronto)

The 'LIFT Story'

In the evening of July 16, 2012, a shooting occurred at a block party on Danzig Street, close to the KGO community. Two young people lost their lives and 22 others were injured, making this the worst mass shooting in Toronto's history. In the aftermath, the East Scarborough Storefront, a community organization in the KGO, brought together stakeholders to coordinate a response leveraging City resources, local organizations and residents and to explore how to reduce the potential of such an event reoccurring. Community stakeholders agreed that community priorities in response to violence need to be informed by the experience of young people, which resulted in the creation of a youth-focused place-based strategy called KGO-ACT.

In the fall of 2012, an outreach coordinator of the Boys and Girls Club and a youth worker from Department of Parks, Forestry and Recreation spearheaded the idea of getting East Scarborough recognized as youth-friendly. The Youth Friendly Community (YFC) Recognition is an initiative of Play Works, an Ontario-wide group of youth-focused organizations, that recognizes communities that support programs and services for youth. The goal was to renew the community's commitment to youth through documenting the variety of resources and opportunities available in the neighbourhood and identify gaps in social infrastructure. The program consists of application requirements to demonstrate evidence of satisfying ten criteria, which include, among others, "youth have options for play," "the community recognizes and celebrates youth," "play is accessible," "youth feel valued by their community," and "schools support the youth-friendly approach."

Through the East Scarborough Storefront, the youth workers were connected with a geographer at the nearby university (one of the co-authors of this paper) to explore opportunities for student involvement to support the application. This collaboration was the catalyst for creating LIFT, which became a pilot project of KGO-ACT. From the beginning, the work of LIFT was supported by undergraduate students and between 2012 and 2014, for three fall semesters, a total of about 75 students enrolled in a 3rd-year

community-engaged learning course and conducted the research in partnership with LIFT members. The course itself was designed as an introduction to community-based research and the syllabus re-purposed to facilitate the research for the application. The majority of students were in their early 20 s, many identifying as youth, and some East Scarborough residents themselves. Several stayed involved in a volunteer capacity after completing the course.

The project was led by a steering group, consisting of youth who had a relationship to East Scarborough, either living, working, going to school or studying in the community, and adult allies from participating organizations. The youth members of the steering group ensured that the collaboration was rooted in the priorities of youth and supported components of the community-based research by connecting youth participants to undergraduate student researchers. The faculty member coordinated the project, developed skills of both students and community youth, and provided general oversight. This resulted in the recruitment of youth leaders, including the current co-chair of LIFT (and co-author of this paper), along with several other youths to ground the project in the priorities of youth and support their research effort.

Typically, YFC applications are completed by municipalities in a bureaucratic fashion. Seeking a process where youth were leaders, the goal was to flip the premise of the recognition program from one where they are idle subjects of evaluation to one where they produce knowledge and critically examine the criteria through their lived experience. LIFT's intent was to embark on an inclusive, bottom-up process, with involvement of the community's youth residents. Embracing principles of positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2005), coupled with an asset-based approach to community development (Green & Haines, 2008), LIFT members wanted to link the micro-assets of community youth to the meso-environments of city decision-making structures and policy making. The outreach coordinator of the Boys and Girls Club who initiated the collaboration reflected on the process: "We had a very grassroots approach with youth heavily involved. […] Hopefully others can adopt a similar approach and engage youth when it comes to youth-driven initiatives like these because it can be very effective" (University of Toronto Scarborough, 2016).

The work was guided by the commitment to collectively investigate a problem, rely on local knowledge to better understand the problem, and to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the problem (McIntyre, 2000) and grounded in the assumption that knowledge is shaped by power and that reality is structured by relations of power (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014, p. 77).

LIFT specifically worked within a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) framework centred on the following commitments: (1) Youth knowledge is actively solicited, valued, and put into action; (2) Youth identify issues relevant to them and develop solutions; (3) Youth initiate and lead community-based research collectives through all stages of the project; (4) Youth make collective decisions; and (5) Youth support other youth through mentorship and peer-teaching (UC Regents, 2015).

