

**Come and become:**  
**Investigating how youth development is facilitated at  
the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre**

by  
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# **Abstract**

**Come and Become:**

**Investigating How Youth Development is Facilitated at the  
Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre**

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**University of Guelph, 2014**

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This thesis investigated youth development in the context of an afterschool program in Ingersoll, Ontario. In particular, this mixed methods study examined the developmental assets of youth members at Fusion and discovered how the staff and Fusion as an organization foster youth development. Positive Youth Development theory, the Developmental Assets Framework, the Developmental Relationships Framework, and Capacity Development studies informed this research. The findings revealed that Fusion youth are likely to become healthy, contributing, caring, thriving, and productive adults. In addition, it was found that Fusion staff foster youth development primarily through the developmental relationships that they cultivate with youth. These relationships are formed and nurtured within an organizational culture that is empowering, caring, and respectful. This interaction between staff and organizational capacity to facilitate youth development is captured in a Framework called “Asset Building Capacity” presented in this thesis, which fills a gap in a literature on youth development.

## Acknowledgements

*Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Raheem*  
*"In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful"*

First and foremost, I am thankful to God for allowing me the opportunity to learn in an enriching environment with incredible people and for allowing me to make the most of this opportunity.

I am eternally grateful to my parents, who instilled the value of education into my siblings and myself and who uprooted their lives in their late forties for the sake of their children's education. Thank you for giving up everything so we could get this far. This degree is for you.

I am deeply grateful to the staff at the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre. Interviewing you was an honour and I feel so privileged that you shared your stories with me. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. A big thank you also to the youth members at Fusion who participated in the survey for this study.

I extend my sincerest gratitude to Al and Nate, my advisory committee. Al, thank you for seeing me through the ebbs and flows of this process. Thank you for creating a safe space in which I could grow and for cheering me on when I needed it. I couldn't have done this without you and I truly appreciate everything you have taught me. Nate, thank you for your sense of humour and for sharing your wisdom with me. Thank you for helping me display my data visually for making me think of my research at a rudimentary level.

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Last but not least, I am thankful to my siblings and friends, near and far. This journey has been tough for me but at every moment of weakness, I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by amazing people who gave me strength. Knowingly or unknowingly, you helped me along. Whether through a whisper of encouragement or a moment of affirmation, you helped cheer me along. Knowingly or unknowingly, you contributed to my growth. Either by helping me spread my wings or bringing me back to the ground again, you helped me along. Thank you.

## Prologue

*“Words are a pretext. It is the inner bond that draws one person to another, not words - the moon stays bright when it doesn't avoid the night” - Rumi*

The Journey of my Master's has been a particularly turbulent one. It has been exciting because I have felt myself grow in my self-awareness, capacity to reflect, capability to express myself, in my ability to relate and extend beyond who I am at present into someone who is a little bit better, stronger, kinder, and more confident.

My soulwork has been my thesis. It is where I have had to come face to face with my deepest fears of failure. Ensnared by feelings of incompetence, I have had to allow my discipline and stick-to-itiveness to release the stronghold of insecurity. My thesis has given me an opportunity – an arena – to sift through my learning and synthesize it in a particular context.

At first, I didn't think I was interested in my research topic. I started this program with the desire to research leadership in development. But, as fate would have it, my original plan didn't work out. I resisted vehemently to this unexpected change. But then, I was offered the opportunity to work on youth development within the context of the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre in Ingersoll. I welcomed the opportunity with arms wide open because I saw no other option. On the surface, it seemed that I was pleased with this choice. But my insides were bubbling with doubt. I was never interested in working with youth. I had never heard of the Developmental Assets Framework before. I had never considered the possibility of conducting my research within Canada. With these thoughts ruminating in my head, I went through a minor identity crisis.

My research is supposed to be a reflection of me, I thought. What does this reflect about me? Am I being true to myself in pursuing this path? What does this mean for my career? Will I be able to pursue international development work? What will I do my Ph.D in? Does this bring congruency and coherence to my academic experience to date? How will this change the course of my future?

I wrestled with these questions quietly. I called upon my previous experience and recognized that life often makes a lot more sense in retrospect. If this opportunity presented itself, I have to trust that it is the best course of action for me. I have to let go of the illusion of control.

So, I went with the flow. My supervisor had in mind a standardized survey instrument that he wanted me to use for my research. I agreed to use the instrument and frame my research questions accordingly. However, I also knew that I had to make my research my own. As such, I included another dimension in my design – staff interviews. I wanted to know how the staff contributed to asset development in youth at Fusion. At the time, I had no idea that this added component would unfold a world of inspiration to me.

I started my data collection in January 2014. On the first day, I had 2 interviews scheduled. I was conducting them on the phone. I was so nervous. I crafted my questions so that they would align with my research objectives. I also looked up what kinds of questions would be important to ask afterschool program staff and I included those as well.

My interviews went so well. One after the other, I felt like I was unpacking a world of inspiration. These staff members were so dedicated to their mission of bettering the lives of youth. I could feel their glow as they talked about these youth and what their work meant to them. It was their soulwork. I felt energized and inspired throughout the data collection process. I interviewed 18 staff members and 1 manager in the span of two weeks. I transcribed my interviews as I went along because I couldn't wait to document their words, thoughts, and experiences. There were no glitches along the way, thank Goodness.

These conversations excited me. I had tears in my eyes as I listened to and transcribed my interviews. In the process of trying to record the meaning of their work, I found meaning in mine. Fusion staff helped rekindle my passion for people.

I always knew that I loved people. I loved listening to their stories and getting to know them. I loved being able to create a space in which they felt safe enough to share their stories. I felt like everyone had so much to offer – wisdom, beauty, love, experience, knowledge, and grace. Unfortunately, I had my head in the books for so long that I had forgotten just how much joy I get from simple conversations and what a lasting and profound impact interpersonal communication has on me. I am eternally grateful to the Fusion staff for helping me rediscover, unravel, and bring to the forefront of my experience, my passion for people.

Sadly, what goes up must come down. The high of the data collection phase was met with the absolute and deeply penetrating sense of anxiety and incompetence of analysis. Analysis was completely unfamiliar territory to me. I had analyzed small chunks of qualitative data before; but, nothing that compared to the task ahead was in my repertoire of experience.

I cared about the Fusion staff team and I wanted to represent their voices with precision and prose. I valued their time and their level of commitment. I recognized that their work took on the form of play for them; yet, it meant something to them on an unspoken spiritual level.

I felt paralyzed by the magnitude of the task ahead of me. I had no credentials. Who was I to think that I could bear the burden of this responsibility? I couldn't do this. I couldn't bear to disappoint. The staff and their work meant so much to me.

Thankfully, my insecurities and self-doubt didn't engulf me. I worked on my thesis a little bit every day. I set aside 2 hours a day for it. On some days, I would spend the allotted time on my thesis and on others I would spend a mere 2 minutes. Either way, I was kind to myself. I encouraged myself when I was feeling low, celebrated small accomplishments, and rewarded myself when I had reached goals. I put self-care first.

That, to me, meant adequate amounts of sleep, a well nourished body and soul, and consistent contact with people I cared about – people who are positive forces in my life.

That's how I got through my Master's. One step at a time. Although the cloud of self-doubt still looms near, I am working hard to keep my insecurities at bay. I am fortunate enough to have people in my life who have faith in my abilities and competencies. I allow words of encouragement and spontaneous expressions of faith to ring and echo inside my head, like a song on repeat, when I need a confidence boost.

I hope this thesis accurately reflects the wholehearted stories of the staff at Fusion. I hope this work can benefit others the way it has benefited me.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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## Introduction

The majority of youth, between the ages of 12-18, are at a disadvantage as they transition into adulthood (Arnett, 2001) because youth seem to lack access to opportunities they need to become successful adults (Shucksmith, 2004). Despite the “proliferation of prevention and positive youth development (PYD) programs” in North America over the past three decades (Catalano et al., 2002), the majority of youth lack opportunities to develop the skills, traits, and values that they need to fulfill roles and responsibilities as adults in an increasingly complex world (Guichard et al., 2012). These skills, traits, and values are often referred to as “assets” in the youth development literature (Search Institute, 2004).

Despite the recent strides made in the understanding of adolescence and youth, the idea of youth seems to be undergoing a transition in the contemporary context. Lerner and colleagues (2005) note that changing demographic trends -- i.e. the increase in families with dual earners as well as the increase in single, working parents-- have led to an interest in how young people spend their time after school and the opportunities available to them to support their healthy development. This has led to increased focus on the support mechanisms in place for youth in communities and society at large. This signifies a shift in childrearing responsibility from families to society as a whole (Lauzon, 2013).

There has also been a delay in the transition to adulthood. Building on Arnett’s theory of Emerging Adulthood, Bynner (2005) argues for the recognition of a new life

stage between adolescence and adulthood. He points to the delay in the age of marriage and the age at which youth join the workforce as indicators that demand the rethinking of the youth phase of life. According to Bynner (2005), globalization and technological change have created fertile ground for exclusion mechanisms that delay youth's transition into adulthood. In essence, he argues that the individualization that characterizes adulthood is constrained by social, cultural, and structural forces at the micro and macro levels (Cote and Bynner, 2008; Bynner, 2005). He argues for a comprehensive theory of youth that is illuminated by the understanding of youth's experience at the intersection of age, gender, class, ethnicity, and context (Bynner, 2005).

Perhaps most critical to the contemporary crisis is the recent research that has demonstrated that a growing percentage of youth seem to be bored, unmotivated, and unexcited about their lives (Larson, 2000). These emotions can be viewed as signs of deficiency in positive development (Larson, 2000). Larson (2000) argues that these high rates of boredom and disconnection indicate a deficiency in positive development. He extends that anti-social behavior such as displays of aggression and violence as well as premature sexual involvement might be due to a lack of engagement. Larson (2000), like Lerner and colleagues (2005), places the onus of positive youth development on communities rather than families. As a result, afterschool programs have gained popularity over the past two decades as a supportive environment where youth can spend their time afterschool and grow.

