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The Role of After-School Programs in Promoting Youth Inclusion in Rural and Small Communities: The Case of the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre, Ingersoll, Ontario

Authors: Sarah Christie & Al Lauzon

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Sarah Christie
Ophea
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
schris01@uoguelph.ca

Al Lauzon
SEDRD, University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada
allauzon@uoguelph.ca

Abstract

Rural communities face many challenges including the retention of their youth. Rural youth also face challenges, particularly in comparison to urban youth. Rural youth experience higher levels of morbidity and mortality as a result of risky behaviours, and face a different set of challenges in regard to issues of social inclusion/exclusion when compared to urban youth. One way in which these risks and challenges can be mitigated is through the provision of afterschool programs. This study begins by asking the question what impact does the provision of the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre, a progressive afterschool program, have on rural youth's feelings of social inclusion/exclusion? A qualitative study was undertaken and the results suggest that the provision of an afterschool program does provide an inclusive environment where youth feel cared for and connected, are allowed to explore and develop skills, competencies in a safe and secure environment that they experience as 'their place'. However, they still report feeling excluded from the larger community.

Keywords: rural youth; afterschool programs, social inclusion, social exclusion

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1.0 Introduction

Rye (2006) makes the point that rural is often constructed within the context of the "rural idyll," often seen as being close to nature and characterized by social cohesiveness, especially when contrasted with larger urban and metropolitan centres; it is also often characterized as an ideal caring place to raise children. Rye continues, however, that there is also a shadow side to the rural idyll known as the "rural dull," where it is seen as being bereft of resources, traditional rather than modern, and the caring environment is seen as a controlling environment. And as Rye continues, young people are less likely to view rural communities in the context of the rural idyll and more likely to view it through the lens of the rural dull. As Rye states, "It is possible that the 'peacefulness' and 'tranquility' that adults value so much in the rural idyll may just be boring to teenagers" (p. 411).

Despite the frequent construction of the rural as the rural idyll, rural and small communities face many challenges. In Canada, rural community challenges include imminent population declines, lack of job opportunities, and out migration of youth (Government of Canada, 2011). It is further argued that these challenges adversely affect the economic and social well-being of these communities, including labour market performance, delivery of services, and governance issues. Of particular interest is youth. As Franke (2010) argues, youth constitute a key opportunity for social investment policy. Yet as Kidder and Rogers (2004) note, Canada has no national youth policy. In 2009 the OECD ranked Canada 22 of out 30 comparator countries in terms of child wellbeing and health and safety. Franke (2010), in a review of youth policy in Ontario, concludes that policy is characterized by limited-scope policies and programs that do not adequately address the needs of all youth. Malatest and Associates (2002) argue that there is a need to stem the tide of out-migration of youth from rural communities because it leads to a disruption of and shortage in labour supply, undermining the viability of rural communities. Yet youth continue to leave rural communities. The need to stem this outflow becomes increasingly apparent when we consider it from the perspective of labour force development. For example, given that the immigrant population in rural areas constitutes on average a little more than 5% of the population (Beshri & He, 2009) increases in human capital and labour force development must come from in-situ development.

Rural communities face many challenges and so do rural youth. While the youth life stage is generally associated with good health, it is also a period of transition which often lends itself to experiences that may place youth at risk as they explore and find their place in the world (Kidder & Rogers, 2004; Cross, 2012). This risk may be exacerbated for rural youth by virtue of living in a rural community. As Cross (2012) reports, rural youth are more likely than their urban counterparts to experience injury, and have higher levels of morbidity and mortality than urban youth. Much of this may be attributed to engaging in risky behaviour in response to boredom (Rhew et al., 2011). For example, both Rhew et al. and Pruitt (2009) note that rural youth are at greater risk 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 and 6 p.m., as rural youth are just as likely to be latchkey kids as are their urban counterparts. Furthermore, engaging in these risky behaviours has longer term consequences for youth in adulthood. As Rachele et al. (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."

Bourke and Geldens (2007) maintain that one way of mitigating these risks is to develop supportive relationships with adults. These relationships are as critical to youth wellbeing as are achieving goals, having hobbies, having positive attitudes and believing in oneself. These are the factors whose presence in youth's life mitigates some of the risks inherent within the youth-to-adult transition; youth need to feel connected to others and to their community and have opportunities to explore aspects of their developing identity. Furthermore, as youth begin to engage in

identity development they often seek out diverse activities to experiment with and to explore developing competencies and setting personal goals for themselves.