While the research tools developed for the project were intentionally eclectic, the overarching goal was to explore the qualities of place and support the development of a critical awareness of the uneven distribution of social infrastructure and resources in Toronto. As an inquiry of place, using written, oral, visual and mobile methods, the research was influenced by Trell and van Hoven (2010) who discuss various research methods in relation to abstract (memories, thoughts, emotions) and concrete aspects (location, design, appearance) of place.

Neighbourhood surveying was used to collect information "on the ground," such as the location of places, the personal connections of youth to places, the time spent there, and the feelings associated with these places. These surveys were seen as an appropriate tool to understand local environmental and spatial issues and to directly experience them. Neighbourhood walking tours, walking interviews, and "go-alongs" were used to visit places that are important to youth, allowing for first-person explanations of concepts and ideas. Less formal than a neighbourhood survey, walking tours as a mobile method were an effective way to communicate the personal significance of places (Evans & Jones, 2011). Key informant interviews were conducted primarily with local service providers to get a better understanding of the activity of organizational stakeholders in the community around programming, youth outreach, communication, and resource allocation and funding constraints. Community mapping exercises were used to

understand and discover the features of a community from the perspective of the mapmakers. The practice of community mapping built the capacity of groups to represent themselves and project their conception of their community onto the map (For example, Fig. 2 shows a web-based geo-visualization that was produced following a community mapping session held at a local youth club exploring youth hang-out spaces and experiences and interactions with adults).

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) was used as a way to store, manipulate and present spatial and geographic information, in particular to explore accessibility and proximity of youth to social infrastructure and resources (Fig. 3 is an asset map co-produced by university students and community youth investigating the location of social infrastructure in relation to transit access and where youth participants lived).

After 3 years of research, the LIFT collective submitted a 286-page application containing evidence that East Scarborough was in fact a youth-friendly community. LIFT members attended a ceremony in 2016 to accept the designation on behalf of the community. Yet receiving the designation was never seen as an end in itself but a means to develop sustainable mechanisms for youth leadership in the community. The data collected by the LIFT collective also shed light on challenges with regard to social infrastructure and youth programming. Recurring themes were: (1) Issues of mobility and the lack of efficient and affordable transit; (2) Ineffective communication of youth-serving organizations which results in lack of awareness of resources; (3) Financial barriers to using community spaces and a scarcity of bookable spaces; (4) Unsustainable funding for youth initiatives and the ebb and flow of policy attention; and (5) The tension between the expectation for (unpaid) youth volunteerism and their actually-existing material needs. In the remainder of the paper, we reflect on the process and how this informs our development of theory of practice for youth-led community geography.

Methods, data and critical reflection

The co-authors are a university-based geographer and a youth organizer (recently also a graduate student in planning) who have been working together for over 10 years. In line with the values of community

