

# Learning from Youth Experts

## **Active Listening to Guide Youth Development**

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**Pathways**  
to Education

## **Preface**

Pathways to Education is a national charitable organization breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Its award-winning program, which provides students with a holistic combination of financial, social, and one-on-one supports, is proven to promote positive youth development by meeting the needs of students living in low-income communities during the critical years of high school.

In close partnership with local organizations, schools, and volunteers, Pathways Program staff identify priority barriers youth face and help them map out a tailored plan to achieve their goals. With this support, many Pathways alumni pursue post-secondary education or training or gain meaningful apprenticeships, internships, and employment opportunities.

**This series aims to highlight the expertise among Pathways staff who work directly with youth at program locations across the country.**

Through these conversations, we hope to develop recommendations that can be shared with youth workers, policymakers, youth organizations, youth leaders, and educators.

All names and personal identifiers have been changed to protect the anonymity of the young people portrayed in this article.

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# Learning from Youth Experts: Active Listening to Guide Youth Development

## Introduction

*In the first of our series, a Pathways youth worker with multiple years of experience supporting young people living in contexts of disadvantage shares actionable insights that those in the youth work or youth development field can implement. Looking back on her professional journey, she reflects on the personal and structural implicit biases in youth work where expected outcomes and traditional “success” may be at odds with day-to-day realities.*

My role at Pathways focuses on supporting high school seniors' post-graduation plans. A successful transition out of high school is typically characterized by graduation after four or five years and enrolling in a post-secondary program. There are many benefits to enrolling in post-secondary education directly from high school and research has long cited the benefits of post-secondary education on employment and social outcomes. At my Pathways Program location, we report on post-secondary transition rates, provide coaching and specific activities to help youth apply for post-secondary education, partner with post-secondary institutions, and offer scholarships to encourage enrolment. As a coach, my goal is to work closely with the young people in the program, understand their interests and needs, and support their decision-making so that they are set up for success when they graduate from high school. By the time they get to Grade 12, that work typically revolves around helping them decide on a post-secondary program and institution.

## Supporting Gina

Early in my career, I supported a quiet Grade 12 student named Gina, who was very open about being unsure of what she wanted to do after high school. Spurred by an art class in Grade 11, Gina discovered a passion for graphic design and spent a lot of time refining and experimenting with her skills. Although it was clear this was her interest, Gina's parents worried that graphic design would not provide their daughter with a sustainable career in the future and felt strongly that she should pursue something in the field of technology. Technology was everywhere, the professional field was flourishing, and it was common knowledge that a degree in technology could provide an avenue to a well-paying career. Gina was hesitant. Yes, she did her designs on a computer, but that was not what made her passionate about graphic design.

She spoke to me about taking a year off, working, and thinking over her options. Her parents knew she was hesitant about choosing her next steps after high school and would often call to convince me and their daughter that she should apply for college. As her coach, I found it hard to balance what both parties wanted.

Gina did well in school, and I had no doubt she would be accepted into college should she apply. I knew that students who take a gap year are less likely to enroll in post-secondary education than those who transition straight from high school. I was worried that Gina would lose momentum once she graduated and started employment for the first time. She could find it difficult to leave that source of income in order to continue her education and wouldn't have the support of Pathways to help with the transition. She would be the first in her family to attend post-secondary education, and I worried about how she would navigate school and loan applications on her own.

In the end, Gina accommodated her parents' wishes, and I supported her as we filled out applications for technology programs at various colleges. To nobody's surprise, Gina was accepted into a program at a reputable college, and with the completion of loan and scholarship applications, she was ready to go. It seemed like a success. Gina had graduated high school and was enrolled in a post-secondary program that would lead to a career in an in-demand field.

After only her first semester, Gina left college because she did not enjoy her courses. I found out later that year that she took some time to work and think over her options before applying, being accepted, and now

flourishing at a school for graphic design. This made me think about the expectations we have of our students and the push for her to go into a field that her parents and I had thought was the best decision. We had wanted her to have a concrete plan for the following September. Still, Gina needed more time to decide what direction to take before applying for post-secondary education.