One strategy for assisting youth with navigating this transition and mitigating risks is through providing after-school-programs (Pruitt, 2009). As Durlak et al. (2010) maintain, these programs offer opportunities for youth to develop competencies through participating in a variety of different activities, learning about leadership and developing interpersonal and social skills while developing positive relationships. Durlak and Weisssberg (2007) report that after-school programs can assist youth in improving their academic performance, and developing positive self-esteem and confidence which manifests itself in positive behaviours. In other words after-school programs can support youth in developing a positive view of self and provides opportunities for experiencing inclusion. This research project had the goal of discerning how, or if, participating in afterschool programs, in this case Fusion Youth and Technology Centre (Fusion), fostered experiences of inclusiveness for rural youth, and if participation mitigated engaging in risky behaviour. Specifically the research was guided by four broad questions:

- What is it like growing up in Ingersoll?

- How has participating in Fusion contributed to the youths' development?

- How has Fusion affected youths' experiences of inclusion and exclusion?

- Have youth formed relationships with people within Fusion and, if yes, what do these relationships mean to them?

We begin this report by providing a brief review of the literature on social inclusion/exclusion with a focus on rural youth. This is followed by a description of the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre, the case for this study. This is then followed by an overview of the methodology, results, discussion and conclusions.

2.0 Social Inclusion and Exclusion

Reimer (2004, p. 2) maintains that "Social inclusion and exclusion is about the ways in which people, groups, organizations, or societies gain access or are constrained from access to resources and services." He further elaborates by suggesting that social exclusion occurs when people's needs are not met and they do not have access to services, social relationships, resources or institutions they need. Shucksmith (2003, p. 1) argues that social exclusion is a "multi-dimensional process which refers to the breakdown or malfunctioning of the major systems in society that should guarantee the social integration of an individual or household. Reimer further argues that exclusion occurs in different ways, be it "through restricting or redirecting services to particular peoples or groups, and away from others" or "through the reorganization of rights and entitlements to exclude some and include others" (p.2). Regardless of the form of social exclusion it is a function of organized and legitimated social relations.

Shucksmith and Philip (2000) argue that young people often cannot access the structures and facilities open to adults, and hence are disadvantaged as an age group. While they are disadvantaged as an age group, they are, as Shucksmith notes, not a homogenous group. Some young people are more privileged than others, and hence have access to more resources and supports. Shucksmith and Philip (2000, p. 15) add that rural youth, relative to their urban counterparts, may be disadvantaged by lack of "access to transport and leisure, issues of identity and the visibility of living

in small communities." Also, rural youth may not have access to positive relationships with adults. Lauzon (2013) notes that often within schools a "private school" forms where a small percentage of the students get the majority of the adults' time. This may be even more problematic for those youth who do not have good familial relationships and this places them, as Cross (2012) noted, at greater risk.

Davis and Ridge (1997) note that youth in rural communities occupy a unique social environment whereby youth may struggle with adults for control of space and resources. As a result, youth may be very visible but despite their visibility their needs are not recognized and consequently not met. This, as Davis and Ridge further argue, is even more problematic for those youth who have a low family income further exacerbating the consequences for these youth. Furthermore, as Shucksmith (2004) argues, youths' experiences are shaped by their class, gender and race. Issues of class, gender, and race result in the fact that often youth will be highly visible in the community and consequently under the scrutiny of adults and their behaviour is often disapproved of by adults. This leads to the idea that youth are a problem to be "dealt" with rather than as contributing or potentially contributing members to the community; youth are marginalized. This problem can be further exacerbated when youth attempt to assert their claim to public space by hanging out in it or by leaving signs, such as graffiti, of their physical occupation of the space (White & Wyn, 2008).

Leyshon's (2008) and Laegran's (2002) research acknowledges that youth exclusion in rural communities often arises as a result of being denied their own space. Furthermore, when youth are provided space it is often under the power of adults and they continue to be scrutinized by adults (Rye, 2006; Nairn et al., 2003). As Leyshon (2008, p. 236) writes, "For rural youth marginality is in part founded upon surveillance and regulation of activities and spaces within the countryside." Shucksmith (2004, p. 47) writes that:

> In navigating landscapes of opportunity and exclusion, young people and children in rural areas nevertheless exhibit agency as competent and active members of society, despite often being treated as merely 'human becomings'. …young people negotiate their roles and spaces within rural communities, whether through simply maintaining activities in spaces shared with others or through actions which directly challenge established social/power relations in order to "make their own fun."

However, when youth make their own fun it is often regarded by adults in the community as engaging in anti-social or inappropriate behaviour.

Despite the need for youth to be treated more seriously, and their need to begin to assert their independence and autonomy, they need dependability around them and this means having relationships with adults they can count on. As Wyn and White (1997, p. 110) argue, "the challenge is to be accommodating in meeting the different realities of youth rather than premising our support on what they call the fictional mainstream". Rural communities need to be adaptive in how they meet the needs of youth, recognizing the plurality of lived lives youth have which manifest in differing needs, if we are to create inclusive spaces for youth in rural communities (Matthews et al., 2000). But this plurality of lived lives often means that youth create their own exclusionary systems based upon pre-defined criteria set out by the group (Adler & Adler, 1995; Laegran, 2002). In other words, social exclusion of youth often arises as a consequence of youth "othering" other youth.

