

Research in Brief

Learning and Growing Together to Measure Youth Impact

Spring 2025

A Partnership for Deeper Understanding

At the YMCA, we are deeply committed to understanding and enhancing the impact of our programs on the young people we serve. To truly understand and measure these outcomes effectively, especially within the diverse contexts of the communities the YMCA serves, we knew we needed to deepen our expertise.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the YMCA of Hamilton|Burlington|Brantford had the privilege of partnering with Dr. Danielle Law and the Child & Adolescent Research and Education (CARE) Lab at Wilfrid Laurier University's Brantford campus on an important research project. This collaboration focused not just on what to measure but, critically, on how to measure social-emotional outcomes in a meaningful and practical way within our unique YMCA program environments.

Our Goal: Building Capacity to Measure What Matters

The primary aim of this research was to explore the relationship between Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) skills and participation in key YMCA programs: Aquatics, Beyond the Bell, and Camp Wanakita. More broadly, this project was a vital learning experience, designed to build our YMCA's capacity to effectively gather outcome data from youth in different program settings. We sought to develop tools and approaches tailored to our unique environments.

What We Did: Listened to Youth

Dr. Law and her team used an adapted version of the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) survey, along with interviews. This involved engaging with children and youth at the beginning and end of their program sessions to understand changes in areas such as:

- Growth Mindset
- Emotion Regulation
- Social Awareness
- Feelings of Belonging
- Anxiety

What We Learned: A Foundation for the Future

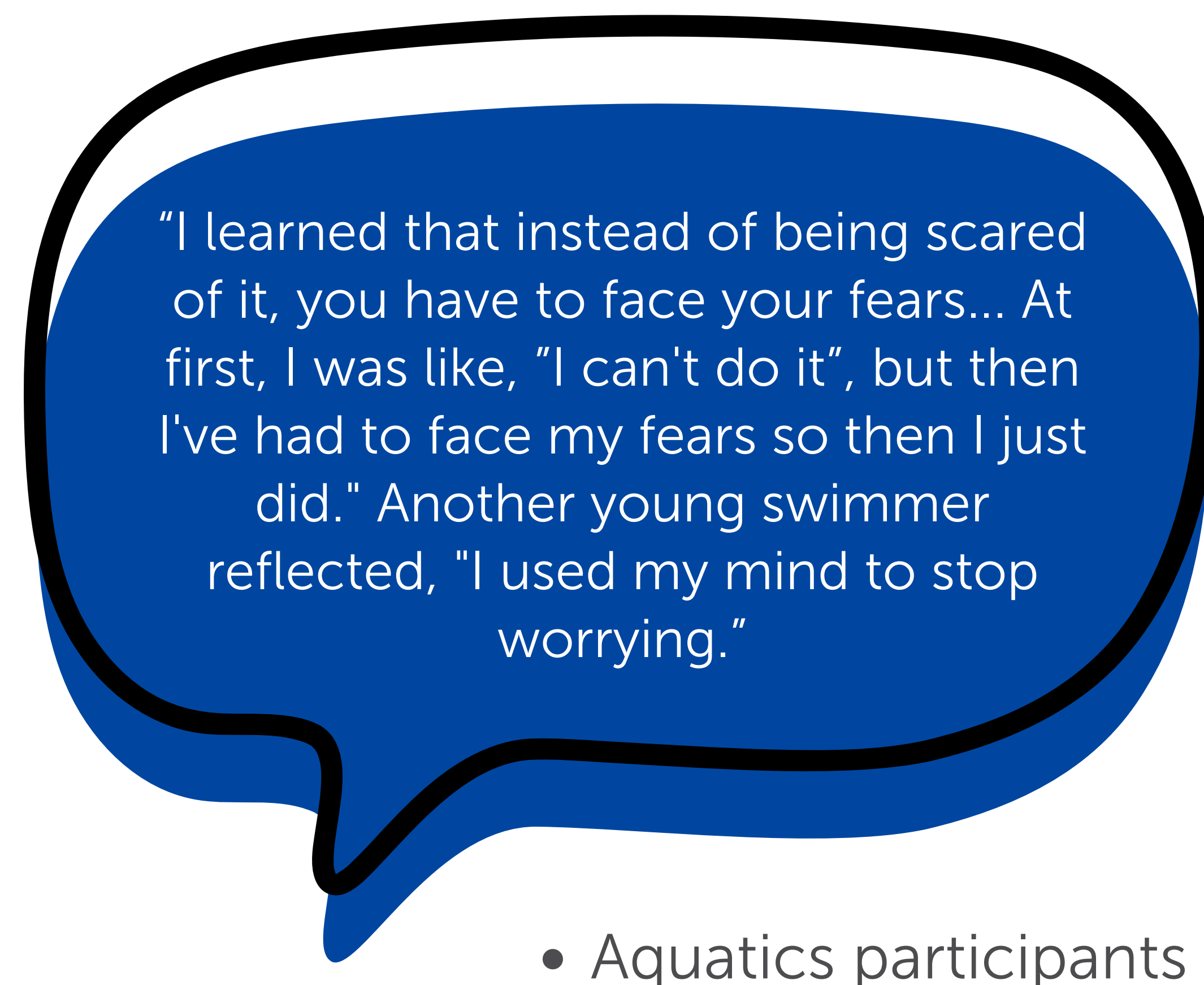
This research project has been instrumental in advancing our understanding of outcome measurement. While the quantitative data provided some insights, showing small improvements in most SEL domains even with a limited sample size, the most significant impact of this project lies in the valuable learning and capacity building it provided.

