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Fostering Rural Youth Wellbeing through Afterschool Programs: The Case of Fusion Youth and Technology Centre, Ingersoll, Ontario

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Abstract

Rural youth face many challenges and risks to their wellbeing. One means of mitigating the risks rural youth experience, is through the provision of afterschool programs. This study reports on adult perceptions of how participation in an afterschool program—Fusion Youth and Technology Centre—affects rural youth wellbeing. A qualitative study was undertaken in which nine staff members, three program administrators, and six knowledgeable adult community members were interviewed to determine how they perceived the impact that participation in Fusion had on the wellbeing of rural youth. Three broad themes were identified that contributed to enhanced rural youth wellbeing: (1) engaging youth through an eclectic mix of programs and activities; (2) building relationships and connections; and (3) a place for youth. The results of this study were then contrasted with an earlier study that examined the perceptions of youth who participated in Fusion. There was a corroboration of all themes between studies with the exception of enhanced community relationships. The conclusion is that participating in Fusion Youth and Technology Centre contributes positively to the wellbeing of rural youth. This then raises a number of questions that rural communities need to ask themselves if they are serious about promoting the wellbeing of the youth in their communities.

Keywords: youth, rural, health, wellbeing, afterschool programs

1.0 Introduction

It has been argued that rural communities face many challenges. 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 wellbeing of these communities, including labour 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 now qualifies as a determinant of health.

According to Franke (2010), youth should be of particular interest as they represent the future of rural communities and they provide a key opportunity for social investment policy. Yet the results of a recent OECD (2009) study, where Canada ranked twenty-second out of thirty comparator countries in relation to child wellbeing for health and safety, suggests that investment in youth has not been a priority; much like rural in general, rural youth seem to experience greater challenges to their development than urban youth evidenced by the 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 adolescent rural males deaths often arise as a result of “injuries and poisonings, MVAs and suicides” (51), accounting for a significant proportion of adolescent male deaths. Adolescent girls also experience similar higher levels of mortality than their urban counterparts, although they are significantly lower than rural male adolescent rates. Furthermore, given the above, it appears that the differences between rural and urban youth in terms of mortality rates is a function of rural youth engaging in more risky behaviours. For example, both Rhew et al. (2006) and Pruitt (2009) note that rural youth are at 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” (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, 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.” In the end, Ostry (2012) concludes that the “rural health disadvantage is largely a problem among children, youth and young adults” (55).

Perhaps this increased activity in risky behaviours is a function of rural youth viewing what many adults consider the “rural idyll” as the “rural dull” (Rye, 2006) with little to do and few resources available to them (Shucksmith, 2003). Thus youth will often seek to secure their own “resources and space on their own and this can often lead to a struggle between youth and adults (White & Wyn, 2008). Hence the absence of financial, material, and human resources in rural communities relative to urban centres, means rural communities are more likely to be challenged to create inclusive spaces that meet the diverse needs of their youth to promote their development and wellbeing.

This article asks the question what impact does rural youth participation in an afterschool program have on the youth wellbeing from the perspective of adults who know and are involved with the youth? Specifically, we will examine a particular rural afterschool program, the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre (Fusion), situated in Ingersoll, Ontario, that serves youth between the ages of 12 and 18. We begin by examining the relationship between the concepts of health, wellbeing and

youth and this is followed by examining the role that afterschool programs play in promoting youth wellbeing. We then provide a brief overview of Fusion followed by the methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusions.

2.0 Health, Wellbeing and Youth

The concept of health has evolved over the past century shifting from a 'biomedical' model, through a 'lifestyle' model to the current 'social determinants of health' model. This last model of health recognizes that the primary factors affecting the health of people are not medical treatments or lifestyle choices, but rather the conditions in which people live (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011; Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). The social determinants of health are the economic and social conditions that determine the extent to which people have access to the physical, personal, and social resources required to satisfy needs, cope with the environment, and achieve personal aspirations (Raphael, 2009). These determinants are beyond the control of most individuals, as many conditions are imposed and affected by policy, including distribution of income and wealth, employment, working conditions, social exclusion, and ability to obtain quality education and housing. Thus health is a function of how society organizes and distributes economic and social resources; to improve health, society must improve distribution and use of these resources (Raphael, 2009). While some social determinants of health cannot be modified at the individual level, people can acquire protective personal resources and learned abilities such as coping skills, resourcefulness and capacity for action. In addition, environmental resources, such as social support, can promote health (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011; Rogers, 1997).

In relation to youth, adolescence is a period of transition for youth, whereby they are vulnerable to risk (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011; Rogers, 1997). During the transition to adulthood, youth begin to choose their own environments and make choices that place them on trajectories that determine adult health and health behaviours (Hoyt et al., 2012; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011). Thus, health can be understood as a capacity or resource rather than a state in which people are able to pursue goals, acquire skills and education, grow, and respond to and control life's challenges and changes. This broader notion of health recognizes the range of social, economic and physical environmental factors that contribute to health (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011), giving rise to the idea of wellbeing that recognizes the multitude of factors that affect how we experience and understand our lives.

Wellbeing then has implications for how we understand the experiences of youth. Although youth is generally a time of good health, experiences inherent in youth transitions can pose threats to wellbeing. Most researchers agree wellbeing is a multifaceted concept, and it is not intuitively obvious which domains should be integrated into an assessment of wellbeing, or how different aspects should be weighted as important; there are diverse definitions and measures (Foregeard et al., 2011). Historically, the conceptualization of wellbeing in relation to youth has been largely based on a youth-at-risk disorder, in which wellbeing is defined only by the absence of disorder, such as antisocial behaviour, much as health was defined as the absence of disease (Hoyt, et al., 2012; Park, 2004). This approach has been criticized for failing to consider the underlying causes of problems and aiming interventions at people perceived as being part of a 'disadvantaged' vulnerable social group, rather than considering the heterogeneity of the youth population. There is a need to provide resources that strengthen the abilities of all youth, enabling them to reduce

their vulnerability and risk (Franke, 2010). More recent 'social investment' views argue there is a need to balance the youth-at-risk dimensions with positive aspects of youth development to provide a full picture of a person's wellbeing (Park, 2004). In addition to addressing the needs of the whole population, this view recognizes that positive and negative emotions may co-exist, and one should not assume that individuals are doing well simply because they do not report negative behaviours, moods or emotions (Hoyt et al., 2012; Cronin de Chaves et al., 2005; Park, 2004).