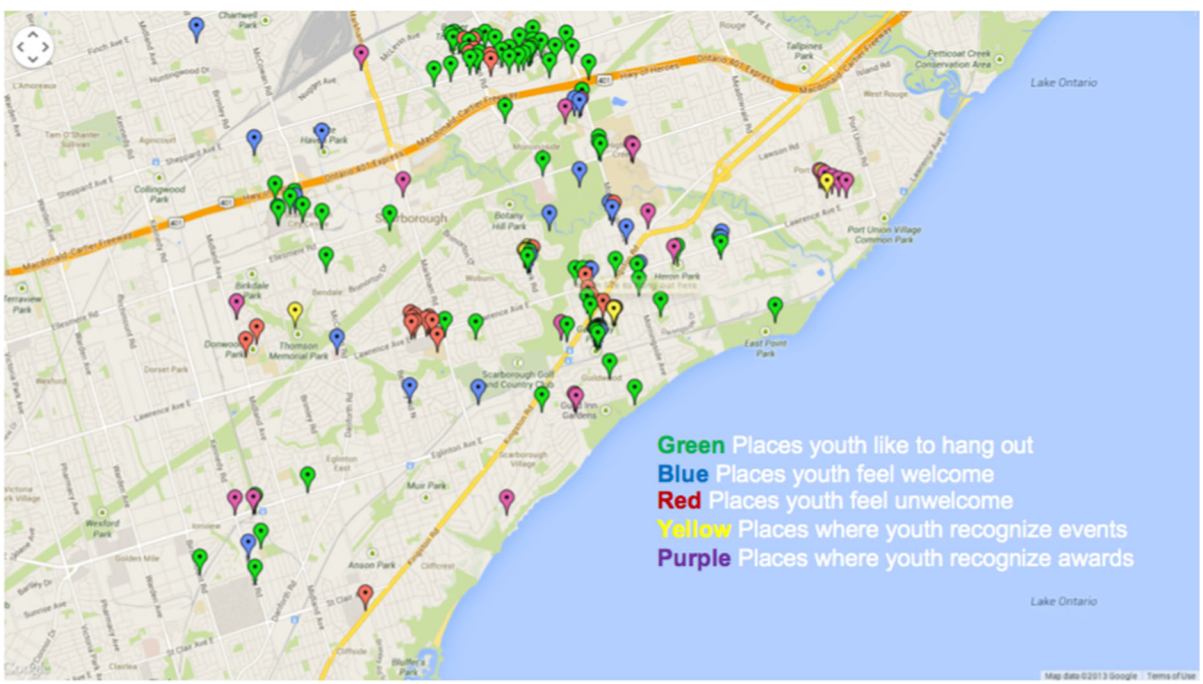

Fig. 2 Geo-visualization produced by youth researchers to identify different types of "hang out spaces" (excluding private residences) and social and emotional attributes associated with different places in the community

