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# **Supporting Rural Youth Development and Learning through Rural Afterschool Programs: Staff Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

It has recently been argued that afterschool programs are important to youth development and should be considered part of the lifelong learning infrastructure. This has become increasingly important as the restructuring of education has consequently marginalized increasing numbers of youth from formal education. This issue is exacerbated in rural communities through increased school consolidation which has a negative impact upon some rural learners. The study reported on in this paper is a qualitative study that interviewed 19 staff of a rural afterschool program (Fusion Youth and Technology Centre) to determine how Fusion and Fusion staff support the development of their youth participants. The following themes were identified and discussed: relationship-building; skill development; a holistic approach to youth development; balancing structure and flexibility; and respect and ownership. The paper concludes by acknowledging the importance of afterschool programs in support of positive rural youth development which provides the foundation for developing productive adults.

**Keywords:** rural; youth; afterschool programs; skills development; nonparental adults

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## **1.0 Introduction**

This research project explores how staff in a rural afterschool program—Fusion Youth and Technology Centre (Fusion)—supported rural youth learning, development, and success. We begin, however, by examining the rural challenge, and the rural youth challenge.

The Government of Canada (2011) reports that many Canadian rural communities are facing numerous challenges, including imminent population declines, lack of job opportunities, and out-migration of youth. It is further argued that these challenges adversely affect the economic and social well-being of these communities, including the labor market performance and delivery of services. These challenges are exacerbated by the poor health reported by rural Canadians (DesMeules & Pong,

2006). In fact, according to DesMeules and Pong, rurality in the Canadian context should be considered a determinant of health<sup>1</sup>.

According to Franke (2010), youth should be of particular interest to rural policy-makers as they represent the future of rural communities and they provide a key opportunity for social investment. Ironically, while it is true that rural communities often lament the loss of their “best and brightest” youth, they invest limited available resources in helping those who will leave while disregarding those who will stay (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Carr and Kefalas further argue that in many cases those who choose to stay are often considered “losers” with little to offer to the community.

Considering the above, one would think that the investment in youth should be a strategic investment for all levels of governments, including municipalities. In the Canadian context, this does not appear to be the case according to the results of a recent study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2009). In this study, Canada ranked twenty-second out of thirty comparator countries in relation to child well-being for health and safety, suggesting that investment in youth has not been a priority. Furthermore, rural youth experience greater challenges to their development than urban youth as evidenced by health outcomes for youth. For example, Ostry (2012) reports that in Canada all-cause mortality rates for boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 19 years of age is approximately 160% greater for those living in rural areas than their urban counterparts. For rural adolescent males, deaths often arise as a result of “injuries and poisonings, motor vehicle accidents, and suicides” (Ostry, 2012, p. 51), accounting for a significant proportion of adolescent male deaths. Adolescent girls also experience similar higher levels of mortality than their urban counterparts.

Furthermore, given the above, it appears that the differences between rural and urban youth in terms of mortality rates are a function of rural youth engaging in risky behaviours. For example, Rhew, Hawkins, & Oesterle (2006) and Pruitt (2009) note that rural youth are at a greater risk in terms of using tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs than their urban counterparts. As Pruitt concludes, “rural teens abuse virtually all drugs at rates greater than their urban counterparts, whether it is the urban-associated cocaine or the more rural-associated methamphetamine and prescription pain killers” (p. 372). Hirsch (2006) states that rurality is associated with greater suicide rates for both adults and adolescents, and that in Canada, as community size decreases, suicide rates increase. Pruitt found that the time period where youth are most at risk is between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. as rural youth are just as likely to be unsupervised as their urban counterparts. Also, engaging in these risky behaviours has long-term consequences for youth in adulthood. As Rachele, Washington, Cuddihy, Barwais, & McPhail (2013, p. 163) note, “Habits and lifestyle choices established during adolescence can lead to disability and disease later in life. Therefore, adult mortality and morbidity could be reduced by improving health habits in adolescence.” Gatehouse (2009) reports that rural youth are more likely to engage in sex during adolescence than urban youth (60% versus 49%). While he did not report pregnancy rates, one can assume that greater sexual activity is likely to lead to more unintended pregnancies. In conclusion, Ostry (2012) states that “rural health

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<sup>1</sup> In this report rurality was defined using the Rural and Small Town (RST/MIZ) definition which refers to the population living outside the commuting zones of larger urban centres—specifically outside census metropolitan areas (CMAs) and census agglomerations (CAs).

disadvantage is largely a problem among children, youth, and young adults” (p. 55). This raises the question of how we mitigate these risks for rural youth.

We begin this paper by providing an overview of youth development, the role of non-parental adults in the life of youth and the role of afterschool programs. This is followed by a description of the case study—the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre (Fusion)—and a brief report on relevant and related research that has already been conducted at Fusion. This is followed by the methodology, findings, the discussion, and a conclusion.