The strongest predictor of wellbeing is the presence of supportive relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). From the healthy community point of view, the capacity to realize potential is affected by collective relationships, and the collective wellbeing of communities is an essential precondition for individual wellbeing (Wiseman & Brasher, 2008). Bourke and Geldens (2007) identified the need to view wellbeing through the lens of the social processes inherent in young peoples' lives. They explored ways in which Australian youth define wellbeing. Supportive relationships with family, friends, teachers, and counselors were important as youth valued having someone in which to confide, talk, laugh, and have fun with. Psychological dimensions of wellbeing included achieving personal goals, having hobbies, having a positive attitude, and believing in one's self. Youth perceived that wellbeing is impacted by stress and pressure, environments at home, school, work, and access to opportunities for education and employment. Australian youth workers identified similar aspects of wellbeing, but placed more emphasis on structurally determined aspects, such as the social environment, opportunities, and sense of belonging. Young people focused on the present, while youth workers focused on social processes affecting youth lives over time. Bourke and Geldens (2007) concluded each group works towards different but complementary goals, and addressing community structural assets is an effective way of enhancing the wellbeing of youth. Thus, from the perspective of youth, wellbeing means supportive relationships, achieving goals, having hobbies, having a positive attitude and believing in one's self.

Research on the long-term effects of positive wellbeing in adolescents is sparse, however two recent longitudinal studies have addressed this issue. Hoyt et al. (2012) conducted a recent analysis of data from the United States National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to investigate the longitudinal health consequences of positive wellbeing in 10,147 youth, who were in Grades 7 to 11 at the time of enrollment. Positive wellbeing included measures of happiness, enjoyment of life, hopefulness about the future, having a lot to be proud of, liking themselves, and feeling socially accepted, wanted, and loved. Follow-up took place when youth were 18 to 27 years of age. Positive wellbeing during adolescence was significantly associated with reporting excellent health and less risky behaviour such as low physical activity, fast food consumption, cigarette smoking, binge drinking, and use of illegal drugs during young adulthood. The authors concluded that nurturing positive characteristics in families, schools and after-school programs may be a promising way to improve lifelong health. A recent Australian longitudinal study, using data from the Australian Temperament Project, demonstrated that positive youth development during emerging adulthood was associated with improved emotional health and physical wellbeing during early adulthood (Hawkins et al., 2012). This study followed 890 rural and urban youth from diverse backgrounds from ages 19 to 20 through their transition to adulthood at ages 23 to 24. After controlling for gender and socioeconomic status, the authors demonstrated that positive development at 19 to 20 years of age was predictive of higher levels of self-

reported emotional health, physical wellbeing and peer relationships as well as reduced levels of antisocial behaviour at the four year follow-up (Hawkins et al., 2012). The authors concluded that intervention programs supporting positive adolescent development should be explored for subsequent impact on successful transition to adulthood, including the interrelated roles of specific dimensions of positive development.

People who lack supportive relationships and experience social isolation are more likely to sustain stress that affects health (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). To a large extent, the trajectories youth take are the result of individual choices and decisions, but youth develop within specific family, social and economic contexts and rules that govern life and present certain opportunities and risks (Franke, 2010). Their vulnerability to risks depends on their ability to mobilize the necessary assets to prevent, mitigate or cope with these risks, including their own capacities and the support of other social actors such as families and communities (Franke, 2010). A cross-sectional study on Canadian youth examined the relationship between the presence of social developmental assets, health enhancing practices and participation in risky behaviours (Yugo & Davidson, 2007). Connectedness with peers was associated with better health and higher self-worth; those reporting high levels of peer connectedness were 1.64 times more likely to also report excellent or very good self-rated health than youth with medium to low levels of this asset. However, those reporting high levels of peer connectedness were more likely to report more use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana than youth with medium to low levels of peer connectedness. Youth who reported a high level of connectedness with family and school were more likely to report better health and less use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. Interestingly, high levels of parental monitoring was not associated with reduced participation in these risky behaviours, and was actually associated with lower reported levels of youth self-worth. The authors concluded that programs and policies that may be most beneficial to youth and facilitate their transition into healthy adulthood are those that increase the number and quality of connections, focus on positive youth development rather than avoiding risky behaviours, and engage youth in meaningful activities (Yugo & Davidson, 2007).

3.0 After-School Programs

It is often assumed that the educational system is the fundamental institution that will meet the needs of youth. Lauzon (2013) has argued that despite the central role of education in the life of youth, the changing educational discourse with a greater focus on education for employment has been at the expense of the historic humanist educational agenda that focused on the growth and development of youth. As Lauzon (2013, 6) wrote, “as a result of the preoccupation with the relationship between education and the economy, those issues that schooling had considered an important part of the educational mission—character development, the function of responsible citizenry, and the development of a more just society—has been marginalized, leaving the economy as the central concern of public education policies and systems in developed economies.” Consequently, the very practice of education has changed, increasingly pushing more students to the margins (Lauzon, 2013). As Lauzon notes, as the economic agenda has dominated the humanistic agenda in education, the margins are widening while their density increases, thus further undermining youth wellbeing. This is further exacerbated he argues, by the fact that a private school within the public school often develops, meaning a small percentage of students get the majority of adult attention and time. This issue is

further exacerbated for rural youth, given the “relentless consolidation and amalgamation of schools in most of rural Canada” (Corbett, 2014, 10) and consequently rural youth spend more time travelling to and from school. This will often limit opportunities for engagement beyond regular classes.

Lauzon (2013) has argued that after-school programs need to be understood as a significant part of the lifelong learning infrastructure, particularly in light of changes in schooling. He also suggests, as have others, that after-school programs are an intervention for fostering the development and wellbeing of young people (Durlak, 2010; Wright et al., 2009; Beets et al., 2009; Little et al., 2008; Lowe Vandell et al., 2007; Scott-Little et al., 2002), and in many ways addresses some of the deficits that have arisen in educational practice as a result of the changing educational discourse.

After-school programs refer to formal programs for school-age youth (ages 5-18) that operate outside of normal school hours for at least part of the year, are supervised or in some way monitored by adults, and that intentionally seek to promote young people’s growth and development by focusing on one or more of the following areas: academic/cognitive, personal/social, cultural, artistic, or civic development (Durlak et al., 2009, p. 44).

Intention is an important criteria for differentiating between after-school programs and childcare; programs that have structured programming designed to lead to specific goals have demonstrated positive impacts on development and wellbeing, while programs that focus on adult supervision without skill building have not been associated with these outcomes and may in fact be associated with negative outcomes (Durlak et al., 2009; Little et al., 2008). Structured programs provide opportunities for youth to build personal resources through academic assistance, various forms of enrichment activities such as the arts, music, nutrition, and opportunities to develop leadership, personal or social skills and resources in a safe, adult-supervised environment (Durlak, 2010; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Little et al., 2008; Scott-Little et al., 2002). Furthermore, after-school programs are most effective when they reflect local needs and interests and thus offer the opportunity to embrace diversity. Factors associated with program participation include personal interest and motivation, parental encouragement, peer group influences, proximity of programs, types of programming, and program staff (Durlak et al., 2009; Little et al., 2008).