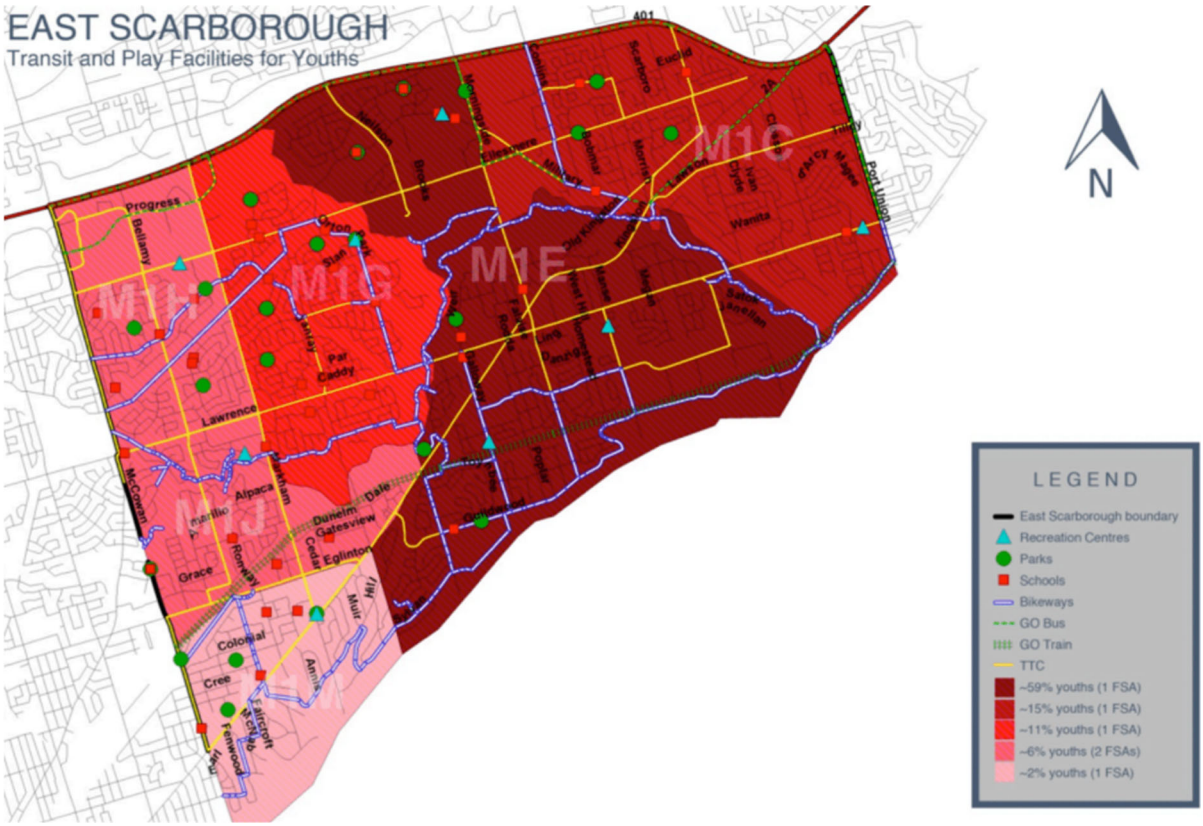

Fig. 3 Asset map exploring location of social infrastructure and transit access in relation to where youth participants lived (data aggregated at the level of Forward Sortation Area (FSA), the geographical unit based on the first three characters in a Canadian postal code). This map was co-produced by high school youth in collaboration with university student using basic GIS techniques

geography, co-authoring across institutional boundaries is a commitment to the continued co-creation of knowledge. As public scholars, our goal is to broaden research dissemination practices (Cahill & Torre, 2007). We recognize that we publish our story in an academic journal, prioritizing the incentive structure of the academy. Yet we have also shared our experience, alongside youth community members, in a variety of other formats, including public meetings, community gatherings and websites.

While we had a plethora of tacit evidence about the challenges and opportunities of our work, we began a more systematic analysis of our practice through critical reflection, a dialogic technique used in professional learning settings (Fook, 2011; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Gardner, 2003) that requires practitioners to examine assumptions implicit actions. We believe critical reflection is suitable for evaluating community geography projects in team with community partners. Critical reflection involves systematically examining the foundations of practice, including how they are influenced by social location, and can help to (1) identify blind spots in one's community practice, (2) understand social location and social influences on one's behaviour, and (3) facilitate organizational and professional learning (Fook & Kellehear, 2010).

Following Fook (2011), we proceeded in two steps: First, recalling "critical incidents," we shared our "participant stories" with one another, intentionally recalling stories that captured our perceptions of the main opportunities and challenges of youth-led community geography and that we considered significant for our own learning. Questions we asked focused on our ideals around community geography and our beliefs about university-community partnerships and the experiences of youth participants and adult allies. We captured these stories as extensive notes and used

them as "raw material" for our reflection. We discussed our individual assumptions and identified discrepancies in our respective perceptions. In the second stage, in a series of subsequent meetings, we applied this new awareness to engage in a reflection on how the new insights might allow us to devise new ways to practice. We used colour-coded post-it notes in our analysis, differentiating critical incidents, underlying beliefs, key learnings, and implications for future practice. As part this process, we reviewed the minutes of the LIFT meetings for the 2 years of the duration of the project to help us better understand the context and how the group discussed and addressed particular issues. These minutes provided an additional layer of data to analyze our personal experiences within the broader context of the development of the organization. Through our reflection, we identified a series of assumptions, opportunities and challenges of our work that can help inform the development of a theory of practice for a youth-focused, youth-led community geography. Three broad themes emerged in our analysis which we will discuss in the following paragraphs.