Currently, afterschool programs (ASPs) are known to be one of the ways in which youth are accessing opportunities that they would not have otherwise (Lerner,

2005). Studies have revealed that participation in afterschool programs is linked with increased social competence and enhanced academic performance (Shernoff, 2010); increased self-esteem and reduced engagement in risky behaviours (Roth et al., 2010); and, better psychological adjustment (Mahoney et al., 2005). Moreover, some scholars argue that afterschool programs can help “emerging adults” form their identities and make informed choices about their careers (Guichard et al., 2012).

The vast majority of the literature on afterschool programs to date has focused on the impact of participation on youth and the elements of successful afterschool programming (Christie, 2012; Durlak et al., 2010). Although “developmental relationships” have been identified as a key element of success, afterschool program staff have not received due consideration in their role as facilitators of youth development.

Rural youth are at a greater disadvantage than their urban counterparts (Looker and Naylor, 2009). Due to structural and geographical constraints, rural youth are limited in their access to programs and services that can help them cultivate attributes that they need to become successful adults (Christie 2012; Durlak et al., 2010). One of the few afterschool programs that cater to the needs of rural youth is the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre (referred to as Fusion hereafter). Located in Ingersoll, Ontario, Fusion provides a drop-in style environment for the youth to use at their leisure alongside structured programming to help them develop skills and explore interests (Fusion, 2014). Previous research with Fusion has studied the effect and impact of participation on youth development through the youth’s lens (Christie, 2012; Cross, 2012; Khan, 2012; Mitchell, 2012). However, no studies have combined self-report

measures from youth with Fusion staff's perception of their work as youth practitioners. The primary goal of this study was to explore the relationships between youth participation at Fusion and the development of assets in participants between the ages of 12 and 18.

## **Problem Statement**

Youth in small communities find it particularly difficult to navigate a path from childhood to adulthood because they have a higher risk of injury, substance abuse, morbidity, and mortality (Christie; 2012; Cross, 2012). They also lack access to role models and a diversity of activities to help them in their identity development (Christie, 2012). Afterschool programs increasingly seem to play an important role in helping youth with this transition (Lerner, 2005). In the case of rural youth, the link between developmental assets and afterschool programs remains to be understood.

## **Context**

Ingersoll is a small town located in South Western Ontario with a population of approximately 12, 000 people. Of the 12,000 people currently living in Ingersoll, approximately 15 percent are between the ages of 10 and 19 (Statistics Canada, 2006). In Ingersoll, youth experience social marginalization due to inadequate public transportation, limited recreational facilities, and lack of public space (Fusion, 2010). In May 2004, the Ingersoll Town Council identified youth as a main focus of the strategic planning for the town. Based on this strategic plan, a Youth Planning Group was created with the vision of encouraging youth to “achieve a high sense of purpose, identity, and pride for and within their community” (Fusion, 2010). In 2006, Fusion was established. Applying flexible strategies to meet the needs of youth, Fusion is an

innovative establishment that offers drop-in and organized recreational opportunities for 12 to 18 year old youth members (Fusion, 2010). A table of Fusion's current programs and activities is attached in Appendix A.

## **Goal of Research**

The goal of this research is to explore the relationship between youth participation at the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre and the development of assets in participants between 12 and 18 years of age.

## **Objectives**

This study has three objectives:

1. To assess the asset profiles of youth members in Fusion using a standardized tool called the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) survey developed by the Search Institute (2012).
2. To investigate, from the staff's perspective, how Fusion helps youth develop the assets that they need to become thriving, contributing, and productive adults in society.
3. To explore how Fusion creates an environment that facilitates youth development for its members.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Brief Overview of the Theories of Adolescent Development*

The first phase in the contemporary study of adolescence and youth began with Stanley Hall's publication of *Adolescence* in 1904. This approach, which was accepted as conventional wisdom, was deficit-based, trying to fix broken youth, in need of psychological repair and biological growth (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2004).

Similarly, Freud (1969) viewed adolescence as a period of “developmental disturbance” and Erikson (1968) believed that youth identity was born out of crisis. Lerner et al. (2005) assert that this “deficit perspective” has influenced the focus on diagnosis and treatment of problems in the research and theory of youth development.

According to Lerner (2005), the second phase in the study of adolescent development focused on particular facets of youth development such as identity development, formal operations, moral development, and social development. This phase, although piecemeal, sparked an interest in the field of adolescent development as an empirical science as opposed to a strictly cerebral venture as it was in the first phase (Lerner, 2005).

The third phase of the study of adolescent development was characterized by collaborative and synergistic ventures that served as the foundation for the theory and practice of positive youth development (Lerner, 2005). Additionally, this sparked interest in human development across the lifespan (Lerner, 2005).

The theory of Positive Youth Development (PYD) enabled the emergence of the Developmental Assets Framework (DAF) first posited by Benson in 1990. The DAF was designed to shed light on the positive developmental “nutrients” that young people need for successful development (Benson, 2002). This approach synthesized research in a number of fields and compiled a list of 40 assets that is subdivided into external and internal asset categories (Search Institute, 2012). The external category includes: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The internal category includes: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Developmental Assets Framework**

<b>External Assets</b>	<b>Support</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Family support</b>—Family life provides high levels of love and support.</li> <li>2. <b>Positive family communication</b>—Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.</li> <li>3. <b>Other adult relationships</b>—Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.</li> <li>4. <b>Caring neighborhood</b>—Young person experiences caring neighbors.</li> <li>5. <b>Caring school climate</b>—School provides a caring, encouraging environment.</li> <li>6. <b>Parent involvement in schooling</b>—Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.</li> </ol>
	<b>Empowerment</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <b>Community values youth</b>—Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.</li> <li>8. <b>Youth as resources</b>—Young people are given useful roles in the community.</li> <li>9. <b>Service to others</b>—Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.</li> <li>10. <b>Safety</b>—Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.</li> </ol>
	<b>Boundaries &amp; Expectations</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. <b>Family boundaries</b>—Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.</li> <li>12. <b>School Boundaries</b>—School provides clear rules and consequences.</li> <li>13. <b>Neighborhood boundaries</b>—Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior.</li> <li>14. <b>Adult role models</b>—Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.</li> <li>15. <b>Positive peer influence</b>—Young person’s best friends model responsible behavior.</li> <li>16. <b>High expectations</b>—Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.</li> </ol>
	<b>Constructive Use of Time</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>17. <b>Creative activities</b>—Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.</li> <li>18. <b>Youth programs</b>—Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.</li> <li>19. <b>Religious community</b>—Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.</li> <li>20. <b>Time at home</b>—Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.</li> </ol>
<b>Internal Assets</b>	<b>Commitment to Learning</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>21. <b>Achievement Motivation</b>—Young person is motivated to do well in school.</li> <li>22. <b>School Engagement</b>—Young person is actively engaged in learning.</li> <li>23. <b>Homework</b>—Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.</li> <li>24. <b>Bonding to school</b>—Young person cares about her or his school.</li> <li>25. <b>Reading for Pleasure</b>—Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.</li> </ol>
	<b>Positive Values</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>26. <b>Caring</b>—Young person places high value on helping other people.</li> <li>27. <b>Equality and social justice</b>—Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.</li> <li>28. <b>Integrity</b>—Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.</li> <li>29. <b>Honesty</b>—Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”</li> <li>30. <b>Responsibility</b>—Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.</li> <li>31. <b>Restraint</b>—Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.</li> </ol>
	<b>Social Competencies</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>32. <b>Planning and decision making</b>—Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.</li> <li>33. <b>Interpersonal Competence</b>—Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.</li> <li>34. <b>Cultural Competence</b>—Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.</li> <li>35. <b>Resistance skills</b>—Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.</li> <li>36. <b>Peaceful conflict resolution</b>—Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.</li> </ol>
	<b>Positive Identity</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>37. <b>Personal power</b>—Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”</li> <li>38. <b>Self-esteem</b>—Young person reports having a high self-esteem.</li> <li>39. <b>Sense of purpose</b>—Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”</li> <li>40. <b>Positive view of personal future</b>—Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.</li> </ol>

The Development Assets Framework emerged as a result of Search Institute’s research with 500, 000 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade youth in more than 600 communities across the United States from 1989-90 (Scales and Leffert, 1999). In 1990, Benson presented the results of preliminary research with 111 schools in a report entitled “The Troubled Journey: A Portrait of 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Grade Youth,” in which he introduced working definitions of developmental assets. The original framework identified and measured 30 developmental assets. Subsequent research led to a revision of the framework to include 10 additional assets (Scales and Leffert, 1999).

Search Institute has surveyed nearly three million youth over the past 20 years to find out how youth experience the 40 Developmental Assets—i.e. the building blocks that all youth need to become principled, healthy, caring, and productive adults (Search Institute, 2012; Scales and Leffert, 1999). Researchers have found clear relationships between outcomes and asset levels in youth in cross- sectional and longitudinal studies (Search Institute, 2012; Lofquist, 2009).

The results are convincing: the more assets adolescents have, the better (Search Institute, 2012). As previously mentioned, youth who have high asset levels are less likely to engage in “risky behaviors” (such as: violence, premature sexual activity, drug abuse, and suicide) and more likely to engage in “thriving behaviors” (such as: doing well in school, helping others, and grasping leadership opportunities) (Search Institute, 2012).

## **Research Questions**

This study explored the following three questions:

1. What does the Developmental Assets Framework tell us about youth members at Fusion?

2. From the staff's perspective, how do they contribute to the development of youth members?
3. How does Fusion, as an organization, support the development of its youth members?

## Methodology

A mixed methods design, incorporating quantitative and qualitative techniques, was employed for the purposes of this study. According to Clark and Badie (2010), the literature on mixed methods research has reached consensus in its position that “mixed methods research is appropriate when a study’s purpose and research questions warrant a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches” (p. 276).

The standardized instrument this study used was a survey entitled “Developmental Assets Profile (DAP).” Search Institute created the survey in 1989 and it has been revised since. The original survey was a 156-item self-report survey that measured developmental assets, deficits, thriving indicators, and high-risk behaviors (Scales and Leffert, 1999). The modified survey measures the 40 developmental assets as well as how the youth are faring personally, socially, within the family, school, and community contexts (Search Institute, 2012). A hardcopy version of the survey was administered to the population of youth members at Fusion. The data was collected from a self-selected sample at Fusion. SPSS 20 was used to conduct tests of difference on the data in order to compare means of asset scores on demographic variables, program-related variables, and membership-related variables.