After-school programs have been examined in terms of wellbeing. Durlak and Weissberg’s review and meta-analysis demonstrated that programs had a positive effect on self-confidence and self-esteem as well as a reduction in problem behaviours such as aggression and conduct problems (2007). Scott-Little et al. (2002) conducted a meta-evaluation of after-school programs and found program participation was associated with improved social skills, such as the ability to express opinions and communicate with others, and the ability to maintain self-control and avoid fights. There were also positive findings in relation to participant attitudes, self-concept, and self-esteem. Programs involving youth in longer term arts and leadership experiential learning projects have been linked to building skills related to strategic thinking, a necessary skill for adapting to changing life circumstances and maintaining mental health. In a study of youth participating in eleven urban and rural arts and leadership programs, youth participants reported they had learned to think strategically and organize their efforts to accomplish goals and solve problems (Larson & Angus, 2011). Youth also felt they had learned tactical skills such as how to predict and influence their environments and shape their actions

based on how they predicted others would respond. Importantly, youth felt that they transferred this learning to address general life problems and navigate their transition to adulthood (Larson & Angus, 2011).

Risk reduction and safety outcomes that have been associated with after-school programs include avoidance of drug and alcohol use, increased knowledge of safe sex, avoidance of sexual activity, and a reduction in youth violence and crime (Little et al., 2008; Lowe Vandell et al., 2007). A recent quasi-experimental Canadian study involving 183 youth from low income communities in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and one rural Ontario town compared youth participating in after-school arts programs with a matched sample control group. The study demonstrated that after-school arts programs featuring peer social support had a positive effect on pro-social behaviours including reducing emotional problems and increasing global self-esteem ratings (Wright et al., 2009), particularly for youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

The above review demonstrates the efficacy of after-school programs in the promotion of youth development and wellbeing.

4.0 The Fusion Youth and Technology Centre (Fusion)

The concept of rural is a contested concept and what we mean by rural is not always obvious or clear. Statistics Canada (2011) published a document entitled *From Urban Areas to Populations Centres*. Here, a new typology was articulated that defined communities by population size. Simply stated, they identified large urban population centres (100,000 people or more), medium population centres (30,000-99,999 people), small population centres (1,000-29,999 people) and all other areas were called rural. The site of this research study—Ingersoll, Ontario—would be classified as a small population centre. Bollman (2014) divided communities by census divisions and identified three census divisions: (1) metro census divisions, (2) partially-metro census divisions, and (3) non-metro census divisions. Ingersoll is located in Oxford County in SW Ontario and is classified as a non-metro census division. Given that Ingersoll is classified as both a small population centre and a non-metro census division, it will be understood to be a rural community for the purposes of this study.

Ingersoll has a population 12,146 people. It is situated approximately two hours west of Toronto and is in Oxford County. Economic activity in Oxford County is dominated by manufacturing with two major auto manufacturing plants located in Oxford County, (Woodstock and Ingersoll), agriculture, and a substantive representation in the service industries. However, the manufacturing sector in non-metro Ontario has decreased by 15% between 2008 and 2014 (Bollman, 2014). When the rates of income growth were examined, Oxford County was third last in the rate of income growth between 1993 and 2011 with an annual growth rate of 0.81 percent. Total population growth for Oxford County between 2011 and 2012 has been 0.73 percent of the total population (Bollman, 2014), with population growth for those under 18 years of age being 1.19 percent. However, despite growth in the population over all, and the growth in population in youth under 18 years of age, there has been a decline of 1.15 percent of those young adults between 18 and 24 years of age. This suggests that as youth transition to adulthood they are choosing to leave the community.

In 2003 Ingersoll engaged in a process of renewing their strategic plan. One area that was identified during this process was youth, and youth became one of six strategic directions. As a result of this initiative a Youth Planning Group was convened and identified their goal as “Youth will be encouraged to achieve a high sense of purpose, of identity, and pride for and within their community” (Fusion, 2015). This led to the Youth Planning Committee to identify three strategic goals:

- Establish a permanent youth committee and a permanent youth council;
- Develop a flexible youth strategy to meet the needs of the community’s youth; and
- To establish a fully funded youth centre.

Fusion Youth and Technology Centre, located in Ingersoll, opened in 2006 and has since expanded space, resources, services, and activities. Fusion, situated in a former school, while originally occupying two rooms, now occupies approximately 18,000 square feet, is located downtown and is open six days/evenings per week. The centre offers a wide variety of programs to 12 to 18 year-olds including art and music, leadership and social development, entrepreneurial and skill development, indoor and outdoor recreational fitness and sports, and a wide variety of technology activities including computer labs, computer recycling, photography, broadcasting media, and a recording studio¹. The staff members who interact directly with youth are generally young adults who bring both knowledge in working with youth and expertise in the above activities. Fusion serves youth from Ingersoll and the surrounding area. It is operated and funded by the Town of Ingersoll and is situated within the Department of Parks and Recreation. It has an annual budget from the municipality of just under \$500,000 per year and leverages municipal money into slightly less than a total of \$1,000,000 per year (Pries et al., 2013a). While Fusion has a rather large budget, the youth membership costs \$5.00 per year.

Fusion, however, is situated in a county that has its own set of youth challenges. For example, in Oxford County, bullying/conflict and stress ranked within the top five health concerns identified by high school students and teachers in a 2010 survey (Oxford County Public Health and Emergency Services, 2011). Stress was also the number one issue identified by Oxford County youth in a 2008 survey (United Way, 2008a). Issues leading to stress included academic pressure, responding to parents’ stressful circumstances related to illness and employment, addictions, relationships, rumors generated from social networking media, lack of opportunities to be with healthy role models, not knowing where to go to for help or how to deal with stress in a positive way, lack of places where they can go and fit in and feel safe without exposure to drugs or alcohol, and lack of trust between adults and youth (United Way, 2008b). Students also identified a number of related safety concerns, including the availability of drugs, bullying in school and being harassed by older adolescents in community places.