Discussion

Benefits and challenges of creating and sustaining youth-adult (research) partnerships

Throughout our reflections, critical incidents related to power and knowledge in youth-adult relationship appeared. A core belief or our project has been the assumption that youth have valuable knowledge about their communities, that their insights can make important contributions community-based research and that youth have the ability to develop strong critical analyses of their lives and how it is shaped by structures of power and inequality. Throughout the project, we wrestled with what it means to genuinely work "in team" with community members as a commitment of community geography. For adult researchers, establishing a genuine team with youth is neither easy nor self-evident but a task of time and genuine commitment, and not always reconcilable with semester timeframes or project funding cycles. Youth shedding light on local issues, sharing community perspectives and articulating community issues relevant to them, all of which we consider privileged information, is the result of trust that is anchored in relationships nurtured over time. It is therefore crucial that youth-led community geography is grounded in partnerships where both youth and adults commit to a process of equitably working together and continuously developing and reaffirming relationships of reciprocity.

In effort to create an inclusive research collective and democratic space for knowledge production across age differences—with preconceived age-related assumptions about skills and research proficiency—LIFT adopted a *youth-led adult partnership model* (Ramey et al., 2017; Zeldin, 2013) for its work, characterized by youth and adults taking the time to create and iteratively recreate a shared vision. The youth-adult partnership was designed to facilitate deep participation, i.e. research *with* not *on* youth participants. Essential to this process was to start with the questions that were important to youth and the YFC application framework became a critical opportunity for youth to reflect on their lived experience in the community. Furthermore, age, educational level, and research proficiency are important mediators of power dynamics in youth-adult research collectives (Torre et al., 2001) which required the ongoing discussion of expectations, limitations, and capacity to support the collective work. Our commitment of prioritizing "people and process over product" required a continuing fostering of inclusive and equitable relationships while simultaneously working towards impactful research outcomes. This partnership work was grounded in Freirian understandings of education as a "practice of freedom" and collective processes that facilitated ongoing dialogue and critical reflection.

Unlike other initiatives where youth are simply "informed" or "consulted," this model begins with local youth. LIFT has done so by building on the existing momentum of grassroots youth leaders advancing neighbourhood-level priorities as opposed to inserting external aspirations and then seeking buy-in retroactively. LIFT created a shared identity among youth, helped shift power, and legitimated their contributions, and gave youth more agency and autonomy. As a result, youth have been the driving force for the actions and directions of the work.

While receiving the YFC designation was an important milestone for LIFT, the goal of the collective was more ambitious: To develop sustainable opportunities for youth-led community geography as a

tool for advancing youth priorities in underserved communities. Community geography amplifies the desires of young people by translating their knowledge into data recognized as legitimate in order to inform systemic change. The strategy of the group focused both on increasing youth influence in local decision-making spaces and building on the momentum and work of active groups and organizations in the community. Activities were as closely as possible connected to and reflective of the realities of young people in East Scarborough. This emergent nature meant that group priorities shifted with the momentum of community, reflecting the realities of youth in East Scarborough. This required organizational partners and adult allies to move at the speed of youth participants. Youth-led community geography is an inherently complex, imperfect and messy, yet ultimately rewarding process.

Our critical reflection revealed that ongoing conversations about the power dynamics within the partnership were conducive to trust and relationship-building. The credibility of the university-based faculty member and students in the community conducting research and recruiting participants benefited significantly because of LIFT's involvement. In the case of LIFT, adult allies invested their time over several years (for instance, regularly attending meetings as participants and partners), established group values and guiding documents to support equitable group decision making, acknowledged and reaffirmed that learning was mutual, and simply, and more important, shared meals together. Community geographers must understand the nature of youth problems, understand the broader policy context in which the research encounter is unfolding, and continuously manage expectations of youth participants of the potential impact of their participation.