Semi-structured, key-informant interviews were conducted with staff at Fusion. The interview questions were informed by the DAF (Search Institute, 2009). Questions were tailored to suit the role of each staff member but, in general, the following questions

were addressed:

1. How would you define youth?
2. How, when, and why did you start working with youth?
3. What brought you to Fusion? How long have you been here? What makes you stay?
4. How would you describe the youth that you work with?
5. What elements do you think an afterschool program needs to be successful?
6. What are some of the challenges of working in an afterschool program?
7. Tell me about your program.
8. What do you expect of the youth that participate in your program?
9. What do the participants expect from the program and you?
10. What strategies do you use to implement your program? What is the philosophy behind those strategies?
11. What do you do when a participant doesn't listen or follow instructions?
12. How do you build relationships with the youth participants?
13. What is Fusion's mission and philosophy?
14. How would you describe the culture at Fusion?
15. What values does Fusion try to instill in its youth members? How is this accomplished?
16. What is one thing you love about working at Fusion?
17. What is one thing you want to change in your practice with youth?
18. What are some of the barriers to participation for youth?
19. What role do you think Fusion plays in the lives of youth?

The survey findings were analyzed manually using the grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2000).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to completion of the survey, participants were asked for their full, informed consent. They were reminded that their participation is completely voluntary: they were given the opportunity to skip any questions they did not feel comfortable responding to and they were informed that they could cease to participate at any time. There was no compulsion or coercion of any kind.

In the case of both the surveys and the interviews, confidentiality was guaranteed. In order to respect the privacy of all participants, all soft copies of data were stored in password protected, encrypted files and any notes with identifiers were kept under lock and key.

### **Significance**

This study contributes to the small body of literature on after-school programs in rural Ontario. It falls under the category of replication studies but adds another dimension through the key-informant interviews with program staff. This investigation highlights how participation at the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre affects the development of assets in adolescents. It is hoped that the findings of this research will provide empirical support for the contribution that Fusion makes to youth's lives in Ingersoll.

### **Limitations**

This research has many limitations of which the limitations of the research design will be discussed here. The youth who participated in the DAP survey for this study

were self-selected. Even though the sample was assumed to be representative of the population of youth members at Fusion, a self-selected sample places restrictions on the generalizability of results. In addition, the design lacked a comparison group, which makes it hard to attribute development of assets to participation at Fusion.

### **Classification of Terms**

The definitions of the core terms used in this study are debated in practical and academic circles. As such, it is important to articulate the definitions of important terms for the purposes of this study. These definitions were adapted from Lofquist (2009) and the Search Institute (2004).

*Youth* – young people between the ages of 12-18 going through cognitive, social, emotional, and physical changes in their formative years.

*Staff* – management, program, and drop-in centre personnel employed on full-time, part-time, or casual basis at Fusion.

*At-Risk Youth* – young people who are at risk of not being able to develop into mature and healthy adults as well as active citizens. In this case, their rural location, lack of access to opportunities and role models, low educational attainment, and regional history with substance abuse and teenage pregnancy identified youth as at-risk.

*Positive Youth Development* – a theoretical paradigm that colours youth in a positive light as resources to be developed.

*Developmental Assets* – a repository of 40 experiences, skills, qualities and values that young people need to develop into healthy, thriving, resilient, and contributing adults.

*Developmental Assets Profile (DAP)* – a reliable, strengths-based measure of the portfolio of assets that youth need to develop successfully. It is a self-report assessment instrument designed for youth from 11 to 18 years old. It has 58 questions and can be analyzed using the “assets view” and/or the “context view”.

*Internal Assets* – the internal convictions that young people need to facilitate positive decision-making and to foster “purpose, confidence, and passion” in youth.

*External Assets* – the external experiences of youth facilitated through their interactions with peers, family, neighbours, adults, and teachers as well as through their involved with organizations and institutions on a day-to-day basis.

*Support* – receiving support, care, and love from individuals, organizations, or environments that young people are in.

*Empowerment* – young people need to feel like they have valuable contributions to make, that they are being encouraged, and that they are being provided with the appropriate opportunities to make said contributions.

*Boundaries and Expectations* – young people need to know what is expected of them and when they are behaving appropriately or inappropriately.

*Constructive Use of Time* – young people are provided opportunities to use their time to invest into interests, skills, expression, or growth.

*Commitment to Learning* – young people are excited about learning and seek opportunities for continued learning.

*Positive Identity* – when young people have a strong sense of self-worth, self-esteem, self-confidence, and are hopeful about their futures.

*Positive Values* – when young people are exposed to and encouraged to develop strong values and principles such as hard work and respect.

*Social Competencies* – success later in life is often linked with the strength of relationships and the ability to connect (Little et al., 2008). Young people need to be able to engage with, relate to, and build relations with other people to succeed as youth and as adults.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

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*“We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends.”*

– Mary McLeod Bethune

### Introduction

This study examines the intersection of youth, their rural context, and their participation in afterschool programs. To this end, this literature review focuses on four distinct but overlapping bodies of literature. First, “youth” are defined and the experiences and challenges particular to “rural youth” are outlined. Secondly, the PYD and the DAF that is nested within the paradigm are presented. Thirdly, the literature on afterschool programs is explored. Then, the concept of “developmental relationships” is reviewed. Finally, the theory of capacity development is introduced as the conceptual framework using which the four above-mentioned bodies of literature will be brought together.

### Defining Youth

In order to investigate youth development, it is important to understand generally accepted definitions of “youth” and their origins. The academic and practice-based definitions of youth differ. For instance, Lerner and Gestsdotir (2008) define adolescence as a “period of marked change in the person’s cognitive, physical, psychological, and social development and in the individual’s relations with the people and institutions of the social world” (p. 32). While the United Nations defines youth as a period of transition from a dependent state in childhood to independence in adulthood (UNESCO, 2013). Youth is understood as a fluid category that has a relational component (United Nations, 2013). In the context of education and employment, a

youth is someone between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Broadly speaking, youth can be defined as the period between when someone leaves compulsory education and finds first employment (UNESCO, 2013). In addition, youth is also seen as the transition period between romantic relationships in adolescence to marriage in adulthood. It is important to note that the definition of youth reflects cultural norms (UNESCO, 2013).

Christie (2012) states that the way society conceptualizes youth continues to change and discussing these changes is an important first step towards understanding youth. Bucholtz (2002), an anthropologist, contends that the category of youth does not have a generally agreed upon definition. Often times, the definition varies according to social circumstances rather than biological age or culture (Bucholtz, 2002). Similarly, Durham (2004) contends that the definition of and meanings attached with the term youth are under constant construction and re-construction.

The concept of youth is also studied from many different angles and through the lens of many different disciplines (McCulloch et al., 2006). McCulloch, Steward & Lovegreen (2006) explain that three paradigms dominate the study of youth. Firstly, youth is studied as a biological category. Secondly, youth is treated as a distinct social group. Lastly, youth is understood as a cultural construct (McCulloch et al., 2006).

### **Understanding the Experience of Youth in Rural Areas**

Youth in general and rural youth in particular are a socially constructed category (Christie, 2012). There is a small, but growing, body of literature on the rural experience of youth (Nairn et al., 2003). The experience of young people living in rural communities is often different from young people living in urban areas in various ways (Christie, 2012; Cross, 2012; Khan, 2012; Park and Peterson, 2010; Shucksmith, 2004).

According to Shucksmith (2004), four main approaches are used to study the experience of rurality: namely, structuralist, experiential, instrumentalist, and integrationist approaches. The structural approach, while ascribing importance to human agency, identifies “motors of change” at the systems level such as globalization, economic restructuring, technological advances, migration, changes in cultural norms and policy changes that impact the lives of rural people. The experiential approach, which is informed by cultural geography, tries to capture individual voices and tries to understand the experiences that young people have with spaces and places as well as the meanings they attach to those experiences. The instrumental approach relies on statistical indicators of social exclusion in rural areas to try to glean an understanding of the rural experience. The amalgamation of the three above-mentioned approaches is termed the integrationist approach. The integrationist approach tries to capitalize on the strengths of all three approaches and tries to involve them in a meaningful discussion to gain a holistic understanding of the rural experience (Shucksmith, 2004).

### *The Rural “Idyll”*

Through the adult lens, the popular conception of the rural life is a romantic one. As Christie (2012) highlights, the “rural idyll” includes symbols such as strong family-orientation, strong work ethic, and good health (Christie, 2012; Shucksmith, 2010). In addition, rural communities are seen as “inclusive, closer to nature, and therefore ideal places for young people to grow up in” (Nairn et al., 2003, p.10). There seems to be a sharp disjunction between the romanticized rural life and the “experiences of growing-up in small, remote, poorly serviced and fractured communities” (Matthews et al., 2000). Looking through the lens of youth, a darker side of the so-called “rural idyll” is revealed.

The youth experience life in the rural areas as “dull” (Christie, 2012; Rye, 2006). Youth report experiencing traditional, caring, peaceful environments as lacking resources and opportunities, controlling, and boring (Christie, 2012; Rye, 2006).

### ***Social Exclusion and Disadvantage***

Although young people, as an age group, are disadvantaged (Shucksmith, 2004), the experience of disadvantage is exacerbated for youth living in rural areas. The idealization of the rural as real and inclusive lies in sharp contrast to the literature on social exclusion. Nairn et al. (2003) report that scholars have “challenged” the “idealization of the rural” by unveiling an “alternative geography of exclusion and disenfranchisement” (Mathews et al. 2000). Apparently this “alternative geography” especially characterizes the experience of “the least affluent and teenagers” (Mathews et al., 2000). In other words, socio-economic class is one of the factors that mediate the experience of rural youth.

Paired with feelings of exclusion are feelings of disadvantage and marginalization. According to Shucksmith (2010), young people’s identity, especially in rural areas, is shaped by their experiences of ‘othering’. They are ‘othered’ within their own communities by adults or other members of the out-group as well as among society at large (Shucksmith, 2010). Marginalization also arises from being denied their own space for social interaction: “For rural youth, marginality is in part founded upon adult surveillance and regulation of activities and spaces within the countryside” (Leyshon et al., 2003, p. 168). In other words, youth living in rural areas often feel like they are constantly under adult scrutiny and lack access to public space (Shucksmith, 2010). As Nairn et al. (2003) put it: “we see that young people are subjects of, and subject to, the

power relations of public space” (p. 11). Christie (2012)’s research with the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre in Ingersoll shows that their programming helps youth in Ingersoll feel included. Youth identify Fusion as a safe space for them in which they can hang out without the scrutinous gaze of parents and teachers.

