



Saskatoon
Open Door
Society



Fondation
Rideau Hall
Foundation

THE CREW OF YOUNG THINKERS

Evaluation Report

October 2025 - September 2026

Project Description

The Crew of Young Thinkers was a youth program designed and delivered by the Saskatoon Open Door Society, with funding from the Rideau Hall Foundation and support from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Saskatchewan, which provided classroom space for the program. The overall project ran from October 2025 to September 2026, including planning, program delivery, and reporting. The youth sessions took place from December 2025 to June 2026 and were offered free of charge to youth ages 12 to 17. The program was primarily designed for newcomer youth, but was open to youth from all backgrounds.

Participants were recruited through an open call, SODS' existing youth program networks, posters distributed in the community and shared with local schools, and social media. A total of 42 youth participated in at least one session. They were divided into two cohorts, with 20 youth in the morning group and 22 in the afternoon group. Each cohort met in person on Saturdays for a two-hour session. Over 24 weeks, 24 sessions were delivered to each cohort, for a total of 48 cohort sessions.

Inspired by the Philosophy for Children approach, the program aimed to help youth develop critical, caring, creative, and collaborative thinking skills. It also encouraged participants to listen carefully to others, share their own ideas, and engage in respectful disagreement. Sessions usually included an ice-breaking activity, a stimulus to introduce the topic, and small-group and larger-group discussions. Topics included happiness, love, death, freedom, beauty, power and politics, and race and racism.

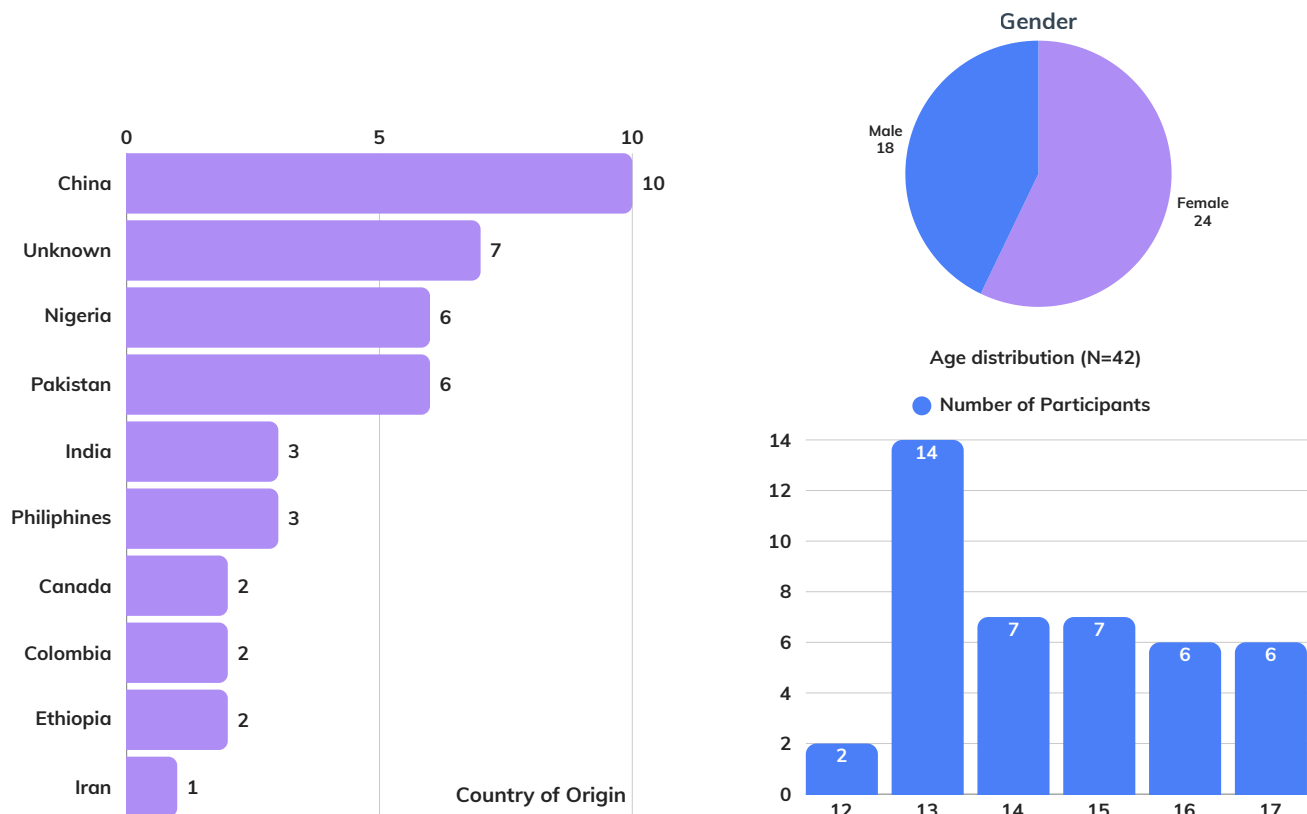
Methodology

The evaluation used demographic data, pre- and post-program surveys, facilitator observations, and two youth focus groups to understand participants' experiences and assess changes and outcomes over the course of the program. The survey tools and focus group questions were developed by the Students Commission of Canada, which also facilitated the focus groups.