Organizational challenges and political constraints of community-based youth research

Several critical incidents in our reflection revolved around questions of institutional capacity and support. Grassroots youth collaboratives vary in organizational capacity, resources, and governance structures. LIFT had limited organizational capacity in its early stages, despite receiving funding through KGO-ACT. The group remained small with no formal status, avoiding the administrative burden and liabilities of non-profit advocacy. Its governance structure did not have clearly defined roles, which may otherwise reflect common Board practices. Instead, it built on the interests of those involved to assume leadership in emergent ways. This approach to youth-led community-based research certainly came with its challenges. All of the youth leading the group were volunteers, doing this work on top of regular school work, jobs, and family obligations. Recruiting youth from the community (supported through the Boys and Girls Club and Native Child and Family Services) and making their participation sustainable has been challenging and, at times, university students outnumbered community youth. Monthly steering group meetings were scheduled in the evenings to accommodate schedules, yet often missed due to work and family commitments. At times, crucial decisions sat idle. The age of youth leaders meant that they were at high transition points in their lives: High-school students moving on to post-secondary studies or full-time work and family responsibilities affected participation levels. It is important to create an open and flexible participation structure that allows for multiple opportunities for participation. Community geography projects can benefit from creating multiple opportunities for youth participation, ranging from light participation (for example, the one-off or sporadic participation in research events) to medium participation (for example, the participation in specific working group or design meetings) to heavy participation (i.e., the participation as a core member of the research collective involved in research design, strategy, and facilitation of processes). Each fall during the 3 years of the duration of the project, LIFT engaged youth coming in at the start of the school year and gauged their commitment levels for the upcoming 8–10 months.

One cannot ignore the importance of funding for this kind of research. As a grassroots group without charitable status receiving grants was challenging. With limited funding, it is important to continuously ask, "Who is being paid and who is volunteering to participate in the partnership?" Important questions about the uneven distribution of labour in a non-profit context must be openly discussed. Youth are often expected to participate without compensation in exchange for "valuable experiences" or certificates (For a discussion of the pitfalls of adultism in non-profit work, see Krey, 2017). When working with

grassroots community groups, it is unlikely they have access to operational funding making the resources such as office space, access to computers, stationary, and meeting space inaccessible. In the case of LIFT, the group was supported through in-kind contributions from community organizations and the university including meeting spaces, conference call lines, equipment such as laptops, projectors and flipcharts to support the group's activities.

The challenges have raised fundamental questions about the importance of continuously negotiating the legitimacy of these types of youth initiatives. There is always a real risk, despite good intentions, that youth initiatives become tokenistic, engaging and requiring youth to "participate," without compensation or adults being held accountable to the longer-terms impacts of the work. Furthermore, as community geographers committed to youth empowerment, we need to be mindful of the ebbs and flows of funding and policy attention to youth issues. LIFT emerged at a critical juncture when youth issues were a city-wide priority. Securing organizational sustainability and support is a key ethical consideration for this kind of work. We also need to be mindful of how youth participation is central in policy discourse and calls for grant proposals, and how that participation is conceptually and political linked to actual empowerment and opportunities for policy change. Our reflections have raised questions for us about the structural limits and constraints of youth agency in action research that must be central to our conversation within youth research collectives and beyond. Otherwise, this work runs the risk of being dependent on the intermittent benevolence and attention of adults, requiring youth to participate on demand without addressing the structural limits of what that participation might actually mean for improving access to resources and opportunities for youth in the city.

Dynamics of university-community partnerships involving youth

Several critical incidents revolved around the often-complicated dynamics of community-university partnerships and the involvement of university students in community-based research. More specifically, we discussed incidents that revolved around the cultural distance between university and community and the potentially extractive nature the university's involvement in community knowledge creation. We tried to reflect on the motivations, interests and power of all actors involved. The faculty member (and co-author of this paper) approached the student involvement through a critical service-learning lens, trying to overcome traditional (charitable) ways of student community engagement and developing a pedagogy dedicated to social justice and change (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Mitchell (2008, p. 51) highlights the relevance of this type of service-learning: "Without the exercise of care and consciousness, drawing attention to root causes of social problems, and involving students in actions and initiatives addressing root causes, service-learning may have no impact beyond students' good feelings."