During this period of the lifecycle youth require spaces of their own, places where they can go and hang out with peers or make new friends (Nairn et al., 2003). When these youth friendly spaces are not available, youth will often try and appropriate public spaces for themselves. For example, youth will hang out in malls or the downtown core of small towns. Yet this creates tensions within these communities as merchants feel that youth have no money and keep other customers away as a result of their often boisterous behaviour. Youth are not made to feel welcomed in these spaces (Wyn & White, 2007; Panelli, et al., 2002).

Afterschool programs are one means of providing youth with access to resources and relationships while providing them with space of their own and opportunities to engage in activities that they might not otherwise have access to; they provide inclusive spaces where youth feel welcomed. These afterschool programs also provide dependability. As stated above, youth need to assert their autonomy and explore their identity, but there needs to be dependability around them. They need to feel safe. Afterschool programs can provide this for youth. At the same time afterschool programs can provide youth access to useful information and knowledge through the networks they establish with other youth and with adult staff (Jarret, et al., 2005; Kohfeldt et al., 2011). This information may relate to work opportunities, future careers, or travel etc. Thus afterschool programs are one means to deal with the issue of creating inclusive spaces and places for youth. These may be of even more significance for rural youth, as often within rural communities there are limited opportunities and resources, and they are also often constrained by the absence of public transportation which they can use to access services and resources in surrounding communities.

3.0 The Fusion Youth and Technology Centre

The Fusion Youth and Technology Centre (Fusion) is a unique not-for-profit youth centre in Ingersoll, Ontario, Canada, population 12,146. Fusion was opened in 2006 as a result of the town's 2004 Community Strategic Plan. Identified in the strategic plan as it pertains to youth, were the following goals (Town of Ingersoll, 2009):

- To establish a successful youth program;

- To promote youth friendly attitudes in the town of Ingersoll; and

- To encourage young people to develop their skills and become more civic minded.

A school that had closed was purchased by the town, and while initially Fusion utilized two rooms of the school and employed 2–3 staff, the centre now occupies all 18,000 square feet and currently has 22 staff members. Fusion is unique in rural Ontario in that it brings together recreation, leisure, technology, arts, leadership development, health and well-being promotion, youth engagement and volunteerism under one roof[1] Fusion serves all youth in Ingersoll and the surrounding area between the ages of 12–18. It operates out of a positive youth development framework whereby Fusion strives to provide the conditions to foster positive asset development at the same time that it attempts to promote knowledge and skill acquisition that will serve youth as they transition into adulthood. In addition, Fusion currently runs three social enterprises that provide youth with opportunities to put

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[1] For a complete listing of Fusion programs see Lauzon (2013).

their new knowledge and skills to work, earning money while at the same time the social enterprises serve as a revenue generator for Fusion.

Fusion requires youth pay a $5.00 membership fee which provides them with a lifetime membership. As of 2010 approximately 45% of the youth target population held Fusion memberships (Fusion, 2010) and currently Fusion is open from 2:00 pm–9:00 pm Monday through Thursday and from 2:30 pm –11:00 pm on Friday and Saturday. Fusion is visited daily by 90–110 youth (J. Smith, personal communication, November 12, 2012).

4.0 Methodology

This study employed an intrinsic case study. According to Stake (2005), this provides the means for understanding a specific case, in this case 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 programming it runs, and in terms of its funding through the municipality of Ingersoll and its housing in the Department of Parks and Recreation. The geographical boundaries of the case are defined by the catchment area for Fusion while study participants are defined by those youth who have a membership at Fusion.

In this section we will describe participant selection; methods employed in this case study; and a description of the data analysis.

4.1 Participant Selection

Twelve youth self-selected to participate in this study. Youth were initially approached by staff to elicit interest in participating in the study. Participants between the ages of 14 and 18 agreed to participate in the workshop, the interview, and the validation focus group. Three of the participants were female and nine were male. The participants had all been involved with Fusion for two years or more, with a number of participants having been members since Fusion opened its doors in 2006. Each youth was required to get parental permission to participate in the study as required by the University of Guelph Office of Research, and we also requested the signature of the youth in the hopes that it would respect their own decision-making and agency.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

The data collection was begun by visiting Fusion on three separate occasions to observe, interact with youth and staff in terms of the centres day-to-day activities, and to begin to build relationships with staff and youth. During these visits the field

researcher (Sarah) also attended a staff meeting where she was introduced to staff, presented the study to them, and answered questions. In addition, during this period critical documents pertaining to the development and operation of Fusion were reviewed. These two activities were instrumental in understanding the context for the research more fully.