### *Rural as Synonymous with ‘At-Risk’*

Looker and Naylor (2009) argue that discussions around social exclusion in rural areas brush over the fact that rural youth are at greater risk than their urban counterparts. As already mentioned, youth see life in rural communities as lacking resources, opportunities, or they decide to stay in rural areas because they lack faith in their own abilities (Looker and Naylor, 2009). According to Cross (2012), rural youth have greater risk of injury, engaging in premature sexual relations, higher instances of substance abuse, morbidity, and mortality. They also have less access to role models and facilities that offer a diversity of activities to help them explore their interests and develop identities (Cross, 2012). Bourke and Geldens (2007) note that maintaining supportive relationships with adults as well as having goals and hobbies are critical to the wellbeing of youth. Living in rural areas also shapes the identity of rural youth (Park and Peterson, 2010). Park and Peterson (2010) argue that: “in the industrialized world, individuals living in cities are increasingly more healthy and productive than their rural counterparts” (p. 537). Moreover, cities are increasingly seen as hubs for more creative and innovative pursuits (Park and Peterson, 2010). Implicitly, some scholars suggest that rural creativity is rare and that creative energy is best fostered in hustling bustling cities. This renders rural youth at the risk of being considered not creative as well as

being pigeonholed into having “strengths of heart” as opposed to “strengths of head” (Park and Peterson, 2010).

Although the experience of rural life varies along axes of socio-economic class, gender, and age, the experience tends to be characterized by the polar forces of exclusion and inclusion as well as advantage and disadvantage. Youth from lower socio-economic classes are relatively more at-risk for substances abuse, injury, premature sexual relations, morbidity, morality, poverty, unemployment, underemployment, transportation barriers, lack of resources and opportunities, as well as the negative perceptions associated with being considered rural (Cross, 2012; Christie, 2012; Park and Peterson, 2010; Mathews et al., 2000). It is clear that rural youth need positive support mechanisms in their lives to leverage them out of hopelessness into the arms of opportunity.

### **Conceptualizing Positive Youth Development**

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is an approach that paints a positive picture of youth and serves to help create positive support mechanisms for youth. Traditional approaches to the study of adolescent development and youth have been deficit-focused (Christie, 2012; Cross, 2012; Khan, 2012; Lerner et al., 2009). Since Hall (1904), the period of adolescence and youth has been associated primarily with “storm and stress” (Lerner, 2005). According to Lerner et al. (2009), the deficit model permeated “the fields of developmental science, psychology, sociology, education, public health and other fields through the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 524). In addition, this “deficit-model” dominated the theory and practice of adolescent development in much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the rise of the PYD paradigm (Lerner et al., 2009; Phelps et al., 2009).

The PYD perspective changed the prevailing notions about adolescence (Phelps et al., 2009; Lerner et al., 2009; Lerner, 2005). In light of the research findings from the past three decades, the dominant paradigm in youth development discourse shifted towards a positive outlook on youth. Scholars agree that PYD is a “strengths-based model” (Lerner, 2005). Lerner et al. (2009) define PYD as “a view of the strengths of youth and the positive qualities and outcomes we wish our youth to develop” (Lerner et al., 2009, p. 524). Similarly, Damon (2004) suggests that the PYD perspective “envisions young people as resources rather than as problems for society...emphasiz[ing] the manifest potential [within youth] rather than the supposed incapacities of young people” (Damon, 2004, p. 13). Another definition of PYD is offered by Butts (2011), a youth development practitioner. He says that PYD is “a field of practice and policy that blends concepts of adolescent development and effective services” (Butts, 2011). Evidently, a strength-based model now colours the landscape of adolescent development in theory and practice (Phelps et al., 2009).

Although some scholars believe that PYD is rooted in positive psychology, Lerner et al. (2005) argue that the origins of the PYD perspective can be traced to the work of comparative psychologists and biologists who studied how development processes changed in reaction to the “fusion” (Tobach & Greenberg, 1984) of biology and context (Lerner, 2005). Influenced by the dynamic, integrationist, interdisciplinary perspectives on human development, PYD is said to take on the nine “defining features” of developmental systems theories. The nine features that inform the theory and practice of PYD are:

1. Developmental systems theories are *relational meta-theories* in that they

transcend dualisms and seek to resolve dichotomies, such as the class nature-nurture debate, through integrationist perspectives.

2. The *integration of different faculties* within the organization of human development is another defining feature of developmental systems theories. In other words, developmental systems theories “fuse” together biological, psychological, physiological, political, economical, historical, and cultural levels within the ecology of human development.
3. The *interaction between individual and context*: Individuals and contexts are in a bi-directional relationship.
4. “Integrative actions”, resulting from the interacting of the individual and the context, serve as the basic unit of analysis in human development.
5. *Plasticity of human development*. The developmental trajectories of individuals are malleable and dependent upon the interaction of their individual genes and the environmental factors that they are exposed to. Thus, human development is a dynamic process.
6. *Plasticity in human development has limits*. There is a range of change that can be expected in response to contextual factors. The magnitude of change may vary across the life span.
7. There are *individual differences* in the ability to change. This makes studying the diversity of changes within and between groups of individuals extremely important.
8. The potential for plasticity in human development legitimizes an *optimistic* view of human development.

9. Developmental systems theory values *multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary* knowledge creation and exchange. It also values flexible and dynamic methodologies that are sensitive to contexts.

Lerner (2005) extends that the main hypotheses of positive youth development are predicated upon the above-mentioned fundamental tenets of developmental systems theories. PYD has adopted an integrationist perspective that finds a middle ground between the nature versus nurture debates. PYD encourages scholars from various fields, policymakers, and practitioners to come together to collaboratively help youth. The PYD perspective considers the dynamic relationships between individuals and their environment (Christie, 2012; Lerner, 2005). PYD paradigm fosters the understanding that youth are able to learn, grow, and change while acknowledging that individual youth differ with respect to these capacities. Perhaps, most importantly, PYD offers a positive, optimistic view of youth and allows multiple disciplines to come together to help youth develop (Lerner, 2005).

In addition, Lerner (2005) identifies that the PYD framework has helped scholars and practitioners understand and formulate four main hypotheses. These are:

1. The development of youth is contingent upon the resources and relationships available within their environment (Christie, 2012; Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner, 2005; Catalano et al., 2004).
2. Community-based programs help foster youth development. Research findings validate the belief that youth programs, particularly those that espouse ideas associated with PYD, help youth develop positively (Scales et al., 2000; Lerner, 2005a). Lerner (2004) suggests that there are three pillars that programs that

promote youth development are built upon: they foster positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, they provide skill-building activities, and they create opportunities for youth to use their skills in community-based activities (Lerner, 2004 as noted in Lerner, 2005a).

3. Positive Youth Development is comprised of five Cs. Bowers et al. (2010) says that the five Cs are: “competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring” (Bowers et al., 2010, p. 721). Some scholars have expanded the model to include Contribution as the sixth C (Christie, 2012; Lerner, 2005). Contribution refers to the bi-directional relationship between youth and their environment. In other words, just as the environment plays a role in developing the capacities of youth to function as healthy adults, the youth carry the potential to contribute to themselves, their families, their communities, and civil society (Christie, 2012; Lerner et al., 2005)
4. The final hypothesis is that indicators of PYD should be inversely related to risk and problem-related behaviors, such as depression, aggression, drug use and abuse, and/or unsafe sexual behavior (Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner, 2005a).

In summary, the PYD perspective discounts the deficit model of youth (Lerner, 2005). In contrast to the deficit model, PYD views youth through a strength-based lens as resources to be developed, sees the potential within them, and sees them as being capable of change (Lerner, 2005). In summarizing the PYD perspective, Lerner (2005) contends that all youth can increase their wellbeing. Youth have the inherent ability to thrive if their internal strengths are in alignment with the external social and ecological resources in their contexts. The theory of PYD is predicated upon the interdependent

and integrationist relationship between individual and context, the Five Cs, and the potential of youth to transition into adulthood where they want to make contributions to the self, family, community, and society (Lerner, 2005). The PYD approach is holistic in that it engages youth, their families, their communities, relevant institutions, and society at large to ensure that an environment that is supportive of the personal, physical, psychological, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual development of youth is created and maintained (Wentworth, 1982 as quoted in Khan, 2012).

### ***Conceptualizing Developmental Assets***

As per Lerner et al. (2009)'s review, scholars within the discipline of PYD investigate concepts such as developmental assets (Benson, 2003; Scales and Leffert, 2004), moral development (Damon, 1990), civic engagement (Flanagan and Sherrod, 1998), identity and wellbeing (Benson, 2006), and thriving and resilience (Lerner et al., 2009; Scales et al., 2000). In addition, the theory of PYD enabled the emergence of the Developmental Assets Framework first posited by Benson, in affiliation with the Search Institute, in 1990. Benson et al. (2006) coined the term "developmental assets" to refer to social, economical, and ecological resources that serve as nutrients for the healthy growth of youth.

The Developmental Assets Framework was designed to shed light on the positive developmental "nutrients" that young people need for successful development (Benson, 2002). More specifically, Benson (2007) defined developmental assets as "a theoretical construct identifying a wide range of environmental and personal strengths known to enhance educational and health outcomes for children and adolescents" (p.33). This approach synthesized research in a number of fields and compiled a list of

40 assets that: a) have been correlated with reduced engagement in risky behaviors (substance abuse, early sexual activity, and dropping out of school); b) have demonstrated enhanced thriving and/or strengthened resilience; c) have served many social locations (generalizability); d) are within community capacity to provide; and, e) are within individual capacity to acquire (Lauzon, 2013; Benson, 2007; Benson, 2002).