## **2.0 Youth Development and the Role of Non-parental Adults and Afterschool Programs**

Often, education and schools have been viewed as a panacea for all that ails society and youth (Lauzon, 2013). Lauzon has also argued that increasingly afterschool programs (ASPs) are an important part of the lifelong learning infrastructure, fostering youth development, skill development, and wellbeing is complementary to the formal educational system and often reaches and supports the development of marginalized youth that the formal education system fails to support in meaningful ways. This is important as Lauzon noted, changes in the formal educational system has led to increasing numbers of youth being pushed to the margins of the educational system while Morch and du Bois-Reymond (2006) argue in the formal education system a small percentage of students get a disproportionate amount of adult time, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. Given continued school consolidation of rural schools which lead to longer bus rides, may make it challenging or even impossible for bussed rural students to participate in afterschool activities, denying them the opportunity for more contact and more meaningful relationships with adults. We know school consolidation and the consequence of bussing negatively impacts those students who reside in the academic margins, many who come from families with lower socioeconomic status (Ares, 2014).

The central task of adolescent youth is to develop a tentative adult identity (Erikson, 1980). Deutsch and Jones (2008) have noted that paradoxically this requires youth to develop their autonomy while retaining relatedness to others, particularly the adults in their lives. As Deutsch and Jones state, “youth strive to individuate from adults while retaining supportive ties (p. 670).” But not all youth have those relationships at home or within their families, and hence adult/youth relationships outside of the family can play a significant role in the life of youth. Grossman and Bulle (2006) argue that there is a growing body of literature that demonstrates that youth health and well-being can be fostered through connection with nonparental adults, leading to improved school performance, decreased violence and behavioural problems, and decreased experimentation with drugs and sex.

Grossman and Bulle (2006, p. 788) define the nonparental adult as one where “youth feel that they have a caring and supportive relationship with an unrelated adult.” There are numerous benefits to these nonparental adult/youth relationships including better school performance, improved socio-emotional health and wellbeing, reduced risky behaviours, and connections through adult networks improving and enhancing opportunities for youth (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Rhodes and Dubois, 2008). Rhodes and Dubois (2008) further argue that in addition to the above benefits, youth also have more productive and better relationships with others, including peers and their parents. Rhodes (2004) notes that greater benefits are often accrued by youth who come from backgrounds characterized by environmental risk. Rhodes and

Dubois (2008) suggest that the outcomes of these relationships are not immediate but are accrued over time, and the further the relationship develops and endures, the more significant the outcomes are. They also note that the outcomes were improved when youth not only experienced support, but some degree of structure in their relationship provided through programs. As Rhodes and Dubois wrote, “In general, close and enduring ties tend to be fostered when mentors adopt a flexible, youth-centered style in which the young person’s interests and preferences are emphasized, rather than when they focus on their own agendas or expectations of the relationship (p. 255).”

One of the advantages ASPs have in fostering youth development over the educational system is that staff have a greater flexibility to respond to the unique needs and interests of youth, something the educational system is not capable of doing (Rhodes, 2004). Rhodes also highlights that it is important for staff in these programs to be young, and hence be able to relate better and connect with youth. In describing the role that program staff can play, Rhodes wrote that:

...program staff can serve as alternative or secondary attachment figures, helping adolescents to realign their conceptions of themselves in relation to others. In other cases, program staff may act as a sounding board, providing a model for effective communication and helping youth to better understand, more clearly express, and more effectively control both positive and negative emotions (p. 151).

He further argues that this support helps youth understand social processes that allow them to relate to and connect with peers more effectively. Grossman and Bulle (2006) highlight conditions within ASPs that foster the development of positive adult/youth relationships. They are:

- Interact informally with youth
- Incorporate the youth’s desires and needs into deciding what to do
- Support youth in completing tasks
- Share common interests of background with the youth
- Treat youth respectfully.

Grossman and Bulle further argue that the adults in ASPs need to find a balance between task and process to create relationships from which youth will benefit.

Thus, having positive relationships with adults is critical to youth development. We need to acknowledge that not all youth have these relationships in their lives, leaving their needs unmet (Bynner, 2005). Many youths are left to navigate what can be a confusing and chaotic period of life—adolescence and its associated developmental task of identity development—on their own without supportive relationships with adults to guide and mentor them. Furthermore, the experiences and development of identity during adolescence are likely to set patterns in place for life. Failure to successfully navigate this stage of life means greater hardship in navigating subsequent stages of development during adulthood. Consequently, while there is an individual cost to the individual youth, there is an increasing social cost to society if youth lose their way during adolescence and it becomes a pattern across the

lifespan. For example, failure to be successful in learning during adolescence can lead to failure to learn throughout life, and this, as Lauzon (2013) notes, is not a luxury but a necessity in a world characterized by continuous change, necessitating that learning be an ongoing process. Given this, Lauzon (2013, p. 776) writes:

As we move the lifelong agenda forward and particularly as we reach out to those who may be left behind, it is imperative that we look at lifelong learning as a system that is inclusive of all learning opportunities, including ASPs. ASPs have the potential to offer opportunities to youth that support their growth and development in ways which ease the transition to adulthood and provide the foundation for developing a positive learning identity that will serve them well across the lifespan—particularly those youth who exist on the margins of the formal education system.

ASPs can prove to be complementary to the formal education system, letting youth from the margins develop skills and relationships with adults that serve their development in positive ways.

In the next section, we provide an overview of Fusion Youth and Technology Centre.