In relation to risk taking behaviours, in the Oxford County Drug Task Force survey (2010), youth were asked what they believed should be done to prevent youth from using drugs. “Education” was the most common suggestion, but the next ranked suggestion was “nothing” as drug use was viewed as being inevitable and part of the youth experience. This perspective is worrisome. However, other ideas that youth

¹ For a complete listing and description of Fusion programs see Christie and Lauzon (2014).

identified included providing more programs, activities, clubs and sports for Oxford County youth, addressing peer pressure, creating positive home and social environments for youth, and providing places for youth to go when they have a problem (Oxford County Drug Task Force, 2010). Similarly, community stakeholders identified a need for low-cost or free after-school activities that meet a broad range of youth, and prevention efforts that help youth prepare for the moment when they have to make a decision about substance misuse (Oxford County Drug Task Force, 2010).

Recent research at Fusion has been completed by Christie and Lauzon (2014) who studied the impact of Ingersoll youth's participation in Fusion on youth from the youth perspective. They reported that:

- Youth reported that there is little to do in Ingersoll beyond going to Fusion;
- Youth reported feeling ownership and responsibility for Fusion;
- Diversity of programming provides opportunities to choose programs and engage in learning opportunities on their own terms, hence learning is meaningful;
- Youth learn to work toward specific goals and hence develop a work ethic and a capacity to self-regulate their behavior in terms of both their learning and social interactions;
- Youth experience relationships with adults where they can be themselves, along with having adult mentors and confidants;
- Youth experience positive relationships with other youth, escaping the drama and cliques that exist outside of Fusion;
- Youth 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;
- Youth reported enhanced self-esteem; and
- Youth reported that Fusion provided a refuge they could seek to avoid what they described as the bad side of Ingersoll.

These findings are important, given that Khan (2014) reports in her research that staff stated that many of the youth who attend Fusion come from homes that are not well-off economically and often do not have positive adult role models or adults to provide them with socio-emotional support. In other words, youth who exist on the margins may be at-risk. While Christie and Lauzon examined the perceptions of Fusion youth participants, this study complements their study by examining the perceptions of adults who work or are associated with the Fusion Centre and Fusion youth. It provides the perspective of adults who know and interact with youth in the context of their participation in Fusion.

5.0 Methodology

The research design for this study was a single case study, with the unit of analysis being one after-school program—the Fusion Youth Centre in Ingersoll, Ontario Canada. Simons (2009) defines a case study as an “in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a ‘real life’ context” (21). Case studies

are appropriate when there is a unique story to be told, as they tell the detailed story of an organization—what happened, when, to whom, and the consequences, including project successes and challenges (Neale et al., 2006). This approach was fitting to the research question, as the emphasis was on understanding the connections between the youth centre and youth wellbeing. Three sources of data were utilized: (1) document analysis, (2) observation and (3) in-depth semi-structured interviews. In addition, following the data analysis a validation focus group was held.

First, pertinent documents related to Oxford County, Ingersoll and Fusion were reviewed. This document review was undertaken to develop an understanding of the youth context in Ingersoll, and also to develop an understanding of the development and functioning of Fusion. Also previous research that had been conducted at Fusion was reviewed. Second, observations were made during two site visits. During these site visits the field researcher (Heather) acquainted herself with some of the youth and how the day-to-day operations of Fusion were run. During these site visits she had time to talk with staff and with youth who were in the centre during her visits. Third, in depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with adults associated with the centre. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents most likely to have knowledge of both the centre and youth. Eighteen individual interviews were conducted. In order to obtain a diverse range of perspectives, representation was sought from three groups:

- 1) 9 senior after-school program staff
- 2) 3 program administrative staff
- 3) 6 adult affiliated community members who had knowledge of the program but were not part of the staff.

The inclusion criteria for program staff was (1) having at least two years of experience in the program and (2) being identified by the manager as a senior staff member. The two year minimum experience time frame was selected due to the time-bound nature of wellbeing; the impact of health behaviours, decisions and experiences may not be apparent in the immediate time, thus ongoing interaction with youth was deemed to be important to capture the impact of the Centre on youth wellbeing. This timeframe also allows informants to have had opportunity to interact regularly with many different youth. The inclusion criteria for administrative staff was being a manager or administrator responsible for broader program decisions and leading the planning for the centre. Inclusion criteria for affiliated community members was being an adult who did not work for Fusion but who was identified by the manager as having knowledge of Fusion, its programs, and Fusion youth.

The manager identified all program staff who met inclusion criteria and six affiliated community members who could best respond to the research questions. Potential informants were contacted by the manager at their place of work and were invited to participate.

Data collection involved both in-depth semi-structured interviews and one follow-up validation focus group.

Two advantages of using in-depth interviews for case study research are their ability to capture how informants arrive at their opinions through opportunity for clarifying details (Gerring, 2007), and their ability to allow progressive focusing to refine interview questions as significant issues emerge (Simons, 2009). For informant

interviews, each informant was involved in one face to face, in-depth semi-structured interview lasting 20 to 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the field researcher (Heather). The following set of guiding questions was used:

1. Could you tell me how you would define health and wellbeing in relation to youth?
2. Do you think the Fusion Youth Centre, programs and activities have an impact youth health and wellbeing? How? In what ways?
3. In your experience, do you think there are any sources of tension or concerns that exist in the centre or the community about the Fusion Youth Centre in relation to youth health and wellbeing?
4. Is there anything additional that you want to tell me that might clarify my understanding of the situation?

The goal of rigor in qualitative research is to accurately represent the study participants' perspectives. In qualitative research, rigor is most often determined by the study participants (Streubert & Rinaldi Carpenter, 2011). Respondent validation refers to checking the accuracy, adequacy and fairness of the interpretations with those whom they concern (Simons, 2009). At the close of the individual interview, key informants were invited to attend a validation focus group to collectively review and comment on the results. Eleven of the eighteen participants participated in the validation focus group: 5 staff members, 2 administrative staff and 4 community affiliated members. Results were shared, and the researcher guided the discussion according to the themes that had emerged from data analysis. After each theme was shared, participants were asked:

1. Do you think these results reflect how the Fusion Youth Centre, programs and activities impact youth health and wellbeing?
2. Is there anything that you think is missing from these results that might clarify our understanding of the situation?

The purpose of data analysis in qualitative research is to permit an understanding of the phenomenon while preserving the uniqueness of each participant's lived experience (Streubert & Rinaldi Carpenter, 2011). Data collection and analysis occur simultaneously in case study research (Zucker, 2009). For this study, data was analyzed using an emergent, inductive process in which reasoning began with the details of the individual experiences emerging from the interviews and moved towards creating a more general picture of the phenomenon (Streubert & Rinaldi Carpenter, 2011). Concept mapping was used to complete data analysis, using guidelines proposed by Northcott (1996).