The current list of 40 assets (see page 23) is subdivided into internal and external assets (Search Institute, 2014). On the one hand, the 20 External assets consist of the developmental experiences, opportunities, and relationships that are born out of bi-directional interactions that youth have with adults, peers, and community institutions. These assets can be divided into four broad categories, namely: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. On the other hand, the 20 internal assets consist of qualities and characteristics that the individual possesses or cultivates during adolescence. These are also divided into four categories, namely: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Search Institute, 2009). Some scholars align these assets with the Five Cs associated with PYD for their research endeavors (Lerner, 2005a; Lerner et al., 2005b; Phelps et al., 2009).

Of the forty developmental assets identified in the DAF, Scales (2001) contends that the average young person has approximately 19 of these assets. In addition, according to Benson (2006), the more developmental assets a young person has, the better they do in school, the more they are able to take control of the direction their future takes, the more they can contribute to their families, communities, and society at large. In other words, “young people who have more developmental assets exhibit

leadership qualities, maintain good health, value diversity, and achieve their goals” (Lofquist, 2009). Developmental assets are also inversely correlated with harmful activities. This means that young people who are “asset rich” are less likely to engage in harmful activities such as substance use and abuse, displaying violent tendencies, and unsafe or premature sexual activity.

Expanding on the concept of developmental assets, Benson (2002) suggests that there are four contexts that can strengthen or undermine the development of assets, namely: neighbourhoods, local and national youth organizations, faith communities, and primary supports. Benson categorizes these contexts under the term “asset-building community”, which he defines as a “place that maximizes attentiveness to promoting developmental strengths for all children and adolescents” (Benson, 2002, p. 138). In any geographical community, he elaborates, there are five sources of asset-building potential, including: sustained relationships with adults; peer group influence; socializing systems; community level social norms; and, school-based, after-school, and community-based programs (Benson, 2002).

As if refining his view on the four contexts that can strengthen or undermine development of assets, Benson (2007) coined the term asset-building society in addition to asset-building community. Benson (2007) suggests that an asset-building community is any place or setting that provides “a constant and equitable flow of asset-building energy to all children and adolescents” (Benson, 2007, p. 33). Benson (2007) acknowledges that this conceptual model is fluid and dynamic. Moreover, he subscribes to the belief that “social norms, public policy, rituals, and media” play a role in “advancing the asset-building capacity of individuals, systems, and communities”

(Benson, 2007, p. 33).

### *Empirical Basis of the Developmental Assets Framework*

The Search Institute has surveyed nearly three million youth over the past 20 years about how they experience the 40 Developmental Assets—building blocks that all youth need to become principled, healthy, caring, and productive adults (Search Institute, 2012; Scales and Leffert, 1999). Researchers have found clear relationships between outcomes and asset levels in youth in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

Research suggests that the more assets adolescents have, the better (Search Institute, 2012). According to the Search Institute (2012) “youth with high asset levels are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors (such as violence, sexual activity, drug use, and suicide), and more likely to engage in thriving behaviors (such as helping others, doing well in school, and taking on leadership roles)” (Search Institute, 2012). Unfortunately, Scales (2001) and Benson (2006) have mentioned that the average youth only experiences approximately 19 out of the 40 Developmental Assets. Yet, the relationship between the developmental assets youth acquire and the life choices they make is well-documented for all youth regardless of other demographic factors such as age, gender, socio-economic class, race, and geographic location (Benson, 2006). Indeed, research also supports the notion that intentional asset building can have positive implications for youth (Benson, 2006).

Although the results are convincing, scholars have raised questions about whether youth reports, or perceptions are a valid way to measure developmental assets as is done by the Search Institute (Benson, et al., 1998; Leffert, et al., 1998; Scales, et al., 2000; Lerner, 2005c). Lerner (2005) mentions that the alternative is “an objective

assessment of the actual ecology of youth development, as is done in the work of the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development” (Lerner, 2005, p. 33).

Comparative research of the two methods is still lacking (Lerner, 2005). This research project will seek to investigate youth and adult perceptions of developmental assets and positive youth development in an effort to bridge this gap.

In addition, questions are raised about the theoretical and empirical differentiation between developmental assets and indicators of PYD. As previously mentioned, many scholars converge the two in their research undertakings. Some scholars explore processes such as self-regulation and goal-directed behaviors to indirectly measure external assets (Lerner, 2005).

The final question that remains, according to Lerner (2005), is regarding the cumulative effects of developmental assets. Scholars wonder: is the mere accumulation of assets more important than how they were accumulated? Are some assets more relevant for youth in specific contexts? While the evidence for the positive cumulative effects of developmental assets is compelling, Lerner (2005) points out that the “more is better” notion (Benson, et al., 2006) has been “tested primarily through assessing only youth perceptions of developmental assets” (Lerner, 2005, p. 34). However, some recent data suggests that specific developmental assets are more salient in particular settings (Lerner, 2005). Lerner et al. (2005) report that

youth after-school activity engagement (e.g., involvement in school activities, sports, or community clubs) was the most consistent predictor of positive outcomes for youth of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, when socioeconomic status, gender, and grade were controlled for in statistical analyses (p. 28).

Moreover, scholars emphasize the importance of community programs as places where youth can develop assets given America’s changing social structure and increasing

education and training needs of youth in our society (Guichard et al., 2012; Lerner et al., 2005; Eccles and Gootman, 2002).

### **Contextualizing Afterschool Programs**

Lerner et al., (2005) assert that: “the asset concept orients individuals towards what is good and possible across development” (p. 30). As such, the literature on PYD and the Developmental Assets Framework suggest that “all young people have strengths, as demonstrated by their capacity for substantial brain, cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral changes across the adolescent years” (Phelps et al., 2009, p. 20). It is when the strengths of individuals are in unison with resources within their homes, schools, communities, and society at large that positive development of youth can be enhanced (Benson et al., 2006; Phelps et al., 2009). In addition, Lerner et al. (2005) assert that youth need “multiple, positive social influences throughout [their lives]...to maximize motivation, learning, and healthy growth” (p. 30).

Afterschool programs are regarded as one such context within which the potential of youth to achieve positive development is enhanced (Cross, 2012; Christie, 2012; Khan, 2012; Durlak et al., 2009; Lerner et al., 2005). According to Durlak, Berger & Celio (2009), afterschool programs are defined as

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 (p. 44).

Afterschool programs create an environment that is conducive to the development of youth (Christie, 2012; Cross, 2012).

The saliency of Afterschool Programs has been acknowledged with the

emergence of the “after-school movement” (Nicholson et al., 2004). Scholars argue that this movement was a reaction to changing norms and trends in society, namely: the rise of the dual earner household (Lauzon, 2013); the perception that public spaces are no longer safe spaces for youth (Christie, 2012); the perception that youth need to be supervised and provided with skill-building opportunities during the period between the end of the school day and the end of the work day (Christie, 2012; Durlak et al., 2010; Lauer et al., 2006).

Participation of youth in tailored programs is linked to positive development, or thriving, among contemporary youth (Lerner, 2005; Scales et al., 2000). Moreover, as Christie (2012) articulates, evaluations of Afterschool Programs have illustrated that youth participation in Afterschool Programs is positively correlated with positive academic outcomes, enhanced personal and social skills, and health and wellbeing, to some extent (Christie, 2012). Lerner (2005) extends this assertion in saying that participation in youth development programs is “likely to result in a competent, confident, and caring youth, who has character and positive social connections” (p. 30). Lerner (2005) suggests that a young person with the positive attributes described above will seek to make contributions to the self, their family, their community, and civil society at large. By the same token, a young person with such strengths should show diminished risky and problematic behavior (Lerner, 2005; Scales et al., 2000).

However, not all afterschool programs produce such positive results. Although there is no cookie-cutter solution, scholars have identified key criteria that make some afterschool programs more successful in delivering PYD-related outcomes than others. Effective afterschool programs must meet the following prerequisites: intention to meet

specific developmental goals (Durlak, Berger & Celio, 2009; Little, Wimer & Weiss, 2007); tailored to specific context and needs (Crooks and Burns, 2009; Durlak et al., 2009; Christie, 2012); balance between structure and flexibility (Crooks and Burns, 2009; Durlak, Berger and Celio, 2009); leadership opportunities for youth (Crooks and Burns, 2009); a range of activities for youth to choose from (Crooks and Burns, 2009; Durlak et al., 2009); skilled and well-trained staff (Durlak et al., 2009); strong community-program partnership and parental support (Durlak et al., 2009); strong relationships between youth and adults (Christie, 2012; Li and Julian, 2012; Durlak et al., 2009; Lerner, 2005); clearly communicated learning and behavioral expectations of youth (Durlak et al., 2009); and, resources allocated towards organizational learning in order to maintain effectiveness and provide maximum opportunities for youth (Durlak et al., 2009).

### **Understanding Developmental Relationships**

The role and impact of relationships on youth development is known intuitively and scientifically (Li and Julian, 2012). Li and Julian (2012) assert that developmental relationships are “characterized by attachment, reciprocity, progressive complexity, and balance of power” (p. 157). They argue that developmental relationships are the “active ingredient” that determine the effectiveness of youth programs. To summarize findings from scientific literature, they quote the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004):

Relationships not only are of central importance to children’s early cognitive, social, and personality development, but they also have lasting influence on long-term outcomes including social skills, emotion, regulation, conscious development, trust in others, and general psychological well-being.

As if expanding on Li and Julian (2012)'s claim, Guichard et al. (2012) argue that interventions with youth can help them form their identities and help them make sound career choices. Other researchers have identified the transformative power of relationships across developmental settings (Search Institute, 2014). Li and Julian (2012) call for scholars and practitioners to pay due consideration to developmental relationships. Responding to this call, the Search Institute (2014) launched "The Developmental Relationships Framework" that outlines five key elements of developmental relationships. They are: expressing care; challenging growth; providing support; sharing power; and, expanding possibilities (Search Institute, 2014). It is evident that positive relationships are important for youth development.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Although the empirical research conducted to verify the theory of PYD has been strong for the past decade, there are substantial gaps within the literature that scholars have identified (Cross, 2012; Lerner, 2005). Three major gaps are relevant for the purposes of this study. Firstly, the majority of the research conducted on PYD, developmental assets, and afterschool programs is conducted in urban settings (Cross, 2012). Secondly, studies that consider both the youth and adult perspectives of developmental assets in youth are lacking (Christie, 2012; Cross, 2012; Lerner, 2005). Finally, robust measures that capture the interaction of youth and their environments and the positive and negative consequences of this interaction on the development of youth need to be developed (Cross, 2012; Lerner, 2005). This study will seek to bridge, however modestly, the three above-mentioned gaps in the literature.