The formal data collection methods consisted of three methods: an introductory group workshop for youth, in-depth interviews with individual youth, and a validation focus group.

4.2.1 Group Workshop

The group workshops were designed to achieve two goals. First, the workshops provided an opportunity to engage the youth in an interactive format with their peers and it was hoped this active engagement would help in motivating them to participate in the latter parts of the research, and also for the researcher to establish rapport with the participants. Second, it was felt that by providing an opportunity for youth to engage in a group format they would become more comfortable in talking about the issues this research was concerned about. In this sense it was preparatory for participating in the in-depth interview to follow at a later date (Eder & Fingerson, 2001; Heath et al., 2009). Youth would have had an opportunity to think about the issues prior to the interview rather than walking into the interview "cold."

The workshop consisted of 3 activities: (a) a visual mapping exercise, (b) visualization in participatory programmes activity (VIPP), and (c) most significant change event (MSC).

The visualization mapping exercise was intended as a warm up exercise and participants were given a floor plan of the centre along with four different coloured dots and asked to place the stickers, in preferential order, on the places they liked to spend their time when they were at Fusion. Some discussion followed, as youth shared with workshop members where they liked to spend their time. The intent of this exercise was to get them thinking about how they spend their time at Fusion.

The VIPP was guided by four questions that the youth participants were to consider:

- ▪   Why do you come to Fusion?

- ▪   What do youth bring to Fusion?

- ▪   How do you benefit by coming to Fusion?

- ▪   How does Fusion affect your life outside of Fusion?

Youth were then asked to place their answers on colour coded pieces of paper with each colour corresponding to one of the above questions. The cards were then collected and shuffled to protect the identity of the individuals and then the youth sorted them into categories through discussion. According to Heath et al. (2009) it is not only important for youth to be generating ideas but they must also be interpreting what they mean. The sorting experience provided the participants with the opportunity to discuss the ideas presented and what they meant to them. This activity was to get participants thinking about how youth are engaged in Fusion and about the outcomes of their participation in Fusion.

The MSC exercise is a participatory monitoring and evaluation method that asks participants to write or record their most significant change stories. This method is

effective in that it allows participants to make sense of their own lives through the stories they tell about themselves and these stories tend to focus on critical moments which make them good tools for capturing incidents of change and transition (Heath et al., 2009). It also allows participants to identify the issues that are important to them (Heath et al., 2009). As Dart and Davies (2005) have noted, MSC is a process of searching for significant outcomes and then deliberating on the value of these outcomes that encourages participants to think deeply. In this exercise participants were instructed by the researcher to look back on their experience at Fusion and to write about a time that something significant happened to them or someone they knew. MSC stories ranged from one paragraph to three paragraphs in length. While the stories were varied, there were four themes identified:

- Developing relationships
- New perspectives
- Enhanced wellbeing
- Positive life changes and changes in values

The themes identified in the workshop participants MSC stories were then used to inform the development of the interview schedule, in conjunction with the literature review, and were also used in the context of the interviews as areas to probe if needed.

4.2.2 In-depth Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen to follow the workshop, as the interview allows the researcher to explore the issues identified in the workshop in more depth and detail one-on-one with the youth (Palys, 1997; Denscombe, 2007). These interviews are effective for exploring the participants' thoughts, behaviour, and perspectives, and this may be critical for accessing those who may have felt uncomfortable sharing their perspectives in a group setting (Boyce & Neal, 2006). This is particularly important for youth participants since, as Heath et al. (2009) note, they do not need to worry about the reaction of their peers.

The interview schedule was developed by focusing on the research goal for this study and on the literature which deals with rural youth inclusion/exclusion and after-school programs, but it also incorporated the findings that emerged from the workshop with a particular emphasis on the MSC exercise. The interviews were conducted at Fusion at a time convenient to the participants. All interviews were conducted one-on-one with the exception of one interview, when a male and female participant requested to do the interview together. Also one participant asked to have a Fusion staff member present during the interview. In an attempt to be accommodating for the participants, and to respect that they were exercising their agency in making these requests, the requests were granted. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

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.

4.2.3. Validation Focus Group

The validation focus group was held after the data analysis was completed and a first draft of the research findings was written. The focus group provided an opportunity for youth to reflect on the study's findings, and to discuss whether they agreed or disagreed with the researchers' interpretations.

Of the original 12 participants, only four were interested in participating in this part of the study. The findings were presented to the group for discussion. The youth agreed that the analysis completed by the researchers captured what they had tried to communicate. We must remember, however, that only four of the original twelve participants participated in this activity and other participants may have expressed different ideas and thoughts with regard to the findings had they participated in the validation focus group.

5.0 Results

The results of this study will be discussed under five general headings: Youth Experiences of Life in Ingersoll, Participation in Fusion, Youth/Youth Relationships, Youth/Adult Relationships and Fusion as a Place of Their Own.