We gained crucial new knowledge on how to collect outcome data from youth effectively across our diverse programs. The process highlighted both challenges, such as achieving adequate sample sizes and the logistics of survey administration, and opportunities for refinement.

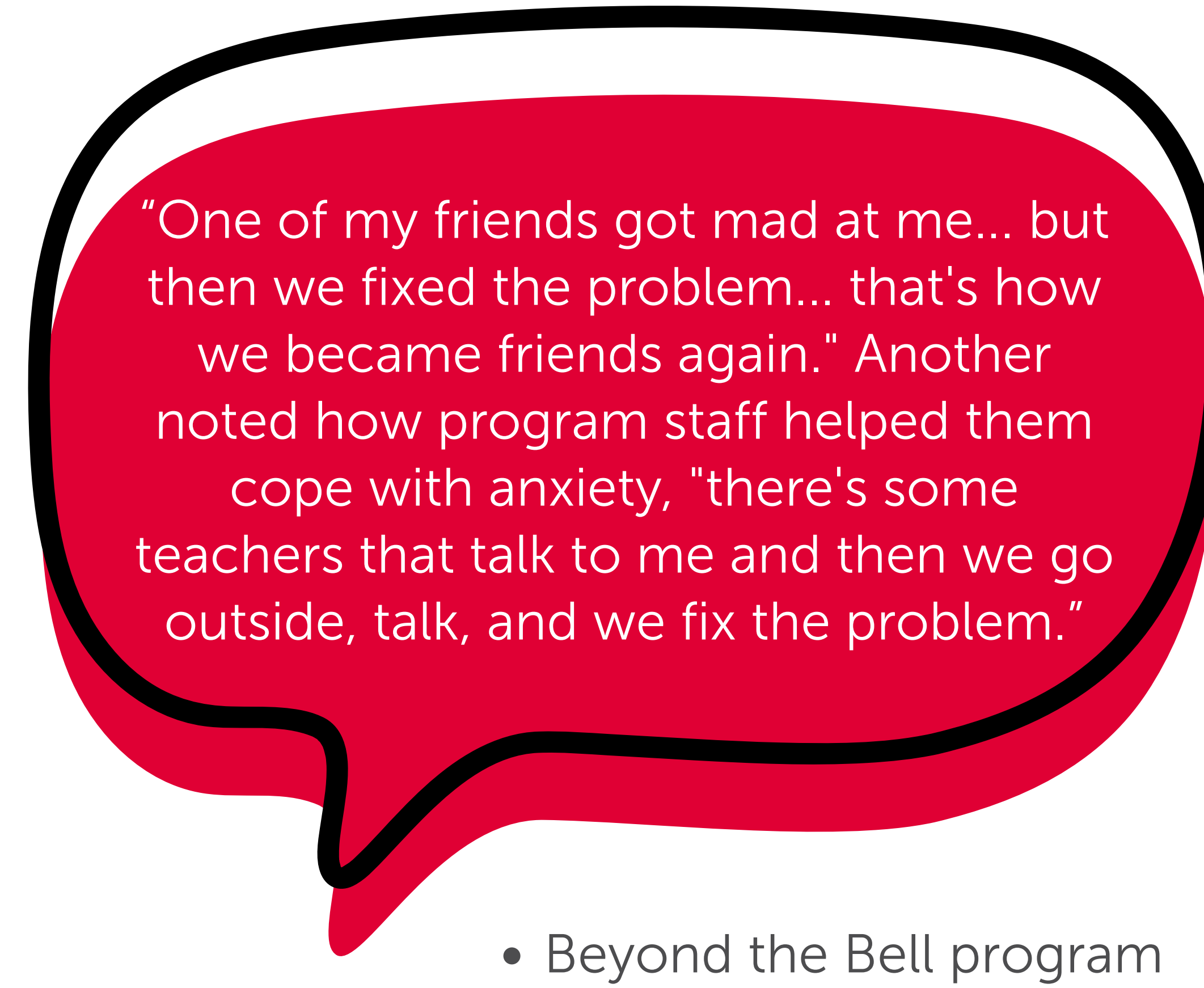


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The qualitative feedback from participants truly brought the potential impact to life. For example:



• Aquatics participants



• Beyond the Bell program participants



• YMCA Wanakita participants

These stories, while not statistically representative of all participants, underscore the positive personal experiences within our programs and the areas where we can continue to focus our efforts.

Looking Ahead: Committed to Continuous Improvement

The insights from this project are already shaping how we approach our work and demonstrate the YMCA's unwavering commitment to improvement. We are encouraged by what we've learned and are exploring future directions for our measurement efforts, such as:

- Developing shorter, more focused surveys.
- Streamlining data collection by inviting survey completion as part of program participation and using survey tools appropriate for each program environment.

This research has laid a strong foundation. It has enhanced our ability to understand and articulate the impact of YMCA programs and will help us to better serve young people and the broader community in the years to come. We are optimistic about the future and dedicated to applying these learnings to foster positive youth development.

With Thanks...

We extend our sincere gratitude to the Ontario Trillium Foundation for their generous funding, and to Dr. Danielle Law and her research team from Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford Campus, for their invaluable partnership and expertise. We also thank the dedicated YMCA staff, and the children, youth, and families who participated in this important initiative.

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