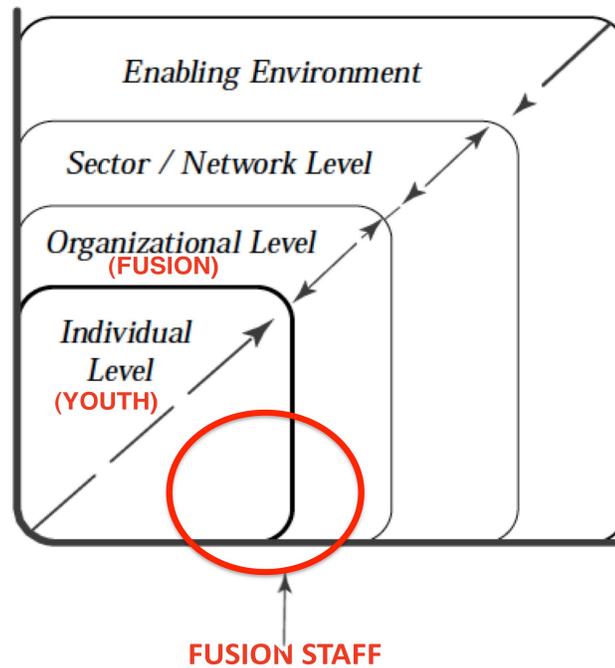
## Introducing the Concept of Capacity Development

Capacity development is the study of change processes within specific contexts (Bolger, 2000). Capacity development practitioners are trained to let go of the illusion of control and focus on process rather than results (Baser and Morgan, 2010; Meadows, 2000). In addition, an understanding is cultivated for human beings and the realization that change cannot be engineered when people are involved (Meadows, 2000). The literature in the field of capacity development can help fill the above-mentioned gaps because it provides a framework for understanding the interaction between individuals, organizations, communities, and networks (Bolger, 2000). As Lerner (2002) specified, one of the gaps in the literature on youth development in the context of afterschool programs is that youth, afterschool programs, and developmental relationships are studied in isolation (Lerner, 2002). As such, the theory of youth development remains disjointed: we understand what is important and why it is important but how to implement it remains to be demystified. Bolger (2000)'s capacity development framework provides a way to conceptualize how organizations and adults can work together to help youth develop across developmental settings.

Figure 1 illustrates the Capacity Development Framework as posited by Bolger (2000). In order to pave the way for a holistic understanding of youth development, this study considers youth development within the context of afterschool programs through the lens of Capacity Development. Within Bolger (2000)'s illustration of the capacity development conceptual framework, the staff's role rests at the intersection of youth as individuals and afterschool programs as organizations. The staff members play the role

of intermediaries and their capacity to perpetuate a nourishing organizational culture and facilitate asset development in youth is explored in this study.

**Figure 2:** Conceptual Framework of this study: Looking at youth development at the Fusion through the lens of Capacity Development



Adapted from Bolger (2000)

To supplement this framework, the DAF and the Developmental Relationships Framework will be used to inform the design and analysis of the research. More specifically, the DAF will guide the analysis at the individual level of youth and the Developmental Relationships Framework will be used to support the discussion of staff capacity.

## Summary

Youth is a socially constructed category with many definitions. In general, it is understood as the transition period from childhood into adulthood. Historically, youth was studied through a deficit-focused lens as a period of “developmental disturbance”

(Lerner et al., 2005). More recently, the PYD perspective has been adopted in the study of youth. This perspective views youth holistically as “possessing hopes, purpose, and skills, as well as problems and challenges” (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 27). The PYD perspective has influenced youth-oriented interventions, programs, and institutions. In response to the changing trends in contemporary society and the needs of youth for supervision during afterschool hours, afterschool programs have been surfacing across North America for the past two decades. Afterschool programs tend to serve as a safe space in which the positive development of youth can be fostered. Effective afterschool programs are built upon key defining features including quality of staff, range of opportunities available for youth, and intentional asset-building approach. Afterschool programs are especially salient for rural youth as they often lack access to opportunities, space, and positive role models that their urban counterparts have.

## Chapter 3: Background and Context

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### Introduction

This chapter articulates the social, economic, and geographic context in which the Fusion is situated. First, some of the challenges facing youth in Oxford County are outlined. Then, the social and economic background of Ingersoll is presented. Finally, the history and evolution of Fusion along with a summary of the research that has been conducted with Fusion to date is described.

### Oxford County

Fusion is located in Ingersoll, Ontario, which falls within the geographical bounds of Oxford County. Although Oxford County has a healthy economy that supports agricultural activity (Oxford County Public Health and Emergency Services, 2011) alongside manufacturing, healthcare and social services, retail, finance and insurance, and professional trades (Cross, 2012; the Corporation of the Town of Ingersoll, 2011), the youth in Oxford County face many challenges (Cross, 2012; Oxford County Drug Task Force, 2010; TORC Report, 2007).

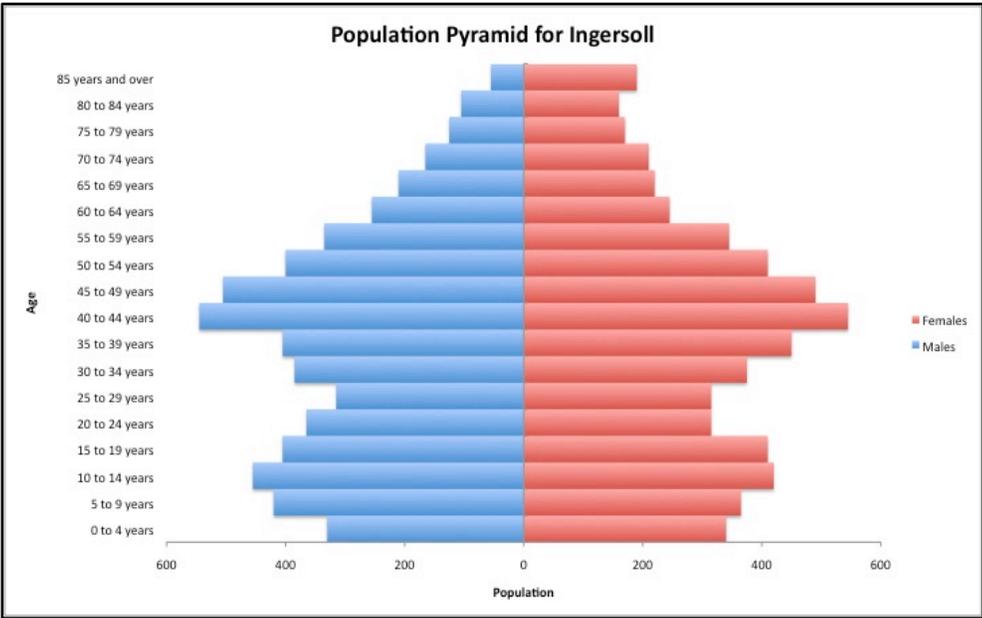
According to Statistics Canada (2011), Oxford County has a population of 105,719. Approximately 33 percent of the population of Oxford County is made of youth below the age of 25 (Statistics Canada, 2011). The youth in Oxford County face many challenges including: exposure to and engagement in drug use (Oxford County Drug Task Force, 2010; 2008); teenage pregnancies (TORC, 2007); teen depression, ageism, and teen homelessness (TORC, 2007). In addition, youth report lack of transportation, lack of sports and recreational activities, lack of youth engagement in

decision-making processes, lack of meaningful employment opportunities, and lack of opportunities for youth entrepreneurship as issues that effect their lives as “rural” youth (TORC Report, 2007).

### Ingersoll

As already mentioned, Ingersoll is located within Oxford County. It has a population of 11,760 residents and is classified as a small town (Statistics Canada, 2011). Consistent with the age distribution across Ontario, approximately 33 percent of Ingersoll’s population is made of youth under the age of 25.

**Figure 3:** Population Pyramid for Ingersoll based on Statistics Canada data from 2005.



### Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre

In 2004, the Town of Ingersoll recognized youth as a priority area and funded the creation of Fusion (Fusion, n.d.). As a result, Fusion is a “unique, municipally-owned youth centre” which was developed “in consultation with local youth” (Fusion, n.d., p.1). Fusion offers a drop-in style environment along with structured programs in business

development and training, recreation and leisure activities, multi-media and technological training, arts and culture, civic engagement, and life skills training (Fusion, n.d.). Reports on the impact of Fusion's programming (structured and drop-in) on youth participants suggest that Fusion helps youth develop ethical, cognitive, social, and physical skills (Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre, 2014).

Since opening in 2006, Fusion has grown from a 2-room facility with 2 employees to a full-fledged youth centre with 20 staff members, community partnerships, and state-of-the-art equipment, and a host of opportunities and activities through which youth can develop their skills and grow (Fusion, n.d.).

### **Research with Fusion to Date**

Four major studies have been conducted with Fusion to date. Christie (2012) examined youth's experiences of social inclusion and exclusion in relation to their participation at Fusion. Through interviews and focus groups with youth, she found that youth in Ingersoll report lacking "youth-friendly spaces and activities" and report suffering from boredom. Also, the youth in her study expressed feeling judged or targeted because of their age. Fusion, to them, is "a place of their own, where they can truly be themselves" (Christie, 2012, p. 88). Christie (2012) suggests that youth feel a sense of ownership and belonging at Fusion. In addition, her findings reveal that through participation at Fusion, youth develop their skills, confidence, and self-esteem. Moreover, participation at Fusion helps youth build connections with their peers, staff, and the community. These connections form a web of support for the youth and help them feel safe and feel like they belong (Christie, 2012). As Christie (2012) only focused on the youth perspective, she recommends that the staff perspective be considered in

future investigations. The present study seeks to incorporate both the staff and youth perspectives as per Christie (2012)'s recommendation.