### **3.0 Fusion Youth and Technology Centre**

Fusion<sup>2</sup> is a unique not-for-profit youth centre in Ingersoll, population 12,146 in Oxford County in South-Western Ontario. Fusion was opened in 2006 as a result of the town's 2004 Community Strategic Plan. It is funded by the municipality and received approximately \$500,000 annually from the town at the time the research was conducted. In addition, Fusion has been able to leverage 98 cents for every dollar they receive from the municipality (Lauzon & Pries, 2014), meaning they have an annual budget of almost \$1,000,000 excluding donated materials and time. Within the centre they run a variety of technology programs, art programs, culinary programs and health/wellbeing/social programs<sup>3</sup> in addition to the drop-in centre. On any given day during the research period, Fusion would have between 90 and 110 youths visit the centre which is housed in an old school just on the edge of downtown Ingersoll.

Fusion staff members have a mixture of training. Some of the workers, mostly those who staff the drop-in areas or non-technical programs, have training in child and youth work. Those staff members that run the technical programs (i.e., the radio broadcasting, music, and sound production program) have technical training and are not trained as child and youth workers. However, all staff members, including those from the technical programs, are required to supervise the drop-in areas, providing them with an opportunity to interact with youth that are not in their programs and also to have opportunities to spend time with youth outside the context of their Fusion program. Youth participation in the actual programs is on a drop-in basis. Youth do not have to register or commit to any program, and they may attend when

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<sup>2</sup> Fusion management agreed that Fusion could be identified in any presentations or subsequent publications with regard to this research project.

<sup>3</sup> To see an overview of Fusion Programs see Lauzon (2013).

they wish. This gives them the opportunity to try out different programs, but perhaps more importantly, it gives them choices about how they will engage with Fusion and what it has to offer. For example, some youth only use it as a place to ‘hang out and chill’ while others may be engaged in numerous programs.

We now provide a brief overview of the results of previous research that has been conducted at Fusion.

#### 4.0 Fusion Research

This research study is one of nine independent studies that were completed on Fusion, focusing on the centre development and sustainability, youth development, outcomes, and costs averted (i.e., changes in youth crime rates). This section highlights some of the findings of these other Fusion studies as they relate to this particular study.

In a qualitative study examining youths’ perceptions of their experience at Fusion and how it affected them, Christie and Lauzon (2014) stated that youth reported the following:

- They felt ownership and responsibility for Fusion.
- The diversity of programming provides opportunities to choose programs and engage in learning opportunities on their terms, hence learning is meaningful.
- Youth learn to work toward specific goals and therefore develop a work ethic and a capacity to self-regulate their behavior in terms of both their learning and social interactions.
- They experience relationships with adults where they can be themselves, along with having adult mentors and confidants.
- They experience positive relationships with other youth, escaping the drama and cliques that exist outside of Fusion.
- They recognize they had choices they had not seen and consequently are able to re-conceptualize their relationship to the world, seeing new opportunities and choices they were unaware of.
- They experience enhanced self-esteem.
- It provides a refuge from what they described as the “bad side” of Ingersoll (drugs and petty crimes etc.).

Khan (2012) who administered the *Youth Experience Survey* to Fusion youth reported that Fusion successfully employs programs, services, and activities that benefit youth. She reported that there is an increase in developmental experiences associated with many of the positive domains of the survey, specifically noting positive development in the sub-categories of *identity work*, *basic skills*, *positive relationships*, and *teamwork and social skills*. Furthermore, she found a positive correlation among these dimensions, suggesting that youth who benefit on one dimension are likely to benefit on the other dimensions. She also reported that youth perceived the Fusion environment to be inclusive, indicating that Fusion is not a source of stress nor does it promote negative behaviours or expose youth to negative influences. She also found that the frequency and duration of participation were positively correlated with positive developmental outcomes. Mitchell (2013) in a

study looking at the relationship between participating in Fusion and “future selves” reported that those engaged in Fusion programs were more likely to develop future goals and plans whereas those who did not engage in the programs had, what she considered, unrealistic ambitions such as being rich or famous without any plan to achieve those goals. Lauzon and Pries (2014) report that youth crime rates have dropped significantly since Fusion opened, falling from 45/1,000 youth to 15/1,000 while comparator communities saw rising rates of youth crime.

This study asked the question how or what does Fusion and Fusion staff do to support youth development and learning?

## **5.0 Methodology**

This study employed an intrinsic case study. According to Stake (2000), this provides the means for understanding a specific case, in this context, the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre. Denscombe (2007) argues that the case study allows for exploring in-depth events, relationships, experiences, and processes. Creswell (1998) describes a case study as a system that “is bounded by time and place and it is the case being studied—a program, an event, an activity or individuals” (p. 61). Yin (2009, p. 4) maintains that a case study may “contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organization, social, political and related phenomena” and “allows investigators to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events.” Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that case studies offer a more nuanced view of reality, while Denscombe (2007) offers that the case study provides a depth of information in the context of relationships and processes, thereby providing a means for a more holistic understanding of the phenomena of interest. Stake (2005) argues that there is much to be learned from a single case study, particularly if it represents a unique case. In this sense, Fusion is unique in rural Ontario in terms of the diversity of programs it runs, and in terms of its funding through the municipality of Ingersoll. The boundaries of the case are defined by the organization and study participants are defined by the staff members at Fusion.