Concept maps are a visual method of representing knowledge and mapping links between related concepts to make sense of the data through clarification of connections and identification of emerging holes or contradictions (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012; Simons, 2009; Northcott, 1996). They are helpful for emergent research designs in which the collection and analysis of data occur concurrently as there is no delay in waiting for transcription to occur (Northcott, 1996). Concept maps can be used to organize and analyze individual perspectives and emerging theoretical ideas; they can be used to code and categorize data; identify themes; and map relationships and patterns (Simons, 2009).

Strategies used to support reliability in this phase of the study included (1) working directly from the recordings in their original form to retain the sequence, expression and emotion. Working directly from audio-recordings allows the researcher to preserve the richness of the context, emphasis, meaning, emotions and tone of statements (Cresswell, 2013; Simons, 2009; Northcott, 1996). Through re-listening to recordings, researchers can reconnect with the 'live' experience of the interview, recalling social, emotional and behavioural cues (Simons, 2009). Additional strategies included (2) returning to the original data to ensure the same codes would be assigned by the researcher on different occasions; (3) comparing findings from audio-recordings with the researcher's written journal notes; (4) making notations on the concept maps as documentation of the procedure for arriving at categories, codes and themes; and (5) providing examples from the original data that support the identified themes (Creswell, 2013). Thus, key informant interviews were mapped directly from the original digital audio-recordings. Each audio-recording was reviewed, and notes were made of key ideas expressed. The notes were transcribed into one concept map for each research question for each key informant using online software available from www.bubbl.us. Interview notes were also consulted as concept maps were created. Notations were made on the digital audio files using software from audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>) that tagged specific exemplars illustrating key ideas expressed in the interview. Those exemplars were then transcribed into written words by the researcher. Once all interviews were transcribed into concept maps and written exemplars, individual maps were compared and merged into one macro map for each research question that captured the prominent codes, categories, themes and relationships. As themes emerged, concept maps were re-organized. Bubbles were color coded to sort codes into the categories of (1) overall emerging theme; (2) explanations of how staff members enact the theme; (3) how youth respond; and (4) the perceived impact on health and wellbeing. From these maps, the central themes of this study were identified.

6.0 Findings

Participants were asked whether they felt there was a connection between attendance at the youth centre and what they had described as encompassing youth health and wellbeing. All participants agreed that a connection existed, and that the connection was positive for most youth. Participants were asked questions that explored why youth come to the centre, what was occurring at the centre, how these factors were enacted by the staff and centre, and how youth respond. Participants were also asked about their perceptions of youth and place or space. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes:

1. Engaging youth through an eclectic mix of programs and activities
2. Building relationships and connections
3. A place for youth

6.1 Engaging Youth through an Eclectic Mix of Programs and Activities

The first theme that emerged related to how the centre impacts youth wellbeing, was the eclectic mix of programs and activities available at the centre. From the perspective of staff and affiliated community members, youth benefit from the centre by having fun things to do, being able to try new things on their own terms to

explore what they are good at, and engaging in opportunities they would not otherwise have, in a social environment.

First, participants described that the number one reason youth come to the centre is to have fun. One reason the activities are fun for youth is because the activities at the centre are designed to let kids be kids without the pressure to stay in a specific activity. The centre also offers a break from school, and gets youth out of the house:

..it is mostly just a space to hang out with their friends...it is not necessary to always have to be structured, you can just hang, watch a movie, or just play on the computers, it's kind of just nice area for them to have. (Staff member)

Participants described that this lack of pressure leads to unanticipated learning that is often not recognized as learning by youth in the moment.

Second, the mix of programs and activities allows youth to try new things on their own terms and explore what they are good at:

They can kind of try a little bit of everything and explore on their own what interests them and what they're good at...it is important for them to get to explore what they are capable of on their own terms and get to kind of experiment with art or technology...and not to be put into a box. (Staff member)

The creation of programs and activities that encourage youth to explore their interests and talents is accomplished through the dedication of staff to their programs. Because staff members feel they have some ownership and responsibility, their dedication leads to innovative programming that attracts youth to the centre:

I think it's one of the things that makes Fusion so successful is that we're always staying on the cutting edge of what youth are interested in, we're always making sure we're aware of those things and offering opportunities for the youth that reflect those changes. (Administrative staff member)

In addition to encouraging participation in their own programs, several participants remarked that they encourage youth to try other programs as well, particularly participating in physical activity.

Third, the eclectic mix of programs and activities offers youth opportunities and experiences that would not otherwise be available to them. These opportunities include learning about business, photography, art, technology, health education, physical activity, music, and development of future job skills. This aspect is accomplished by offering innovative programs, focusing on hands-on doing, and maintaining free access to skill development and fun activities. This access provides opportunities for youth to work on unique goals through building skills.

...some of our programs are so unique ...kids are going to come here because there is no other way to accomplish the goals that they have ...everything that Fusion has, it helps work towards unique goals... it helps kids who might be a professional someday, build those skills. (Administrative staff member)

Thus, participants described that youth benefit from the centre by having fun things to do, being able to try new things on their own terms to explore what they are good

at, and engaging in opportunities they would not otherwise have. How do these factors relate to wellbeing?

Participants described that youth respond to these opportunities in positive ways. Participants commented on how youth surprise themselves—their abilities grow and change as they gain new skills, and they feel rewarded for their accomplishments by being given more leadership responsibility. These positive experiences, gained through engaging in programs and activities, help youth feel valued, gain confidence, and gain skills in self-management and life. Participants identified that these youth responses have a positive impact on wellbeing as youth have less stress and stay positive. In relation to physical health, youth learn to make healthy lifestyle choices, and have opportunities to participate in more physical activity, including casual sports, gym, fitness activities, and outdoor physical activity including the skate park. In relation to resources and supports, youth learn to have goals, and gain skills that open the doors for the future.

6.2 Building Relationships and Connections

A key dimension highlighted by all participants in supporting youth wellbeing was the importance of building relationships and connections. The three areas identified were relationships with staff, relationships with other youth, and relationships with community.

Participants all spoke to the importance of relationships between youth and staff in supporting youth wellbeing. Youth benefit by engaging in relationships with responsible adults. Mentorship, assistance, support and direction were identified by all participants as being the most important strategies used to support wellbeing. Valuing youth was a phrase that frequently emerged during interviews. The key to enacting supportive staff-youth relationships involved believing in the value every youth has. Specifically, strategies staff members use to enact this supportive role include:

- Supporting youth to be who they are;
- Noticing when youth are feeling down or do not have a lot of support;
- Not judging so that youth feel comfortable coming to staff if they need help;
- Helping youth get external help to turn situations around;
- Being available to help youth deal with their immediate crisis;
- Being caring people for youth to talk to;
- Recruiting youth young so staff can influence them;
- Providing feedback to youth on their behaviours from people who are not their parents;
- Sharing interests and sharing stories as a way of helping youth feel attached to certain staff;
- Staff finding a way for all youth to fit in;
- Finding innovative ways to engage and be with youth;
- Consistent, well trained staff help youth always feel welcome; if youth question the sincerity of staff members they will leave and not come back.