5.1 Youth Experiences of Life in Ingersoll

Youth often characterize rural and small towns as not having much to do in them; they subscribe to the "rural dull" construction of rural rather than the "rural idyll." The participants in this study viewed Ingersoll in this way, with limited opportunities for recreation and entertainment, often complaining that Ingersoll was boring. While Fusion provides recreational opportunities, there was also the community centre where youth could participate in programs and swim, the bowling alley, and in the warm weather the golf course and miniature golf. However, as some youth noted, the community centre was on the other side of town and there is no public transportation. As one youth expressed it, the community centre is "Waaaay over there." Also they noted that these activities required paying fees to access them. Even swimming requires a membership or else a fee. They also maintained that even if they could afford these other activities they become boring. As one participant told us: "It gets so repetitive and boring; going to the bowling alley or to the golf course or just swimming in general."

There are other recreational opportunities for organized activities in Ingersoll, such as dance and sports, however all of these require fees which may not be within the budget of all families. When asked what was good about being a youth in Ingersoll, the respondents were hard pressed to identify anything beyond Fusion. One participant's response captures the essence of what most participants reported: "I don't know. I'd say Fusion because that's like the only thing."

Youth also commented that when they were out in public spaces they felt stereotyped and not welcomed. As one participant told us, "When a group of youth are hanging out in a park or something people are automatically going to think 'Oh look, they're probably passing a joint or something.'" Another participant responding to being stereotyped in the broader community told us "I hate it. I hate the stereotype because people look at me for being my age and I hate it."

Other participants talked about not being welcomed in business establishments in the community. As one participant explained to us, "If you go into a store or

restaurant you get stereotyped. …Cuz they always like tell us to leave our backpacks at the front but an adult with a backpack will walk in and they won't say anything." Another participant told us that "When it comes to store owners, they think that every kid is a trouble-maker. I don't know why. Like I can't go in without the manager looking at me awkwardly and I have never done anything bad." However some participants did admit that youth in public places were not always on their best behaviour. And while they often did not feel welcomed in the larger community, they told us that Fusion offered a reprieve from being out on the streets. One participant explained to us that:

> Cuz Ingersoll is small, and besides not being able to do anything and besides just giving a place for kids to go, it does get them off like, I don't know, like the bad sides of Ingersoll. Like with drugs and stuff. It gets them away from that and like it gives them a place to be safe and accepted.

Another participant explained to us that "If I am disagreeing with my parents at home I usually just come down here to get away from them." Other participants report that you paid your five dollars for your lifetime membership and you can come for free whenever you want. Another participant told us that "It gives you a place to hang out with your friends without getting into trouble." Participants also reported that by attending Fusion they were not outside engaging in riskier activities. This participant sums up what all but one participant expressed: "Instead of being bored and going around breaking things with their friends, they get bored and come here and find something better to do, more productive." Or as another participant put it, "It provides a space for youth to hang out and reduces the threat of them becoming involved with the law and making poor choices."

5.2 Participation in Fusion

While Fusion offers a respite from the larger community and home, and it provides a place to hang out with friends, it also offers a variety of more formal programming that allow Ingersoll youth to explore a variety of different areas, or to make improvements in their health and wellbeing. As one participant told us, "It allowed me to explore areas of interest and provided me with some insight into what I may want to do for a career." Another participant told us that:

> I've learned a lot of stuff through the programs like the ReBuildIT program. I've learned almost everything I know about computers in there. So that's been a very positive change. Its gets me more in the know-how and gets me more set up for a job in the future.

These activities may also enhance youth's self-esteem. As one participant explained to us, "Instead of being that loser kid that does all that tech stuff, I'm that awesome kid that does all that tech stuff." While another participant told us "I never used to sing in front of anybody but now I record." Much of the appeal of these programs is rooted in the fact that nothing is mandatory.

> They're not strict about what you have to do. It's by choice and you get to enjoy it more because you're not forced to do it. It's all an option.

Another participant talked about the joy that was derived from learning at Fusion: "…it's enjoyable for us and everything we do may be enjoyable but we're learning a new skill at the same time." They continued to explain to us that while often

programs such as music or art are available at school, here, because they have a choice, it is more fun and more rewarding.

5.3 Youth/Youth Relationships

Participants also report that Fusion provides an environment that fosters inclusiveness. We heard from participants about the cliques and drama that is often part of the Ingersoll youth experience. As one participant noted, "The smallest thing can cause the biggest drama. Like being friends with someone who everybody's like 'that person's not cool.' And someone makes a big commotion about it and it just gets everywhere." One participant reported that Fusion has helped them to learn to get along:

> I think it is because Fusion has taught us that it's easier for us all to get along than to fight and have a bunch of drama: "Oh I don't like her, I don't like him." It's just easier for us all to get along and it makes Ingersoll a better place.