The data collection phase of this study consisted of 19 in-depth, semi-structured staff interviews. The interviews intended to get Fusion staff members to reflect on their practice. To foster reflection, the staff members were provided with questions ahead of time and given ample time to prepare for the interview. The interviews were intended to promote a conversation about how youth development and learning were supported at Fusion, and in particular how they supported youth development.

Initially the research was introduced at a staff meeting, where staff members were invited to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating in the study<sup>4</sup>. All nineteen staff members agreed to be interviewed. There were 7 female staff members and 12 male staff members ranging in age from 22 to 34. The interviews were conducted over the phone. The interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to one hour. The interview questions were designed to try to understand how staff members see themselves and what they do to foster an environment that is conducive to promoting youth development. Questions covered issues related to their philosophy and strategies for working with youth, what they think are the successful elements of Fusion, how they describe the culture at Fusion, what they like about their work, etc.? The interviews were semi-structured in nature and followed a

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that this study was part of a larger three year study and Fusion staff members were familiar with members of the research team, including the field researcher for this project.

predetermined line of questioning; however, the researcher was flexible in allowing the conversation to flow with follow-up questions that responses suggested would be useful to explore. After all the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed. The staff members were asked if they wanted to review a copy of the transcript. Electronic copies were sent to the staff members that requested transcripts for review. The staff members were given the opportunity to modify their responses after receiving the transcripts if they believed their responses were not accurate.

The interview data was transcribed and analyzed by using a system of constant comparison whereby a transcript was read and codes were identified. Subsequent transcripts were then read and themes placed into existing codes, or else a new code was generated to accommodate new information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These codes were then revisited and collapsed into broader themes. The codes were then viewed through the research question and those themes which did not contribute to answering the research question were not included in the reporting of this research.

Out of the codes, five broad categories emerged from the analysis: (1) relationship building, (2) skill development, (3) holistic youth development, (4) structure and flexibility, and (5) respect and ownership.

## **6.0 Findings**

This section reports on the findings and includes the following themes: building relationships, skill development, holistic youth development, balancing structure and flexibility, and respect and ownership.

### **6.1 Building Relationships**

According to staff members, the most critical element of their job is to build relationships with the youth and help youths build relationships with other youths. According to staff, all benefits youth accrue because of participation at Fusion begin with relationships. As one staff member told us, “You can have the best gadgets, toys, and equipment but unless a relationship is formed between the staff and youth, it is not going to be successful.” Another way of stating this is that in the absence of a relationship very little learning or development occurs.

Staff members also report that there is a “therapeutic” dimension to these staff-youth relationships. This is not to suggest that staff are in the business of counselling, only that as youth develop trusted relationships with staff members, youth will confide in them; it gives youth a trusted adult to talk to and receive guidance from if they are experiencing difficulties with relationships, family life or any other issues that may create challenges for them. This was noted by a staff member when he stated that “A lot of what we offer is therapeutic in a sense: if they keep coming, they keep getting the gains, they keep getting the support they need to work on the obstacles they are facing.” Another staff member put it this way:

I am not a counsellor by any means but I still help youth. It is very rewarding to know that you are helping someone who might not know where to go for advice. Again it all comes down to having those relationships.

Establishing relationships with youth is not without its challenges. To meet these challenges, staff members talked about the need to find common ground between themselves and the youth. It might be a particular interest, or it might be sharing

certain experiences, but this “common ground” provides a foundation on which to build that trusting relationship, what some staff referred to as a “connection”. As one staff member noted:

A good way to build relationships with youth, for me, is to find something that I have in common with them whether that be technology or something else. But also, even if I don’t have something in common with them, I’ve found that I can build relationships with youth by listening to them and just talking to them about things that interest them.

Another staff member reported she approached relationship building this way:

Building a relationship with them, I feel, is kind of talking with them. Not in a way that I am superior, kind of like we are friends and we are just hanging out. We are doing this stuff together. I talk to them just like I would talk to anyone else. Treat them as equals.

Staff members also noted the importance of being able to address the challenges youth face individually and responding specifically to youths’ issues, challenges or concerns; youth need to be treated as individuals. This, they report, creates an environment of support, encouragement and caring characterized by authenticity and genuineness. These relationships, according to staff, allow youth to put their guard down and just be themselves and youth know that staff members accept them unconditionally. One staff member explained, “Then, when they come back in, say they’ve told you something, you remember that and you ask them about that.” She further noted, “Sometimes it is a really slow build and sometimes it is quick. I think just listening to them and that really helps them to open up more, providing them with a safe place to discuss these issues.” Staff members noted the importance of these relationships as many of the youth who come to Fusion, they reported a lack positive adult role models in their lives, and they believe staff at Fusion serve this function in the lives of many of the youth.

## ***6.2 Learning and Development***

While the relationships youth have with staff members are important and provide a foundation on which youth can support their own growth and development, there are other elements of ASPs that support youth growth and development, such as skill development. Staff reported that it is through developing skills and competencies that youth learn to negotiate their way through their world and learn to act upon it to realize self-identified goals.