Having consistent, skilled staff is important, particularly from the perspective of community members. They stated that it is the staff at the centre that create this supportive role.

All of the above strategies lead to valuing youth for who they are:

I think it's the belief in the value that every kid has, every person has, I mean that's absolutely central to what they do here because it doesn't matter whether you come in, you're drawing, you know you decide you want to draw...it's like starting where those kids are, and *believing* in those kids, just believing, OK, 'you know you're different than me, and we may have different whatever, but I believe that you're *valuable*.' It is valuing kids, and again, it plays out in so many different ways, whether it's through their Youth Advisory Committee that they really are listened to by the organization, whether it is through some of the awards that they provide... and the kids really just buy into it because it *values* them, I really think that is what is at the centre of it ... it's a bunch of adults saying 'we care, we want to support you to be the best you can be, so how can we help you?' (Community member)

Staff's focus is on guiding/mentoring youth. Youth respond by making good choices, staying positive, feeling that they are valued and matter, and return to the centre.

I really feel like the kids come here more for the staff interaction than the program interaction and it's just kind of hanging out, like you see certain staff have certain kids around them all the time, it's because those kids have connected with that staff a little more than others...whether they be shared interest or they have shared stories or opened up to that staff... the staff is what I see is the biggest strength to youth interaction. (Community member)

Another respondent stated it this way:

...it's about building relationships and having them feel comfortable to come to us and all the staff when they need help or direction, it could be something small or 'you know I got in a fight with my parents and I just want to vent to you for the next hour' or it could be something more serious...'what do I want to do in life in terms of my job' so I think it is just nice to have that different influence. (Staff member)

Thus, participants felt that supportive staff-youth relationships that emphasize valuing youth play an essential component in supporting youth wellbeing. The resulting impact on wellbeing is positive social development, youth feeling a positive sense of self and accepted, and youth making choices that support wellbeing.

Another important dimension of Fusion related to how attendance at the centre relates to wellbeing is the relationships that youth build with other youth and the community. Participants talked about youth being exposed to different groups at the centre, and that youth have different groups of friends at Fusion than outside of the centre. How does this occur? Participants spoke of a culture existing at Fusion in which youth encounter a lot less judgment than other places. Because there is less judgment and greater tolerance for difference the cliques that exist at school or other

places are transcended. Thus youth interact and befriend other youth whom they would not normally socialize or interact with outside of Fusion.

One thing that I think has been something that I have noticed about the youth centre is it's for everyone. I notice that a variety of people come, right? So we do have the skateboarders and the bikers coming and we do have the kids that like the gaming computers and the musicals and artists and then we just have the kids that are the drop in that you need to build the relationship to pull them into a program and they 'just want to come and hang out, and one comment that I have got from youth before is that when you are at school there is different cliques, you know they have themselves labeled as preps and sports and they said that doesn't exist here, you're just a person here. So it's kind of nice that even if you are a gamer you can talk to the skateboarders outside or the kids that are doing the art program, it is not like specific groups. (Staff member)

Activities at the centre also help support peer to peer interactions, as youth help each other learn new skills, particularly in the skate park and with technology activities. How do relationships with other youth impact youth wellbeing? Participants described that youth respond to these opportunities for building relationships and connections by engaging in healthy social development, and the subsequent effect on wellbeing is youth feeling accepted and learning from each other.

Fusion also helps youth access resources external to Fusion such as mental health and addictions resources. This way of accessing resources is viewed as safe by youth as staff members facilitate these contacts, and sometimes youth can connect with these services at Fusion rather than entering unfamiliar buildings.

...what I think is there that is maybe not any place else is the relationships that the staff build with the youth and that's why youth freely talk about their wellness issues because there is nobody else listening at any other level for them and they can open up and trust the staff to tell them things because they're seeking...their support to be able to have just somebody to talk to or how can you help me get to the next level of where I can get help. (Community member)

Participants spoke of the importance of connecting youth with health resources, indicating they have been told by other service providers and families that these connections have saved youths' lives².

Fusion also facilitates youth-community interaction by connecting youth with community events, such as the toy drive and constructing the parade float. Focus group participants also raised the issue of youth who wish to stay in the community as adults but feel they have to leave to access career opportunities. Young adults need to gain exposure to career options available in the community for youth with

² The Ontario Provincial Police Commissioner was quoted as saying: "Lives will be saved because of what goes on here", noting it would reduce the number of youth suicides. He also noted he believed it would reduce crime rates. Pries et al. (2014) in a study that examined youth crime rates before Fusion opened and since it has opened estimated that youth crime has been reduced on average by 70.43 crime events per year.

all kinds of interests beyond the manufacturing jobs. The centre gives youth the opportunity to be exposed and to explore different careers.

Youth respond to these youth-community interactions by gaining a sense of being part of the community, and connecting with community resources that support wellbeing. According to our respondents, youth learn to give back to the community; the community as a whole benefits as these events provide the town with an opportunity to come together. The interactions change people's views about youth to being more positive. These youth and community responses result in enhanced wellbeing for all. Youth become connected with health resources, youth feel accepted in the community, there is an enhanced sense of belonging for community as a whole, and enhanced opportunity to keep youth in the community by meeting their career development needs.

6.3 A Place for Youth: Youth Being Youth in a Safe Place

The third dimension that links Fusion with wellbeing is a place just for youth. Participants noted that Fusion creates a place for youth by being a safe place, by being a youth-friendly place that allows youth culture to grow, and being a place to get away from life's stresses and pressures while finding supports.

In relation to safety, all participants described the centre as being a safe place. Safe includes feeling and being both emotionally and physically safe, and is being achieved at this centre through the following strategies:

- Creating space for youth to establish relationships with adults;
- Providing good staffing/adequate supervision and structure;
- Not allowing non-positive behaviours;
- Enforcing youth developed rules & boundaries;
- Having a secure building;
- Ensuring parents know their kids are safe;
- Keeping Fusion a public & visible place;
- Supporting youth in their exploration of who they are and who they might become;
- Allowing youth to exercise some agency.