Part of this is feeling like you belong. Another participant told us "You come to Fusion, you're part of the Fusion clique." For example, one participant stated that the age divide which usually segregates youth is not present at Fusion. And despite not socializing outside of Fusion (e.g., at school) when youth come to Fusion they all hang out together and learn together. As one participant noted, "If you're at Fusion, if you're hanging out with grades 11 and 12, and I'm younger, they don't act like I'm some little kid. They act, I guess it's because I'm mature, but they act like I'm just another person." The inclusive environment promoted at Fusion also allows individuals to meet others who share their interests as indicated by this participant: "I hang out with other people that are like actual musicians, here. And it's a lot more interesting, like people I would never have talked to and then I find out we share like an interest." One participant also discussed how what he has learned at Fusion is transferred beyond the walls of Fusion:

> We're all taught at Fusion to be respectful to everybody and treat everybody equally. And outside if we see, if you go to Fusion and you see someone who doesn't go to Fusion picking on anybody, you're like 'Whoa, that's not right, don't do that.' It teaches you not to be a bystander.

While another youth simply told us "…you kind of feel more accepted here than out in the big, bad world."

5.4 Youth/Adult Relationships

And while youth connect to other youth at Fusion, they also connect with adults in terms of their relationship with staff. One participant told us:

> My relationship with staff is pretty strong. I am able to come to most of them and talk about what is on my mind, what has been getting me down or angry. Staff are very considerate and caring. They go out of their way to ask you how your day was or to cheer you up.

Another participant told us that "Whenever I have anything wrong, the first thing I do is come to Fusion. I am like 'I need to talk.'" While another participant told us:

> You realize that just because they're adults they're not going to judge what's going on in your life. They're going to try and understand and help you

> through it and it really teaches you to open up to people and talk to them about your problems instead of leaving them bottled up.

Others discussed that they felt accepted by the staff without being judged: "You can talk to them and just have a conversation; just casually without having to watch what you're saying or anything like that." As one participant put it "They talk to you like you are a person, not just some punk ass kid. It's like, nice."

Despite having good relationships with staff the participants did express disappointment and anger when staff would leave Fusion, as is bound to happen; "It sucks. Since I've been here I remember two that have both left. And it sucks because you form a relationship with them and then they're just kind of gone." Youth also discussed their concern for when they "age out" and are not allowed to attend Fusion anymore: "I am going to hate it. I'm going to miss Fusion a lot and all the experiences that I have had here." Others saw it as a "natural progression": "I feel sort of too old to be here and to me, it feels like I am out of place because of my age. I think I am ready to move on with my life." For some, then, there is a fear of losing support, raising the question, does this mean that these youth then experience social exclusion, perhaps making them once more vulnerable?

5.5 *Fusion as a Place of Their Own*

Youth also talked about Fusion as their "place," a safe place. As one participant told us:

> If you don't have a place like this, then it's kind of a free for all, you know: go smoke your drugs, go drink alcohol. Here it's kind of like, you know, you come here you're not bored, and you're not tempted to go out and smoke your drugs or anything. You'll get other kids who are like, well I'm here now, I don't want to risk getting kicked out cuz all my friends are here.

One participant, commenting on the nutrition program, told us that:

> Like you can help with meals and stuff to get a meal. And like after you have to do dishes together. Like we're expected to keep it clean like we would our own house. And I don't know, it just taught us responsibility; yes we can do what we want, but they have expectations that we take care of it.

Another participant told us "I think more towns need something like this to like, I guess, deter criminal activity. Cuz I think I'm almost certain I've noticed the youth crime rate go down since the place opened".

Despite the seeming benefits that Fusion provides for Ingersoll youth, the participants report that it is not necessarily held in high esteem by the community in general. One participant told us that "I've heard that some people don't want their kids coming here [Fusion] cuz they have heard it is a place for drugs." Another participant told us that:

> My parents are definitely among those who think that Fusion is a terrible idea. They think it is another place for us to go, pass drugs around, get drunk, whatever. But really the people that are saying that haven't actually come and given it a fair chance. They just automatically assume youth in a building is a bad idea.

There is some merit in the above participant's comment given another participant told us that "A lot of people have come through Fusion and seen youth not doing bad things and actually doing something, like not bad. So I guess when they see that they think 'They're really not that bad.'" Another participant added, noting the impact of Fusion on the community, that "I would say you see less kids running the roads now. They used to hang out at the park or the gazebo downtown. Now you don't see anybody. They're either at home or at Fusion."