Cross (2012) explored the intersection of youth, wellbeing, and participation in Fusion's programming. Her research showed that "three intervening factors connected attendance at the program with health and wellbeing– the eclectic mix of activities, relationships and connections, and having a designated place for youth" (Cross, 2012, p. 1). She concluded that participation at the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre led to positive health and wellbeing outcomes for youth. These included: reduced stressed and positive attitude, feelings of acceptance, increased physical activity, exercising goal setting, skill building, increased likelihood of making healthy choices, and reduced likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors (Cross, 2012).

Khan (2012) investigated the relationship between participation at Fusion and the developmental experiences of its youth participants. Using the Youth Experience Survey (YES), Khan (2012) found that all domains that measured positive experiences in general and the domains of Identity Work, Basic Skills, Positive Relationships, Team Work, and Social Skills in particular were positively correlated with participation in programs. She also found that the strength of the correlation was mediated by duration of membership and intensity of participation at Fusion. This study will build on the findings presented by Khan (2012). As such, this study will use intensity of participation and duration as variables of analysis.

Mitchell (2012) explored how youth who participate at Fusion envision their future selves. She found that youth who are members at Fusion have different views on what

they hope to and fear to become in their careers and as members of the community. She identified three hoped-for and three feared categories of future selves. She labeled the hoped for categories as: “community-minded professionals”, “independent creatives”, and “no-plan dreamers”. Conversely, the feared future selves were labeled as: “disengaged problem citizens”, “trapped labourers”, and “unhappy average citizens”. A key observation that Mitchell (2012) reported is that while Fusion provides opportunities for youth to explore interests and develop skills, youth may not be well equipped to figure out how to follow career paths related to those interests.

## Summary

Understanding the social, economic, and geographical context within which Fusion is located is important to help the reader understand the results and significance of this study. Youth in Oxford County face many challenges including drug abuse, mental health challenges, and teenage pregnancies. Youth in Ingersoll feel that they lack access to transportation, employment, and opportunities needed to develop their skills. Research with Fusion to date shows that Fusion offers youth in Ingersoll with opportunities to develop their skills and build connections with one another.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

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### Introduction

In this chapter, the methods that this study utilized are discussed. First, a brief description of mixed methods design is articulated. Secondly, the role of the researcher is explored. Then, the target population and the sample population are introduced. Then, subsumed under the banner of qualitative and quantitative approaches, the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) survey and semi-structured are presented. Finally, to close the chapter, some ethical considerations are taken into account.

### Assumptions of the Study

This study assumed the interest of participants to accurately self-report their experiences. It was assumed that the youth members read the survey questions and responded to them truthfully. In addition, it was assumed that the information collected from the self-selected sample of youth was representative of all youth members at Fusion. Moreover, it was assumed that the staff truthfully answers the questions that were posed to them during the interviews.

### Mixed Methods Design

Mixed methods research incorporates qualitative and quantitative design, data collection, and analysis techniques (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Caracelli and Greene (1997) define a mixed methods study as

...one that planfully juxtaposes or combines methods of different types (qualitative and quantitative) to provide a more elaborate understanding of the phenomenon of interest (including its context) and, as well, to gain greater confidence in the conclusions generated by the study (p. 33).

The use of mixed methods design (mixing and/or converging of qualitative and quantitative data) is rational and justified when “neither type of research method is

sufficient to answer the research questions” (Lofquist, 2009; Tashakkor and Teddlie, 1998). In such cases, quantitative and qualitative methods can complement each other to help “gain a fuller understanding of the research problem” (Hessey-Biber, 2010). In addition, mixed methods designs can be categorized into “pure mixed methods”, “qualitative dominant”, and “quantitative dominant” (Johnson et al., 2007).

Using either qualitative or quantitative techniques to address the questions about asset development in youth from either staff and youth perspectives would have been insufficient in isolation. The study used the DAP survey as a quantitative tool because it is a standardized tool designed by the Search Institute to provide valid, reliable asset profiles of youth (Please refer to Appendix B for DAP Survey). The perspectives are triangulated as a standardized survey is administered with the youth to gain an understanding of their developmental asset profile and the interviews are conducted with the staff to understand the process of asset development in youth from a different vantage point.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher evolved as this research progressed. Initially, the intended role of the researcher was to facilitate discovery and reflection. This role was fulfilled in the case of the interviews as a process of guided self-reflection unfolded in conversation with the staff members. The staff were provided with draft questions and given ample time to prepare for the interview. Although the interviews were structured around 19 questions, the style was flexible, which allowed for the conversation to be carried in a direction that the staff desired. A space was created in which the staff could

share their experience at Fusion and their perspective/perceptions on how Fusion fosters positive development in its youth members.

Repeating Khan (2012)'s approach, the staff at Fusion carried out the administration of the survey. The researcher provided guidelines for administration in accordance with the requirements outlined by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph. The researcher checked in with the staff frequently during the administration process and ensured that all questions were answered promptly.

### **Target Population**

The study was mainly concerned with the youth population in Ingersoll, Ontario. Although the census numbers are outdated, approximately 20 percent of the population of Ingersoll is between the ages of 12-18 years (Statistics Canada, 2011). In addition, the study took into account the staff at the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre. The 19 drop-in centre staff, programming staff, and management personnel that Fusion employs were interviewed for the purposes of this study.

### **Youth Sample**

The youth sample was self-selected as youth members at the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre were provided the opportunity to complete the DAP survey for the chance to win an Ipad. A total of 61 surveys were completed in March-April 2014. The intention was to have a youth sample of 306 for the data to be statistically significant in its representation of the population of the 1200 youth who are members at the Fusion Youth and Technology Centre. However, due to the low participation numbers, the target of 306 was not met.

## Quantitative Method of Inquiry

The quantitative portion of this study focused on providing a snapshot of the DAP of the youth who are members at Fusion using the DAP survey. The original version of this survey was created by the Search Institute in 1989. The survey has 58 questions that measure the 4 external and 4 internal asset categories. Each category has 6 to 9 questions that pertain to it and each question is scored on a likert scale (0= not at all or rarely, 1= somewhat or sometimes, 2= very or often, 3=extremely or almost always) (Search Institute, 2005). Please refer to Appendix C for an example of how an individual asset category is calculated. Each individual asset category has a score that ranges from 0 – 30. The scores on the “external” and “internal” asset categories are computed by averaging the scores of the individual asset categories that pertain to each grouping. For example, the average external asset score is determined by computing the average of the scores for support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Likewise, the average internal asset score is computed by averaging the scores for positive values, social competencies, positive identity, and commitment to learning. Please refer to Appendix E for a table that maps each question onto the asset categories assessed by the DAP survey. Both the external and the internal asset scores range from 0-30. Finally, the average total asset score is computed by adding the internal and the external asset scores to produce values that range from 0-60 (Search Institute, 2005).

The DAP is one of the most widely used surveys to measure internal strengths and external supports. Since 2005, it has been used with more than 500,000 youth across the globe. Numerous studies have demonstrated the reliability and validity of the

findings of the DAP (Search Institute, 2012). A hard copy version of the survey was administered to the population of youth members at Fusion. Staff members allotted approximately 20 minutes at the beginning of their respective sessions for survey completion. Copies of the survey were available for the drop-in centre youth to complete as they signed into Fusion. As part of the survey, demographic data was collected from the participants.

Learning from Mitchell (2012)'s approach to research with youth, the onus of consent was placed on the youth participants to ensure that they felt empowered during the data collection process (Williams, 2006). No separate consent form was used; a completed survey implied consent. Youth were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

Of the 61 completed surveys, 57 were deemed to be acceptable for analysis after screening for duplicates, incoherent responses, missing data, multiple responses, and ambiguous responses (Search Institute, 2014).

Fifty-seven responses were entered into the excel file provided by the Search Institute and the various scores for the eight asset categories calculated (see Appendix C and D) accordingly. Although the data were not the result of random sampling, tests of difference were applied to compare average total asset scores on demographic variables (grade and gender), program-related variables (program, program type, and number of programs participated in), and membership-related variables (frequency of participation, duration of membership). In view of the small sample sizes involved in most of the comparisons, appropriate non-parametric tests were used. In addition, a

descriptive account of the survey findings is presented. Following the general convention in social science research, this study reported significance at a 95 percent confidence level (Miller, 2004).

### **Qualitative Method of Inquiry**

The data collection phase of this study commenced with staff interviews. After the research was introduced at a staff meeting, nineteen interviews were conducted with full-time and part-time staff members in program-related, drop-in centre related, or managerial positions at Fusion. The interviews were conducted over the phone in January 2014. They ranged in length from 30 minutes to one hour. The interview questions were designed to understand staff's perceptions about their contributions to the development of youth. The staff members were interviewed to try to understand how they see themselves fostering an environment that is conducive to asset development in the youth participants.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature in that they followed a pre-determined line of questioning; however, the researcher was flexible in allowing the conversation to flow with follow-up questions. In addition, staff members were given the opportunity to answer any unasked questions at the end of the session. Please refer to Appendix E for a list of the interview questions.

After all the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed. The staff members were asked if they wanted a copy of the transcription. Electronic copies were sent to the staff that requested transcriptions for their record and reference. The staff were also given the opportunity to add or subtract from the data upon receiving the

transcriptions. The qualitative data was then analyzed manually using the grounded theory approach. Charmaz and Bryant (2010) define grounded theory as:

[A] method of qualitative inquiry in which researchers develop inductive theoretical analyses from their collected data and subsequently gather further data to check these analyses. The purpose of grounded theory is theory construction, rather than description or application of existing theories. (p. 292).

Five preliminary themes emerged from this approach to data analysis:

relationship building, skill development, structure, flexibility, and holistic development of youth (See Appendix F). These themes set the stage for subsequent analysis in light of the conceptual framework of capacity development (Bolger, 2000), the Developmental Assets Framework (Search Institute, 2009), and the Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2014). The guiding research question was: “How do the staff contribute to the asset development of youth who are members at Fusion?”

## **Limitations**

Although the mixed methods approach that guided this study increased its descriptive merit, some limitations, confined to the quantitative component, compromised its scientific rigor. First, the limited number of survey responses and their self-selected nature rendered sophisticated statistical analysis difficult. In addition, the lack of a control group, inability to control for external variables, and the one-time application of the DAP made it difficult for the researcher to attribute asset development in youth to their participation at Fusion.