The focus groups were held on the final day of programming. Regular program facilitators left the room so participants could speak openly and provide honest feedback. The discussions were recorded and transcribed, and similar responses were grouped together to identify the main themes presented in this report. Quotes were lightly edited for readability while keeping participants' original meaning.

Demographics

The demographic data provides an overview of the 42 youth who participated in the Crew of Young Thinkers program from December 2025 to June 2026, including their age, gender, and country of origin. Participants ranged from 12 to 17 years old, with 24 female and 18 male participants representing a diverse range of countries and cultural backgrounds.



Survey Results

At the beginning and end of the program, participants completed surveys through the Students Commission of Canada's Sharing the Stories platform. Three surveys were administered at both points: Academic Success, Youth and Community (Lifelong Learning), and Career Interest. These surveys are used across Catapult-funded programs to provide a broader picture of participants' experiences and outcomes.

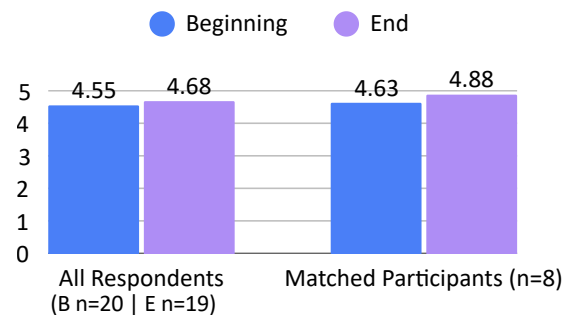
Because attendance varied throughout the program, not all participants were present for both survey periods. There was also a technical challenge during the end survey: some participants had forgotten their account passwords and were unable to recover them, so they created new User IDs to complete the survey. As a result, the full beginning and end survey groups could not be matched perfectly.

The three questions highlighted below were selected from the larger set of survey questions because they are most closely connected to the aims of The Crew of Young Thinkers. The graphs show results for both the full group of respondents and the eight participants whose beginning and end responses could be matched.

I will go to college or university.

Average score on a 5-point scale

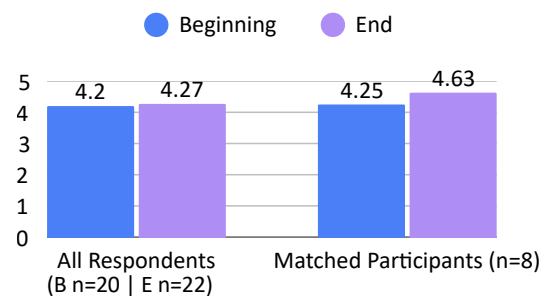
(1 = very low; 5 = very high).



I expect to go on learning for a long time.

Average score on a 5-point scale

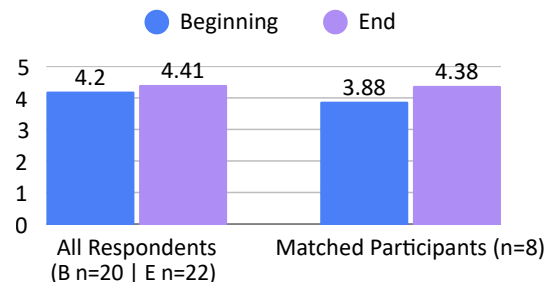
(1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).



I like learning new things when I can see how they make sense for my life.

Average score on a 5-point scale

(1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).



Takeaway: Results improved across all three questions for both the full group of respondents and the matched participants. The fact that the matched group showed the same pattern as the overall respondent group gives us greater confidence that the findings reflect a meaningful trend. This trend is consistent with the goals of this program, particularly its focus on curiosity, lifelong learning, and helping youth see learning as relevant to their lives and future.

Youth Focus Groups & Facilitator Observations

The themes presented in this section were identified through qualitative data gathered from youth focus groups held on the final day of programming. Led by a trained external facilitator, participants reflected on their experiences in the program and shared what they valued, learned, and found meaningful. Their responses were grouped into recurring themes, which are presented below. Participant quotes from the focus groups are shown in italics throughout this section.