The staff members at Fusion reported that the youth they encountered often lack direction and a sense of being able to act upon the world in positive ways. As one staff member told us, “It seems like they are lacking direction because they have lost hope in what they are capable of.” The consequence of this, according to staff members, is youth are often unaware of what their future might look like, or what is possible. One staff member put it poignantly when he stated that “Many of the youth do not know what it is to have clear-cut goals, or what it means to work toward those goals; often the youth do not believe in themselves and hence have never really

worked toward specific goals.” As another staff member noted, “in many ways, the youth seem to have given up on themselves.”

Fusion provided one thing for youth, something that perhaps many of them have never had—opportunity. In many ways, this was a key word for staff members as they spoke about “providing opportunities”, or “expanding opportunities”, or how “youth lack opportunities”. It was in the context of opportunities that staff tried to engage youth, to give them opportunities to express themselves through leading and engaging other youth, and developing technical competencies through the programs. Sometimes the development of these technical competencies lead to what youth described in Christie and Lauzon (2014) as reconceptualising their relationship with the world and seeing they had choices whereas before they could not see them. One staff member captured this when he told us:

A lot of youth come here and participate in programs end up finding a skill or discovering a passion, whether that is graphic design or radio or music. Then, they want to go to college so then they have something to work towards. We have had multiple youth who are now in college because they started taking radio broadcasting or they became interested in recording or art through our programs. And they were successful in school. A lot of kids don't have any idea what they want to do. If they come and figure something out at Fusion then after that they have some kind of passion, some kind of direction. We like to provide the kids with some kind of direction and a future.

While the development of these technical skills is important, they also have opportunities to learn ‘soft skills’—teamwork and collaboration, emotional regulation, communication, and empathy. As one staff member told us:

We try to teach them the whole cooperation thing and peer relation aspect. We try to remind them that they are not just one person: they are someone who interacts with a variety of people and those relationships are very important in their life going on from here.

Staff also highlighted the intangible dimensions of their experience such as learning boundaries. As one staff member explained:

I also think that we give them the opportunity to learn boundaries, even though they might not like it, they are still learning them. I think with the rules and structure that we have at Fusion, they really learn a lot here.

Others talked about the importance of helping youth develop confidence and trust: “One of the main things I focus on in the Girls’ Group program is on being healthy as an individual and building your self-confidence and self-esteem.”

Staff members talked a great deal about youth learning, and this is important, because many of the Fusion participants do not necessarily do well in school. Staff members maintained, however, that youth learning was contingent on their relationship with staff and with youth having fun. As one staff member pointed out, “it was almost like tricking the youth into learning” and while learning could be serious and challenging, they emphasized that it also needs to be fun. To borrow an old adage from adult education, in the context of Fusion, participants can choose to vote with their feet (unlike formal education where they do not have a choice). This raises an important issue: youth exercised choice to participate; there was no mandatory participation and youth could attend when and if they wanted to.

Furthermore, staff members are not territorial and most report encouraging youth to take advantage of the different opportunities they have at Fusion, even if it means moving from one program to another. As youth explore the variety of options available at Fusion, staff reported that many find something that they become passionate about and it may even evolve into a future goal in terms of career or vocation as noted previously. Mitchell’s (2013) Fusion research bears this out and as she pointed out for many Fusion youth exposure to programming at Fusion, particularly the technology-focused programming, opens up new vocational aspirations and opportunities for some youth.

### ***6.3 Holistic Youth Development***

The Fusion staff members reported that in thinking about youth development, they think of Fusion as being youth-centered, or youth-focused, and they thought about youth in the complexity of their entire lives, and not merely as it pertains to what youth do at Fusion. In this sense, it is important for staff members to treat youth as individuals, with differing needs, aspirations and challenges. Staff members’ spoke of being deliberate in wanting to and trying to help youth with both the small and big challenges in their lives. These challenges can range from those youth encounter within Fusion, to family or school issues, or larger personal challenges. Because of the relationships that staff members have with youth, the youth trust them. Staff members also reported that if they are facing challenges outside of Fusion, their capacity to optimize the benefits that can be derived from participating in Fusion become compromised. Given this, it is not uncommon for Fusion staff members to help youth access outside resources (i.e., addiction services), or help them prepare resumes or make recommendations on where they might find part-time employment. As one staff member explained:

I think [we] have gone out of our way for youth to accommodate what it is that they really need even if it has nothing to with the program. For example, if it made sense that we thought a youth needed to be connected to a certain service or that they needed to talk about a certain situation, we’ve never said: “that’s not our job, that doesn’t have anything to do with the program.” We have tried to think about youth in a holistic way [...] We have tried to kind of think about everything and we try to have the best interest of each individual youth.

Furthermore, treating youth holistically means ‘keeping tabs on them’ and remembering what they said and checking in with them when you see them. As a staff member noted:

I think the staff are really good at keeping regular tabs on the youth, who are in their programs. Not just the program but also following-up on details from the youth’s lives. For example, if a youth says that their grandma was sick, the staff will follow-up and ask about the grandmother later on.