Participants described the need for this emotional and physical safety, as well as how the centre creates a safe place that allows youth to feel in control:

We have lots of kids who are here as soon as school is over, and they do not leave until we close, and they wouldn't do that if they had another space to be at so those youth who are coming here...probably don't have somewhere else you would rather be... whether that's home or a friend's house or whatever, so for a certain amount of youth anyway this is their home and if not a home, a safe space that home should feel like, I think we try to provide that here. Everyone knows they are safe here. (Staff member)

And while respondents noted it was a safe space, and it was the youth's space, there were boundaries and expectations that contribute to creating a safe place.

...we do have rules and boundaries around what they can do here, even though we say it is a space for them...we always say this is your property, this is your space so treat it how you would want to treat your own belongings...so we try to give them a little bit of ownership and say like, 'this is your area, do what you want with it' but at the same time, you do have to give them boundaries...the rules we have here, they are all youth-made rules...we just said, 'what do you think is reasonable for us to ask of you' and 'what kind of rules do you want to follow, what would make this place good for you to hang out and where you want to be. (Administrative staff member)

Wellbeing is impacted by these strategies for creating a safe place. Through these strategies, youth feel emotionally safe, and respond by having less need to take risks to fit in, thus helping youth avoid the pitfalls of adolescence. In addition, youth are more comfortable in youth places. Participants identified that the subsequent impact on youth wellbeing is reduced risk-taking behaviours, reduced stress, and feeling happier.

Most respondents commented on the importance of providing youth with a sense of ownership for the space and the importance of youth ownership in allowing youth culture to grow:

At Fusion it's their space, it's their turf, and they can be themselves there and not be something different for the rest of society I guess and there are rules and there are boundaries and there are expectations when they walk in how they will behave but I think it's still quite different. (Staff member)

Participants also explained that youth are held accountable for their actions in ways that are meaningful to them, with logical consequences that help them:

There's openness but accountability on the terms of the youth who come here, I think we communicate with them and we set rules and boundaries and expectations in ways that are meaningful to them...I think we have been really conscious of kind of putting youth culture and just kind of letting youth culture grow and be what it is but also providing some guidance...rather than just saying 'you're out'. (Administrative staff member)

In relation to the impact on youth wellbeing, participants described that youth respond to youth-friendly places by feeling valued and worthwhile. The feeling of being valued translates into wellbeing by creating youth who feel more positive about themselves.

In addition to being safe and youth-focused, the centre was also described as being a place to get away from life's stresses and pressures and a place to find supports. However, having a place to go is not enough – participants highlighted the importance of having a place to go with fun things to do and without financial barriers:

I think for a lot of youth just having a place that they can go and socialize with other youth can be something that can help them in their mental and emotional wellbeing. Sometimes they feel like at school or at home there's

certain limitations or restrictions or different things within that environment that they feel like they need a break from at times and just being able to come here and participate in events and activities that they enjoy with their friends, that can be something in of itself that helps them to stay positive.
(Community member)

In addition to having a need to get away from life's stresses and pressures, some youth have a need for a safe place to escape from home or other situations and influences:

Some of them honestly will come from an unstable environment at home and coming to the youth centre and being with the staff here and with their friends can help them to feel safe, and lets them know there is a place that they can always go to if they need help, or if they just need to get away from a certain environment for a while, that they can always come here.
(Staff member)

How does having a place to get away from life's stresses and pressures, escape situations and find supports affect youth wellbeing? Participants described that youth respond by feeling safe, connected and engaging in physical activity and good nutrition. The impact on wellbeing is enhanced emotional and social wellbeing, enhanced physical safety, and reduced stress.

In summary, in this study, participants identified three dimensions that connected attendance at the centre with youth wellbeing: the eclectic mix of programs and activities, relationships and connections, and having a place for youth. First, youth engage in an eclectic mix of programs and activities, resulting in gaining new skills and abilities that help youth feel valued, gain confidence, and gain life skills. These activities and processes result in positive wellbeing outcomes including reduced stress, staying positive, learning to make healthy lifestyle choices, engaging in increased physical activity, being distracted in a positive direction, learning to have goals, and building skills that will open doors in the future. Second, the centre offers opportunities to build relationships and connections. Youth build relationships with young adult staff, other youth and the community. These connections result in opportunities for guidance with making good choices, staying healthy and positive, feeling they matter and are valued, returning to the centre, engaging in healthy social development, and feeling a sense of community belonging. The resulting wellbeing outcomes are feeling a positive sense of self, feeling accepted, making choices that support wellbeing, learning from other youth, being connected to resources that support youth wellbeing, having a sense of community belonging, an enhanced sense of community for the town as a whole, and enhanced opportunities to keep young adults who wish to stay in the community. Third, the centre provides a place for youth that is safe, allows youth culture to grow, and offers a place to escape life's pressures while finding supports and having fun things to do. Having a comfortable place for youth plays a role in helping youth feel emotionally safe, valued, worthwhile, and connected. Youth who feel safe, valued and connected have less need to take risks to fit in. The positive impact on youth wellbeing is reduced risk-taking behavior, reduced stress, being happier, feeling more positive about self, and enhanced overall emotional and social wellbeing. Participants identified specific strategies for creating activities, building supportive relationships, and creating a place with a youth-friendly culture.

7.0 Discussion

This study explored adult informants' perceptions of how an afterschool program, in this case Fusion, contributes to the wellbeing of rural youth. This is important both for the current life of the youth, but also for their future. As Hoyt et al. (2012) note, as does the Public Health Agency of Canada (2011), adult wellbeing, including pro-social behaviours, is a function of the trajectories that are set in youth. If we wish to have healthy, well-functioning adults, then we need to make sure we provide the conditions for the positive development and wellbeing of youth.

When we examine the results of this study which represents an adult perspective on Fusion with Christie and Lauzon's (2014) study, which examined the adolescent Fusion participant perspective, a number of observations can be made. First, Fusion provides a fun and safe environment where adolescents have the opportunity to choose how to interact with both the physical and human resources that are available to them through Fusion. They have the opportunity to try different activities, and develop competencies and skills that they choose to develop as they explore different areas be it art, the culinary arts or technology. They choose - and these choices contribute to their wellbeing, as does setting their own personal goals and working toward those goals. These are dimensions of youth wellbeing as defined by youth (Bourke & Geldens, 2007). Both studies note the importance of choice - choosing and making decisions helps enhance youth self-esteem. This finding corroborates Durlak and Weissberg's (2007) findings. As youth engage with these opportunities, they also learn to improve their social skills and become more effective in regulating their emotions (Scott-Little et al., 2002).