Open and inquiry-based learning environment

As facilitators, we purposefully selected topics that did not have clear right and wrong answers for our participants to eventually arrive at. Perhaps different from how many classrooms function, we did not see our role as being there to disseminate information to be consumed by the learner. We sought to stimulate curiosity by asking questions intended to foster a greater awareness of our cognitive frameworks and ways of seeing the world, and to broach topics that may not be typically explored in classroom settings.

When we talked about Death, I was very confused about why they raised this topic because it's not a normal topic that people usually talk about. So I was questioning myself, why are we talking about this? But then I realized it was something good to learn about.

This program is a lot more focused on expanding what you already know. A lot of other programs I've been to are about learning new things.

The questions are very open and the people organizing it are really nice.

I think leaving the question open is kind of annoying because you think about it all day. But I guess that's kind of the point.

I felt like it was very different from school. Because when you don't answer a question correctly they don't give you marks, but not here. Here they just let you think and say what you think.

Critical Thinking

From the onset, participants were encouraged to not only share their beliefs, but also consider what values shaped these perspectives. We explored how these can be influenced by environmental factors such as family, friends, community, and culture. Self-awareness is critical in understanding why we believe what we do. The purpose being not to change beliefs, but to better understand the unseen forces that help determine how we see the world and ultimately how we navigate through it.

You have to talk a lot in this program, and do thinking.

I like the deeper questions that no one really asks.

Very thought-provoking questions.

You need to think a lot. You learn stuff that you never really thought of before. You kind of know it, but you never really think deep into it. I just learned a lot.

Social connection and exposure to diverse perspectives

One of the more rewarding experiences we witnessed during our time leading the program was the development of friendships that took seed and blossomed as we all met throughout the winter, spring, and early summer. With most of our participants being new to Canada, we saw the opportunity to build connections to others during these regular sessions as an integral component of what we hoped to nurture. We also worked to encourage an attitude of understanding and respect for beliefs and perspectives that could be different from their own.

You can know new people.

I've learned to be more, to like, tolerate people more.

Extending learning beyond the program

Beyond the fruitful discussions and friendships forged during the sessions themselves, another benefit we hoped to see was the possibility of follow-up discussions with family members and friends following each session. Whether to share new insights with others or learn from other perspectives not yet considered, our goal was to have these class conversations serve as simply the starting point for ongoing thought and consideration. Additionally, we were pleased to learn that participants applied this learning in school settings, which reflects the real-world utility that we had sought.

For the stuff about honesty, for my ELA class assignment we had to do a TED talk on a topic and I did the morality of lies and I got a 4, which is pretty good.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the evaluation suggests that The Crew of Young Thinkers was successful in creating a space where youth could engage seriously with complex questions, express their own ideas, and consider perspectives different from their own. Critical thinking emerged as one of the strongest outcomes of the program. Participants described the sessions as thought-provoking and emphasized that they were encouraged to think more deeply about questions and ideas that they might not normally encounter in school or everyday life.

The program also appears to have contributed to participants' confidence and interest in continued learning. The survey results showed positive changes across the three selected items, including expectations about continuing to learn and seeing the relevance of learning to their own lives. The matched-participant results are particularly useful because they show changes among the same eight participants at the beginning and end of the program, although the small sample means these findings should be interpreted cautiously. The focus groups added further context, with participants describing the program as different from their usual classroom experiences and appreciating the opportunity to explore questions without being expected to arrive at a single correct answer.

Irregular attendance was one of the main challenges. Saturday programming, particularly during the winter months, made consistent participation difficult for some youth. This also affected the evaluation, as not all participants were present for both survey administration dates. In addition, some participants were unable to access their original survey accounts and created new User IDs, which limited the ability to match all beginning and end responses. Future delivery should consider ways to reduce these barriers and strengthen the process for tracking participants across evaluation points.

For future programming, one opportunity would be to organize the sessions around an overarching theme. While the current program successfully used a variety of philosophical topics to develop critical, caring, creative, and collaborative thinking skills, a shared theme could allow individual sessions to build more directly on one another and work toward a broader collective goal in addition to skill development.

The program also demonstrated the value of offering young people an educational experience that is different from more typical classroom or youth programming. Feedback from participants and parents indicated that being part of this kind of program was meaningful and appreciated. At the same time, maintaining a program of this nature over the long term remains a significant challenge. Its sustainability depends on access to reliable and ongoing funding that can support consistent staffing, space, programming, and evaluation. Securing sustained funding will therefore be important if the program is to continue and build on what was learned through this first cycle.

“My daughter enjoyed the thought-provoking activities in the Crew of Young Thinkers program, which sparked her curiosity about philosophical questions and encouraged her to think more critically about everyday topics.” — Parent of a participant