6.0 Discussion

Rye (2006) has suggested that often rural areas and communities are constructed within the context of the "rural idyll", and while some residents subscribe to this construction of rural, others construct it as the "rural dull," particularly young people. The participants in this study identified closely with the idea of the "rural dull," noting that there were few affordable opportunities for young people, with the exception of Fusion. Furthermore, the participants reported being stereotyped in the larger community and that they did not feel welcomed in many public spaces. As with many small communities, youth felt marginalized and excluded, and were treated as "second class" citizens (e.g., adults receive differential treatment than youth in places of business). Nairn et al. (2003) note that youth need places of their own to hang out with friends etc. When there are no places of their own, youth will often attempt to appropriate public spaces for themselves, or may make their presence known through various artifacts left behind, such as graffiti, and this is not always acceptable to the adults of the community (White & Wyn, 2008), particularly if it involves what is seen by adults as anti-social behaviour. One participant noted that since Fusion was opened, you do not see youth gathering in the town core at places such as the Gazebo, a public space they had attempted to appropriate for their own prior to Fusion opening. The participants in this study noted that while Fusion provides opportunities to engage in many various activities and learning, it also provides a space just to hang out with friends and meet new people. It was also noted that youth "owned" the space, and there were opportunities made for demonstrating this through program development, and even through giving youth places to create art/graffiti (the gym walls, the skate-park, the art room). There is an understanding at Fusion that even something like graffiti is an expression of ownership and youth appreciated these opportunities to express their ownership of the space.

Adolescence is also a time of experimentation as youth grapple with issues of identity, who they are, who they might become, and where they might go in the future. Consequently, youth in their experimentation and search for identity may engage in activities that put their health and wellbeing at risk. In fact, risky behaviour is the major cause of morbidity and mortality in young people and for rural youth the risk is even greater than for their urban counterparts (Cross, 2012). When safe spaces and places are not provided for youth then they are more likely to engage in more risky behaviour. In this study we heard from the participants that, despite what the larger community thinks of Fusion, it provides a safe place to engage in productive behaviours and avoid what one participant called the "bad sides of Ingersoll," e.g. drugs and criminal activity.

One of the issues raised by participants in this study is that most youth oriented activities in Ingersoll require money to participate, be it swimming, bowling, or miniature golf. And despite the participants' perspective that these activities become boring after a while (e.g., the same old thing), they also noted that they cost money.

Hence those youth who come from more modest socioeconomic backgrounds may be excluded from participation as a result of not being able to afford to participate just as they may be excluded from participating in more organized youth activities such as hockey or figure skating (Shucksmith, 2003). The participants in this study were clear that from a financial perspective Fusion was accessible and hence inclusive. As one participant told us, he could pay his $5.00 membership fee and come to Fusion for "free" anytime he liked and can engage in any of the activities he wishes to. In this sense Fusion is inclusive and open and accessible to all youth who desire to participate.

While youth may often be excluded from the larger community, some youth may also be excluded from the community of youth. As stated previously, exclusion often arises as a result of youth "othering" other youth (Adler & Adler, 1995; Laegran, 2002). The issue of exclusion by other youth was raised by the participants, often in reference to the drama of adolescent life and the youth cliques that form. The participants in this study were very clear that the cliques that existed outside of Fusion did not exist within Fusion; Fusion provided an environment that encourages youth to extend their relationships with other youth. Youth appreciated this and were often surprised to find that they had much in common with others who outside of Fusion they would not have talked to. This is not to suggest that the cliques that exist outside of Fusion are transcended as a result of Fusion, only that clique membership seemed to be suspended and not a barrier to youth interacting with one another while they are engaged in Fusion, be it a particular program, or just hanging out.

Bourke and Geldens (2007) have argued that successful youth-to-adult transition is contingent on having supportive and dependable relationships with adults where youth feel accepted and cared for, despite their need to assert their independence. The participants in this study were very clear about the importance of their relationships with Fusion staff members, and how they felt accepted and cared for by these adults. We need to be cognizant that not all youth experience these relationships in their families, and as Lauzon (2013) notes, schools only provide these types of relationships for a small percentage of youth, leaving us with the question as to where these other youth find the support and acceptance by adults that they need during this period of precarious transition. It is evident that Fusion is filling that void for the participants of this study.

The downside of these relationships, however, should also be noted. Some youth expressed disappointment and anger at the departure of staff they had grown close to and come to depend on and confiding in. While this can be construed as somewhat troubling, it too is simply part of ongoing organizational dynamics. This is particularly true for those staff members who have professional credentials, such as the music program, where employment in Fusion may be a first step in their career development. For example, one staff member who ran the music and recording program has been developing his own commercial studio. It is now established enough that it demands his full-time attention and hence he reluctantly relinquished his position at Fusion. This does pose a challenge to Fusion to think through how these difficult transitions in staff can be handled in terms of supporting the youth.