Second, it is important to note that many of the themes identified by Christie and Lauzon (2014) in their study with Fusion youth have also been identified by the informants in this study. Both studies confirm the importance of supportive relationships with staff and with other youth. In both studies it was noted how Fusion provides an environment that allow the cliques that exist outside of Fusion to be transcended and youth who would not normally interact with one another actually interact with one another and in some cases become good friends. In this sense, Fusion provides an inclusive environment that promotes the development of these relationships and as noted previously, supportive peer relationships are important to the wellbeing of adolescents. This study noted, as Christie and Lauzon (2014) also noted, the importance of relationships with staff. The importance of these relationships was highlighted in the previously reviewed literature; supportive relationships are the best predictor of youth wellbeing (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013), and wellbeing during youth leads to wellbeing in adulthood (Hoyt et al., 2012; Hawkins et al., 2012). In this sense, Fusion is playing a vital role in the promotion of youth wellbeing which then provides a foundation for adult wellbeing.

Third, both studies emphasize that Fusion provides a safe place for youth, one that allows youth culture to flourish, and one the youth feel responsible for. It provides freedom tempered with adequate structure to promote positive youth development. Part of having a flourishing youth culture is having a place of their own to hangout, a developmental need for adolescents (Nairn et al., 2003). White and Wyn (2008) have argued that when youth have no place of their own they will often lay claim to public space by hanging out in it which often creates tensions and problems with other members of the community, and this will often manifest itself in negative

attitudes toward the youth. Furthermore, it was a space that is accessible physically and financially to all community youth.

One area where the study by Christie and Lauzon (2014) diverges from this current study is in terms of youth community/relationships. The adult informants in this current study seemed to laud the good relationships between youth and the adult community. In contrast, the youth in the Christie and Lauzon (2014) study reported interactions with the community as being less positive. Youth often reported not being accepted in the community and not feeling welcomed in community businesses, etc. Youth reported that they felt discriminated against because of their age and that rules applied to them that did not apply to adults (i.e., checking their backpacks at the door). In fact, in the Christie and Lauzon's study the youth respondents reported being grateful for Fusion but at the same time maintained the youth centre accomplished adult goals which was to get youth off the streets. This perspective raises an interesting question about issues of inclusiveness - what exactly do we mean by inclusiveness, and how inclusiveness may be defined from varying perspectives.

A second area where there were differences between the perspectives of youth and adults related to access to resources (i.e., mental health or addiction services and information). The informants in this study identified access to resources/services as being important but this aspect was not mentioned by the youth respondents in Christie and Lauzon's study of Fusion youth. This difference may be the result of youth reporting on their own personal experience whereas the adult informants in this study were reporting on their experiences with a wide array of youth, some of who may have benefitted from accessing services and resources through Fusion.

These findings raise the question what does this mean for rural youth and the community of Ingersoll?

As noted previously, rural youth are at greater risk than their urban counterparts (Ostry, 2012). In fact as Ostry concluded, the rural health disadvantage is largely an issue of children, youth and young adults. Furthermore, this differential in health outcomes is a function of rural youth engaging in risky behaviours and associated anti-social behaviours. Bourke and Geldens (2007) have identified wellbeing as including supportive relationships, having hobbies in which to use one's time constructively, achieving goals, having a positive attitude and believing in one's capacities. Hoyt et al. (2012) identified youth wellbeing with engaging in less risky behaviours. Yugo and Davidson (2007) identified youth wellbeing as being a function of connections with peers and adults. Fusion, in many ways, would appear to meet the wellbeing needs of rural youth in Ingersoll. First, Fusion provides a plethora of opportunities to explore a variety of program options in which youth are free to participate as they desire. It may be participating in the art program, doing graphic design or video production, or participating in the culinary program. But through these opportunities youth develop skills and competencies while working toward self-identified goals. These opportunities can give youth a sense of accomplishment and enhance their self-esteem. It also provides opportunities to be engaged in physical activities whether it is through developing skills in the skate-park, playing a pick-up game of basketball or floor hockey in the gym, or participating in the youth fitness program.

Second, Fusion provides an opportunity for youth to build meaningful relationships with adults. This is very important in terms of youth wellbeing for youth need adults

they can confide in and who can mentor them (Bourke & Geldens, 2007). Often we assume that parents provide this, or perhaps the school system but not all youth have ideal family lives where they can confide in a parent, and as Lauzon (2013) noted, schools provide access to adults only for a limited number of students.

Third, Fusion fosters connections among the youth, particularly among youth who may have not interacted with each other outside of Fusion, escaping much of the drama of youth cliques that is prevalent during adolescence. This was clearly reported by Christie and Lauzon (2014) in their study of Fusion youth. And as noted previously, it is these connections that promote the wellbeing of youth (Yugo & Davidson, 2007).

Fourth, Fusion is a place for youth, a place that is safe and place that fosters the development of a youth culture. In Christie and Lauzon's (2014) study youth reported that it was a safe place and kept them off the 'bad' side of Ingersoll which for them meant anti-social behaviour such as vandalism, petty crime and also being exposed and participating in the local drug culture.

8.0 Conclusion

One of the major issues facing Canadian rural communities is retention of their youth. And ironically in communities that are often strapped both financially and in terms of human resources, the greatest amount of community resources—financial and human—are often invested in the youth who will leave and not return to the community (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). And while this benefits those youth, it does not benefit the community or the youth who will continue to reside in the community. Furthermore, as noted by Lauzon (2013), increasingly changes in the educational system—the institution charged with developing youth—is pushing more youth to the margins and increasing the density of those margins. The historical humanistic and developmental agenda of public education has been replaced by a narrowly defined vocational agenda with focus on education for the economy. Consequently, positive youth development is not guaranteed for all students. If rural communities are serious about retaining their youth, and are looking to youth who will grow into healthy adults, then they need to think about and reflect upon how they promote the development of their youth. Fusion Youth and Technology Centre is one example of how one community provides opportunities for preparing and developing all its youth, not just a select group of youth. Fusion is available and accessible to all youth who wish to participate. Do rural communities need to replicate Fusion? The answer to that is no but communities can take the lessons that Fusions provides and ask themselves the following questions:

- How can we facilitate the development of connections among youth and between youth and adults?
- How do we develop an approach to youth development in our community that is founded upon the promotion of positive youth development?
- How do we develop meaningful activities to engage our youth that will allow them to utilize their free time productively and meet the diversity of needs that exist among our youth population?
- How do we ensure that all youth have access to these opportunities?
- How do we create physically and emotionally safe places for youth to gather?

There is often a lament in rural communities about the out migration of their best and brightest youth while negating the existence of those who stay behind, those likely to have the least to offer the community (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Rural communities need to see the provision of opportunities and services for youth as an investment in the community's future and not as a cost. If rural communities are serious about their youth then they must keep the larger vision at the forefront, recognizing there are no quick fixes.

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