## Lessons Learned

I have often thought of Gina and where I, as her coach, stopped being her advocate and became her parents' advocate and the advocate of the implicit bias that believes post-secondary education directly from high school is the be-all and end-all. While Gina is successful now, some lessons I learned from this experience are:

- 1. Listen to the student.** As youth workers and parents, we may think because we are older and have more experience, we know the young person in our lives better than they know themselves. But youth generally have a good knowledge of what they want out of life. They may not have the right tools yet or be confident enough to tell you.
- 2. Tell them to listen to their gut and feelings, and put other people's expectations to the side.** Tell them that in the end, they have to be happy with the decisions they have made. Doing this will encourage the development of self-reflection skills, a critical component in developing agency. This will help the student consider their options thoroughly, understand their reasoning, and become more confident moving forward with their decisions.
- 3. Give students the freedom to take that year break if they want to explore the world, work full-time, volunteer, go back to high school, take a co-op, travel, or whatever else they decide to do.** If they don't feel ready to go to post-secondary, I tell them to wait until the time feels right. As a coach, I can use this time to prepare them by encouraging forethought about their plans and encouraging goal setting. This will guide their decision-making and develop important competencies that will support their success after high school.
- 4. I try to help the student advocate for themselves and find their voice.** I help them have important conversations with their parents, which are usually the hardest ones. If a student is very nervous about this, I may tell them we could all have a conversation together if that makes it easier for

them. While at times it would be easier for me to advocate for them, I know that supporting them in doing it for themselves will strengthen skills that will help them in the future.

## Supporting Grace

Even with the support of the program and myself, Grace struggled to complete high school. By Grade 12, she was a single mother who had left school despite many attempts and suggestions to get her into adult education or other alternative schooling, which was frustrating for me. I wanted her to graduate to help her gain meaningful employment, which she would need to support her young family. She was smart, she was thoughtful, she was kind. High school graduation seemed like the last piece of the puzzle that we could not get in place despite my constant support.

It felt like a failure. She would tell me that she wanted to get her high school diploma, but other priorities took center stage instead of school. I did not believe that she truly saw the value in achieving a diploma regardless of how much I stressed the importance of it.

Years later, Grace tracked me down. She and her two children walked through my office door to tell me that she had just completed her last high school credit and was so happy to share that she was now a high school graduate. She told me that she always knew she would do it, but it just took her more time than others. This wasn't the conventional way of doing things, but it was her way, and it worked.

This showed me that, as coaches, we must be patient and realize that not everyone is on the same path. It also made me realize that I had made a much bigger impact on her goals than I thought. I had thought about Grace a lot over the years but never once considered that she had thought about me or wanted to “prove” to herself or me that she could get her diploma. I had even doubted her belief in education and wondered how much of it was her telling me what she knew I wanted to hear. When Grace came to see me, she told me that I was the only person who ever really believed in her and that my high expectations of her motivated her to finish Grade 12. She wanted me to be proud of her and thanked me for my support over the years and for never giving up on her. I realized then that students take different paths that may not align with the typical story of success, be it a four-year graduation or post-secondary enrolment. I realized then that success takes on many different meanings.

## Final Thoughts

There is no “one size fits all” in youth work. We often feel the pressures of external factors when supporting a young person. While one option may not look good on paper, make their parents happy, or be featured in your program’s highlight reel, grounding the work in the young person and ensuring that they are leading the decision usually means it is the correct one.


Gina knew what she wanted to do, but her aspirations went against external expectations. She ended up going in an initially unsuccessful direction based on what others wanted her to decide. Grace followed her own unconventional path. In the end, Grace was able to develop skills and feel supported through a culture of high expectations that enabled her long-term success. Success often comes from listening to the student, understanding their feelings and goals, and using that knowledge to scaffold their development and support the growth of soft skills that will help the young person navigate obstacles and succeed regardless of what they choose to do.

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