A related issue to the above is what happens when youth "age out" of Fusion. This was a concern for some participants, and it means surrendering the support network they may have developed over a number of years. However, other participants viewed it as part of a natural process of maturing. This too challenges Fusion as to how to support this transition of youth as they move into a new phase of their lives.

By providing an inclusive environment, Fusion creates the necessary conditions where youth can begin to explore and develop their identity. The variety of programming and interests offered to youth, along with the freedom for them to exercise their own decisions as to how and when they will participate in Fusion programs, provides the conditions whereby youth can begin to explore provisional identities as they imagine what their futures might be. There was a clear expression of appreciation for the diversity of opportunities available to youth at Fusion, and an acknowledgement of the knowledge and skills they had developed, but perhaps more importantly participants expressed the positive impact participating in Fusion has had on their own sense of self, generating a sense of well-being. When a sense of well-being is generated it begins to mitigate many of the risks that youth may be tempted to take. As Bourke and Geldens (2007) noted, the development of achieving goals and having hobbies, in addition to supportive, caring, and meaningful relationships, is essential to successful and healthy youth development.

7.0 Conclusion

According to the participants of this study Fusion has made a difference in their lives. While they have told us that they often feel excluded from the larger community, and that there is little to do in Ingersoll beyond going to Fusion, the community has provided a valuable resource for the youth of Ingersoll, a resource where they feel included. Youth have told us about how they feel connected to other youth through Fusion, allowing them to escape the drama of adolescence that often characterizes life in Ingersoll for young people. They also feel connected and accepted by Fusion staff, creating relationships where they feel both cared for and respected, and provide opportunities for youth to talk to adults about the challenges they face. Fusion also provides a place for youth, a place where they feel a sense of ownership and pride. As Leyshon (2003) and Laegran (2002) have argued, exclusion of rural youth often arises as a result of youth not having a place of their own. The town of Ingersoll has provided their youth with a place that is their own. Youth are involved in its development and in its maintenance; they are expected to care for this place of their own.

While Fusion does assist in the youth overcoming a sense of exclusion it creates an environment where youth can exercise their agency in choosing how to be involved in Fusion; they can explore and participate in the plethora of programs offered, simply use the skatepark, or just hang out with friends. For those who have participated in the more formal programming at Fusion, we have heard how they have developed knowledge and skills, how they have come to use this as a means of reflecting on their future, and how they have come to see themselves more positively; it has enhanced their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Fusion also provides opportunities for youth to reflect upon and begin to negotiate tentative identities, a critical developmental function of adolescence (Kidder & Rogers, 2004).

Fusion is not without challenges. They need to look for ways to support youth who experience the transition of losing a valuable relationship when staff members leave. They need to look for ways to provide support for Fusion members who are aging out and in aging out also lose a support system that they may have developed over a period of years. Fusion also faces the challenge of its perception by community members, as ultimately its continued support is contingent upon the community seeing the value in supporting Fusion. In these fiscally strained times where all levels

of government are struggling it becomes imperative to demonstrate the value it adds to the community.

Another outstanding challenge for Fusion and for the town of Ingersoll is the feelings that youth expressed in not being welcomed in the larger community, or their belief that people in the community view Fusion negatively. Shucksmith and Philip (2000) noted that to overcome social exclusion is to become integrated into the community. Despite the success that Fusion has experienced with the youth, the youth still report not feeling welcome or part of the larger community, and in this sense continue to experience social exclusion. Nor do they feel that Fusion and what they accomplish at Fusion is valued, which also contributes to feelings of social exclusion.

While Fusion may add value to Ingersoll in a variety of ways, in this study we would argue that the results demonstrate its value is in creating the conditions for healthy youth development. As was noted earlier, the major health risks that youth face during the youth-to-adult transition are engagement in risky and anti-social behaviours. When youth engage in these behaviours there is a cost incurred by the youth, by the community, and by society at large[2]. Supporting youth development is a social investment whose "dividends" are realized at a future date.

This paper started by noting some of the challenges rural communities in Canada face. Communities often lament the loss of their best and brightest youth, but ironically, according to Lauzon (2013), these communities invest significant resources in those youth who will leave the community while investing far less in accessible environment that supports the development of rural youth, whether they choose to go or stay, and whether they come from privileged socio-economic backgrounds or not.

As rural communities look to the future, one of their major challenges is developing a labour force that meets the demands of a dynamic and knowledge intensive economy. Fostering inclusive environments and places for all rural youth that foster positive youth development is a strategic investment in the youth of the community, particularly those who may stay, and this provides the foundation for labour force development, something that is in the community's best interest. Comprehensive afterschool programs, such as Fusion, we would argue, seem to be a prudent investment, promoting both the development of youth and the development of the community, enhancing the wellbeing of both.

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[2] A study conducted by Snyder and Sickmund (1999) estimated that one "lost" youth costs society between $1.7 and 2.3 million dollars over a fourteen year period.

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