Yet while we framed our approach as committed to social justice, we were aware of its potential limits and, admittedly, the limits of youth research in community geography. Butin (2003) reminds us that, "there is little empirical evidence that service learning provides substantive, meaningful, and long-term solutions for the communities it is supposedly helping." As we wrestled with these potential contradictions, we also became aware of the context in which post-secondary institutions and governments have begun to scale up community engagement. Raddon and Harrison (2015) provocatively ask whether "service learning is the kind face of the neoliberal university," pointing to top-down introduction of community engagement to improve the public image of the post-secondary sector and to compete for prospective students and donors. Importantly, institutions increasing their community engagement efforts may contribute to a stress on community and reinforce the "tyranny of participation" (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

While receiving the YFC designation was a significant milestone and set the foundation for further youth leadership development opportunities, we came to realize that the service-learning component of the project was just one small piece in a larger puzzle. This insight resonates with Butin's (2006, as cited in Raddon & Harrison, 2015, p. 146) recommendation that "rather than continuing to think about service-learning as a politics to transform higher education and society, we might more fruitfully reverse the terminology and begin to think through service-learning about the politics of transforming higher education and society". The community geography course, rather than being a solution to youth-related problems,

has become a productive vehicle for us the LIFT collective to think through some of the challenges of youth engagement and empowerment in East Scarborough in the current political climate, in particular the ebbs and flows in policy attention to youth issues, the periodic (and often uncompensated) engagement of youth in (official) community-led projects, and the broader disconnect between neighbourhood-based planning initiatives and broader issues of structural inequality across the city.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to contribute to the development of a theory of practice for a youth-led and youth-focused community geography. We conclude this paper with a series of practical commitments that emerged in our critical reflection. While we articulate these commitments specifically for projects with young people, we believe that—based on their focus on negotiating both institutional and interpersonal relationships of power and difference—they have the potential to contribute to a more reflective practice of community geography more generally. More specifically, we hope to inform both the practice of community geography as a teaching endeavour, including the negotiation of power and knowledge in and beyond the classroom (for an important recent intervention on the *pedagogy* of community geography, see Rees et al., 2020), and through their focus on *participation-as-process*, provide an additional critical nuance to the important methods- and practice-oriented discussions of "doing community geography" (Fischer et al., this issue).

The commitments are: (1) The role of the university researcher is to advance the priorities of the community and its youth residents; (2) The relationship between university researchers and youth is rooted in reciprocity, where both parties learn from each other; (3) Academic institutions and university-based researchers need to strengthen relationship building and leverage existing resources to support youth priorities. (4) People and process over product. Trust building, knowledge sharing and the co-design of research processes should always be foregrounded over a narrow focus on research product and output. (5) Youth 'non-participation' or 'refusal' offer important insights about underlying power dynamics and unacknowledged structural limits of youth agency in non-profit work. (6) *Pizza is cute, but it's not cash* (Krey, 2017). The uneven distribution of labour and compensation in research with youth must be acknowledged and addressed.

Developing a theory of practice for youth-led and youth-focused community geography grounded in these commitments is important for several reasons: First, it allows us to interrogate age-related expectations and intergenerational practices and how they play out in community geography. Second, it allows us to reflect on how broader political conditions and contemporary policy prescriptions call for greater youth engagement, yet often rely on the (unpaid) labour of youth to identify neighbourhood issues and solutions. Third, young people and the issues that affect particularly those living in low-income communities (decades of disinvestment, lack of opportunities, over-policing and racial profiling, to name just a few) point to broader societal issues related to the contemporary crisis of social reproduction and should be at the heart of community geography concerned with social justice and equity.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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