Clearly, staff members see their jobs in a much broader context than simply delivering programming to youth and supervising drop-in; they see their job as the promotion of youth well-being in all its dimensions and complexities. One staff member said that “being genuinely curious about how their day was or what is going on in their lives” helps in forming a relationship. They also try to eliminate barriers to participation in various programs and one staff member relayed the story of how staff members came together to purchase a sports bra for one young woman to participate in the fitness program. They strive to make sure that youth feel safe, have fun, and feel they belong. It is only when these conditions are met that youth can explore and expand their understanding of themselves; and it is having fun that some staff members argue is critical to youth learning. As it was explained by a staff member:

The youth will not stick around if it’s not a very exciting program. I think it needs to be discrete in the way that you are developing skills because I don’t think that the idea of learning is too exciting. Especially when you spend so much time in school, the idea that this is a program just based on learning can be kind of dull. I think you have to be very discrete in the fact that you are building skills with youth while running a program that is more so fun than it is based on a learning opportunity.

Another staff member summarizes by saying that “Developing their character is something that we like to do at Fusion.”

#### ***6.4 Balancing Structure and Flexibility***

Fusion staff members report that they must find a balance between structure and flexibility. Fusion is a youth driven centre and even its programs are youth-driven and the rules are youth formulated under the guidance of staff members. This means that staff members often walk a fine line between structure and flexibility. While staff members report that finding this balance can be challenging, they acknowledged it is important. As one staff member explained, “I think both structure and flexibility are important. The rigid structure is almost to make it a legit program but the flexibility to accommodate the youth.”

Teaching youth that structure is okay and sometimes necessary if you wish to accomplish something was important to staff members. However, they also recognized the importance of flexibility, especially if they want to be responsive to the needs of individual youth and build relationships with them. This requires that

staff operate not out of a framework of equality but of equity, a framework that acknowledges the differences and uniqueness in various youths' circumstances. Furthermore, they reported it is when there is flexibility that youth can be creative and also exercise their agency and choice, to choose to pursue that which they wish to pursue, developing confidence and self-assuredness. As an example, one staff member explained that "I tend to let the youth be really involved in setting out what their day is going to look like when they come into the Fitness Program." Thus, structure sometimes is a necessity to develop skills and abilities while being tempered by allowing choice that fosters autonomy and agency in how these skills and abilities can be developed and used.

One facet of Fusion that differentiates it from other programs is the industry expertise of the staff. For those running technology programs, they are qualified to work in the industry and hence can take the youth's learning to greater depths. They told us about one young man that learned over a four-year period how to play guitar, keyboards, bass and drums; how to record and produce music, and how to film and edit videos. By the time he had aged out he was writing his own music, producing his own music videos, and putting them up on You Tube<sup>5</sup>. The staff member who ran the music program and recording studio was a professional musician and was able to work in industry standard recording studios in the past. To have this level of expertise running programs in ASPs is highly unusual.

### **6.5 *Respect and Ownership***

According to staff members, respect is a value that is practised at Fusion, and they argue that respect is the foundation upon which ownership is built. Respect flows in many ways, from staff to youth, from youth to staff, from youth to youth and from staff to staff. It is respect and ownership that provides a foundation for youth development. As staff members reported, when these two dimensions are in place, youth know that their voice and opinion is respected and that they can have real influence in the context of Fusion. After all, it is youth interests that drive the development of new programming.

A good example for this is a small group of youth that came to the manager and wanted an opportunity to record their music. Essentially, they were looking for a computer with the software that would allow them to do this. The manager suggested they dream big and as a result, they were able to acquire a state-of-the-art recording studio with a professional standard mixing board. The youth were involved in all facets of this project including help develop the proposal and pitch the proposal to the funder, participate in negotiations with contractors and selection of materials and equipment, etc. These values and attitudes permeate the organizational culture of Fusion. As one staff member told us, "We try to be pretty laid back so that the youth feel that it is their space. It is important that they feel that it is their space and they can take ownership of the space here and what's available for them." Another staff member told us:

Creating a culture of respect goes a long way. Initially, when we opened, we worked with the youth to create the boundaries that we have created. They made stop signs throughout the building with the rules that they actually

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<sup>5</sup> To see an example of his music, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wlRx9BerIM>

chose themselves. By having them involved in that process, they respect those values and take ownership of them.

Respect also permeates other dimensions of Fusion. Youth come to respect not only people but the facility, the equipment and the opportunities that are open to them. This is the youth's space, and they need to respect it so that they care for it and continue to have access to it. The example of the recording studio is a good example of how that is accomplished.

As a summary, one staff member summed up what Fusion does quite well when she said:

I think we are a piece of the puzzle. We provide them with positive role models and a positive environment to grow in. I think, ultimately, we contribute to them becoming successful adults, being involved in giving back to the community, pursuing career, and pursuing education. I think that's the type of stuff that we are really pushing on a daily basis.

## **7.0 Discussion**

While this study focused on staff members and how they support youth at Fusion, their actions need to be understood in the broader context of the organization itself, in the context of organizational culture. Schein (2010) defines organizational culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration (p. 18)” and it is these assumptions that provide the necessary organizational stability to carry out everyday activities. In the case of Fusion, the assumptions as mentioned by staff are that they are youth centred, and it is the youths' needs that are the driver of all they do. It is this youth-centred focus from a holistic perspective that gives rise to the ‘caring culture’ that staff members enacted. Implicit within this caring culture was the idea that to develop, to become successful adults, youth need to be engaged but that they need to be engaged in such a way as they experience it as empowering and being empowered means making choices for oneself. It is this organizational culture in which Fusion staff members are socialized and in which they carry out and execute their responsibilities. The organizational culture cannot be separated from the everyday actions of Fusion staff members.

Critical to youth development, according to Fusion staff members, were the relationships they established with the youth. Relationships are essential to youth development, and as staff members reported, they felt many of the youth who came to Fusion were lacking these adult relationships in their life. Deutsch and Jones (2008) have argued positive adult/youth relationships are essential to youth development as they need to develop their autonomy while retaining their relatedness to adults who care about them. While we often assume parents fulfill this role, this is not the case for all youth. We also think of the school system as an alternative means of meeting these youth needs for caring adults, but as Lauzon (2013) has argued that it is a small group of cultural or athletic student ‘stars’ in the educational system that develop relationships with adults. Grossman and Bulle (2006) have argued that the non-parental adult can play an important role in the life of youth, promoting their socio-emotional well-being and health, through being

supportive and mentoring youth, and by helping youth connect with others, extending their network of connections and supports. Lauzon (2013) has argued that ASPs can play a vital role in meeting youth needs for adult/youth relationships. Rhodes (2004) adds that it is imperative that staff members be young so that they can better identify with and relate to youth. Certainly, we have seen that in the responses Fusion staff members reported that the benefits that youth accrue from participating in Fusion begin with the relationships they have with staff. These relationships allow youth to optimize the opportunities available to them at Fusion.

These relationships, however, often take time to develop and it is important that they be maintained for it is the duration of these relationships that support youth in optimizing the benefits from their participation in the centre. Rhodes and Dubois (2008) have noted this, arguing that any benefits that can be derived from these relationships occur over time and are not immediate. The longer and more intimate the relationship, the greater the developmental outcomes. Rhodes and Dubois note, however, that these relationships must be flexible, and adapt to the needs of the youth. This was illustrated by staff members in terms of their need to operate out of a framework of equity rather than equality, allowing them to respond to the unique needs of each of the youth they develop relationships with. The development of relationships with staff members was also facilitated by staff members also being involved in supervising the drop-in in addition to running their programs, providing them with an opportunity to interact with youth more informally. As noted by Grossman and Bulle (2006), this informal interaction with adults is essential to youth development. During the drop-in, staff members could engage youth in casual conversations that would often help staff develop insight into the youth as they often shared what was happening in their life, providing staff members with a more holistic perspective on individual youth.

Rhodes and Dubois (2008) also argue that the benefits derived by youth from these relationships are enhanced when there is structure to the adult/youth relationship. Many of the adult/youth relationships are developed through youth participating in the various programs offered by Fusion. As they argue, it is important for the young persons' interests and preferences to be emphasized. It is also important for the adult to share the youths' interests (Grossman & Bulle, 2006).

The youth who attend Fusion are free to participate in any and as often as they like in the gamut of programs available to them. They are encouraged to explore programs, but it is when they find something that appeals to them that they often develop a relationship with the staff member who is responsible for a program. The relationship, founded on mutual interest, then becomes the foundation on which they may develop their skills and competencies in a certain program. Here youth learn to set goals and work toward them, not only enhancing their skills and competencies, but they benefit in terms of enhanced self-esteem. One of the unique features here is for youth to have youth workers running the programs who have industry level expertise who are able to deepen the learning of the youth while also serving as a role model<sup>6</sup>. The youth interviewed in the Christie and Lauzon (2014) Fusion study reported that through the programming they were able to re-conceptualize their

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<sup>6</sup> The downside to having this level of expertise is often for these young adults Fusion was a stepping stone in their career path and they might leave after a year or two. For the youth it means losing a relationship that has been cultivated over time and for some youth the loss of this relationship can be difficult.

relationship with the larger world and see that they had opportunities and choices whereas before they believed they had none. Mitchell's (2014) study reported that in terms of future selves, those youth who participated in the programming, and hence having an opportunity to develop a relationship with a staff member, were developing not only future goals, but planning how they could be achieved whereas the youth who did not participate in the programming had what were often fantasy goals (to be rich and famous) and no plan for realizing those goals.

These relationships also serve youth in other ways beyond the program and centre. One issue that was identified was the role that staff members play in connecting youth to resources beyond Fusion. In some cases, this may be in support services such as counselling or addiction services. This is important, given that Ingersoll is a rural community and that rural communities have higher per capita rates of youth mortality, morbidity, suicides, substance abuse, and engagement in risky behaviours (Cross & Lauzon, 2015). Staff members also helped them in terms of making them aware of potential opportunities such as employment, or perhaps being a reference for employment or college. This is important as many of the youth, according to staff members, do not have the financial or human resources in their home or life to help with accessing necessary resources or supporting them in their desire for a positive future. This points to Coleman's (1988) argument that social capital—in this case the relationships youth have with staff—is instrumental in the development of human capital. He highlights the importance of social capital in encouraging youth to stay in school rather than dropping out. In the Ingersoll context, this is important. The Canada Council on Learning (2006) reported that rural youth are almost twice as likely to drop out of high school than urban youth. And while staff encouraged youth to attend school, etc., Fusion, according to staff members, also helped them develop qualities that improve their likelihood of academic success. These qualities include enhanced self-esteem and confidence, setting and working toward goals, and experiencing learning as being fun.

While the program promotes the development of hard skills and competencies, they were also a source for developing the so-called soft skills. Staff members reported that through the programming youth learned to set goals and work toward them and staff members played an important role in supporting task completion (Grossman & Bulle, 2006). Critical, in many ways, was the development of emotional regulation allowing the youth to develop greater tolerance and ability when frustrated, allowing them, as Rhodes (2004) notes, to realign their conceptions of themselves in relation to others. This allows them to reconnect with peers more effectively. Both Christie and Lauzon (2014) and Khan (2012) confirm that as a result of participating in Fusion, youth had better relationships with their peers.

Part of the strength of the programming was that it was experiential, or hands-on in nature, and youth self-selected to participate. It was the experiential nature of the program that engaged the youth, which was very different from the standard "book-learning" they experienced in their formal education. As Ord (2009) noted, experiential learning is meaningful learning and promotes reflective behaviour, growth and good health, often leading to a reconceptualization of one's relationship with the world. Jensen (2005) argues this learning is not merely cognitive, but promotes the interaction of cognitive, affective and practical dimensions of learning, engaging learners in their fullness. This, again, can be understood from the staff members' perspective about the need to interact with youth holistically, to engage them in the fullness of their personhood. This is also related to intrinsic motivation

to learn, the connotative dimension of learning for the source of a desire to learn something is affective before it is cognitive. Deep learning requires an affective engagement with the topic of learning as well as the cognitive. As noted previously, Christie and Lauzon (2014) report that the youth interviewed in their study reported that through Fusion and the learning they engaged in they were able to reconceptualise their relationship to the world as Ord suggest it does.

It was also pointed out that youth learn to appreciate that flexibility exists in relation to structure and that often structure is necessary if something worthwhile is to be achieved, such as the development of competencies and skills. This illustrates the importance of structure that Rhodes and Dubois (2008) argued is essential to youth development. Yet, there was flexibility within the Fusion programs and across programs, allowing the youth to have choices. Through having choices, youth develop a sense of agency. This contrasts with the staff reporting that when Fusion youth began to participate, they often lacked confidence, had poor self-esteem, and in some cases staff members reported that they felt youth had given up on themselves.

The last essential element from the staff members' perspective was helping youth develop respect—respect for the facilities and equipment, but more importantly respect for other people. This was accomplished by the staff members demonstrating and serving as a role model. While staff reported respect permeated Fusion, the youth from the Christie and Lauzon (2014) study report that youth felt respected by staff members who did not treat them as 'kids'.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

The findings of this study found that staff members identified five themes in which Fusion and staff members support youth development: (1) developing relationships; (2) promoting learning and skill development through its programs; (3) treating and interacting with youth holistically, taking into account the complexity of their lives, providing support and guidance where needed; (4) providing structure while providing adequate flexibility to promote the development of choices and agency; and (5) the development of respect and ownership for the facilities and equipment and for their feelings and interaction with others.

While these dimensions of support by staff members have been identified and treated individually, we need to recognize that they are interconnected, and it is the interactions among these various dimensions of staff members' actions embedded in a youth-centered organizational culture that promotes youth development. However, staff members do report that if the opportunities available to youth through Fusion are to be optimized, the staff member/youth relationship is critical and essential; all benefits that accrue to the youth begin with this relationship. This constellation of supports meets Grossman and Bulle's (2006) basic conditions for ASPs that foster the development of positive adult/youth relationships:

- Interact informally with youth
- Incorporate the youth's desires and needs into deciding what to do
- Support youth in completing tasks
- Share common interests of background with the youth
- Treat youth respectfully

Throughout our interviews with staff members, they spoke of the importance of each of these dimensions to support youth development. Grossman and Bulle, however, further argue that the adults in ASPs need to find a balance between task and process to create relationships that youth will benefit from. Fusion is unique in that staff members who run many of the programs have industry level qualifications, and this means the potential depth to which they can facilitate youth learning is far greater than most ASPs can provide. The depth of learning that can be offered to youth becomes a means for keeping them engaged and further developing the youth/adult relationship as the learning continues to deepen. They continue to derive benefits through the ongoing learning and relationship.

While we did learn what staff members at Fusion did to support learning and development of youth, can we conclude that this led to successful outcomes? If the outcomes of this study are triangulated with previous studies conducted at Fusion that looked at youth outcomes (Kahn, 2012; Mitchell, 2013; Christie & Lauzon, 2014; Cross & Lauzon, 2015), we can conclude that the actions taken by Fusion and Fusion staff members to support the development and learning of rural youth in an ASP has been successful. Fusion is fulfilling its function and giving youth the skills, knowledge, and qualities that will allow them to become future productive adults.

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