## **Ethical Considerations**

This study was designed in keeping with the policies and guidelines of the Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph. Consent, confidentiality, and risk were the main ethical concerns addressed in the details of design.

For the youth sample, consent was obtained, confidentiality was maintained, and psychological risks were mitigated. Prior to completion of the survey, participants were asked for their full, informed consent. They were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation, the fact that they could skip any questions they did not feel comfortable asking, and that they could cease to participate at any time. No compulsion or coercion of any kind was imposed on the youth. Consent was obtained from the youth themselves in order to allow them to speak for themselves (Williams, 2006). The survey asked youth to respond to questions that they had agency over (Williams, 2006). Since the survey is standardized, reliable, and low-risk (Search Institute, 2012), the Research Ethics Board did not identify age-related risks associated with the survey instrument. The possibility of anxiety and/or embarrassment was recognized as potential psychological risk(s). Three steps to manage this risk were identified: 1) obtaining full, informed consent from the youth before the start of the survey and explaining what the survey was about ahead of time; 2) ensuring that youth knew that their participation is voluntary and they could skip any question(s) they did not feel comfortable answering and/or cease to participate at any time without penalty; 3) debriefing the participants at the end of the survey and making sure that any concerns were addressed. The results of the surveys were shared with the youth in the form of an infographic (forthcoming).

Ethical considerations for the staff members were also taken into account during the course of data collection, analysis, and presentation. Full-informed consent was obtained during the interviews from the staff members. Identifiers were removed from analyses and reports to maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees. Before

conducting the interviews with the staff, it was believed that the study could have posed a social risk to them. The staff members were given an opportunity to reflect on their practice through the interviews. The risk was that the staff members could have felt concerned about their program relative to other programs in the outcomes of the research. This risk proved to be unfounded as the staff expressed a great sense of camaraderie in the interviews and were able to use some of the questions posed in the interviews as probes for group reflection.

Efforts were made to keep the staff in the loop throughout the research process. The staff members were provided with a copy of their interview transcripts within 24 hours of the interview taking place. The preliminary findings from the interviews were shared with the staff in the form of a poster (see Appendix G). The results of the study were presented at a staff meeting and the staff members were thanked wholeheartedly for their support and contribution to the research in written form.

## **Summary**

This study used a mixed methods design that was qualitative dominant. The methods of inquiry included a standardized survey with youth and semi-structured interviews with staff. The quantitative portion of the study faced limitations as the sample of youth was self-selected and lacked a control group. The ethical considerations were accounted for in the design of the study in compliance with the guidelines set by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Guelph.

## Chapter 5: Findings

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*“If you focus on results, you will never get change. If you focus on change, you will get results”*

–Jack Dixon

### Introduction

In order to learn about youth development at Fusion, this mixed methods study collected data by administering the DAP survey to the youth and conducting semi-structured interviews with the staff members. The findings presented in the following three chapters address the following three research questions:

1. What does the Developmental Assets Framework tell us about youth members at Fusion?
2. From the staff’s perspective, how do they contribute to the development of youth members?
3. How does Fusion, as an organization, support the development of youth members?

To begin, this chapter presents the findings that address the first question.

### Describing the Developmental Assets Profiles of Fusion Youth

This section presents an analysis of the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) survey that was administered at Fusion. The survey data provides a snapshot of the DAP of Fusion youth as per their self-reported responses to the survey.

The DAP survey was administered at the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre in March 2014. Although 61 surveys were completed, 57 surveys were analyzed after screening out surveys that were duplicates, surveys that had incoherent responses, and/or surveys with missing data. Twenty-nine of the 57 respondents were male and the remaining 28 identified as females. The average age of the respondents was 14 years with a standard deviation of 1.38 years. The grade levels of respondents

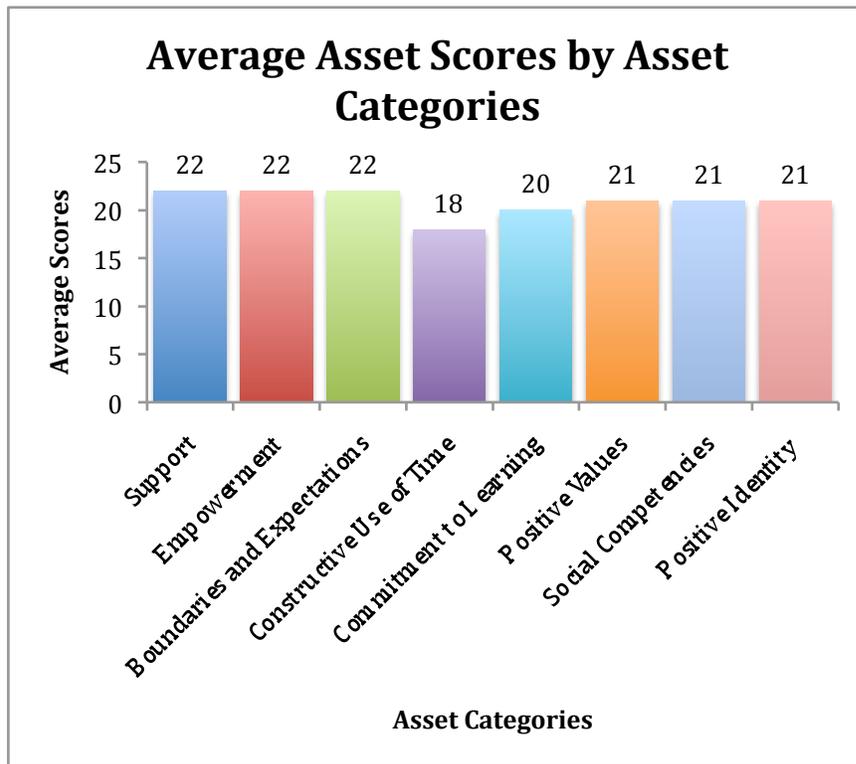
ranged from Grade 6 to Grade 12. Although the sample was self-selected, for the purposes of this analysis, it was assumed that the youth who completed the survey were representative of the population of youth members at Fusion.

The DAP survey revealed that the average asset score for Fusion was 42 out of 60, which is categorized as being “good”. The average asset scores of youth were compared on demographic variables, membership-related variables, and program-related variables. The demographic variables included age and grade. The membership-related variables included duration of membership and frequency of participation. The program-related variables included number of programs in which the youth participate, the type of programs in which they participate, and the frequency with which they participate in programs. The variables were compared using the appropriate non-parametric test(s) (Mann-Whitney U and/or Kruskal-Wallis) and descriptive statistics.

### ***Comparing Average Asset Scores on Demographic Variables***

The average asset scores of youth members on the four external and four internal asset categories ranged between 18 to 22 (see Figure 4 below).

**Figure 4: Average Asset Scores by Asset Categories**



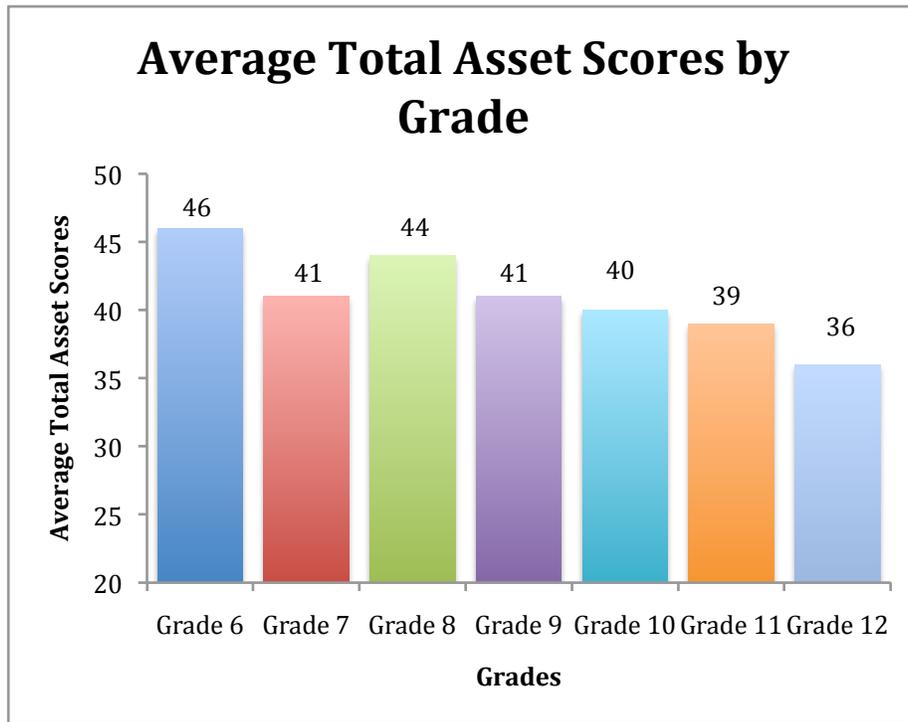
More specifically, the average asset scores on the individual external categories of support, empowerment, and boundaries and expectations were 22. The average asset score on the individual external category of constructive use of time was 18. Similarly, the average asset scores on the internal asset categories of positive values, social competencies, and positive identity were 21. And, the average asset score on the internal category of commitment to learning was 20. Overall, the average asset scores on the external asset categories were slightly higher than the average asset scores on the internal asset categories.

The average asset scores of the 28 male and 29 female youth members were compared. The average total asset score for the males was 40, which is considered “fair”. The average total asset score for the females was 44, which is considered “good”.

No statistically significant difference was found between the male and female total average asset scores by the Mann-Whitney U test ( $p=0.180$ ). Although the statistical analysis did not yield significant results, the descriptive statistics show that the average total asset score for the males was slightly lower than that of the females.

The average asset scores of youth members were compared on the variable of grade. Four respondents were in Grade 6 at the time of survey administration and their average asset score was 46, which is considered “good”. Six respondents represented Grade 7 and their average asset score was 41, which is also considered “good”. Twelve respondents from Grade 8 completed the survey and their average asset score was 44, which is considered “good”. Fourteen respondents were from Grade 9 and their average asset score was 41, which is also considered “good”. Thirteen respondents were from Grade 10 and their average asset score was 40, which is considered “fair”. Six youth from Grade 11 completed the survey and their average asset score was 39, which is also considered “fair”. Two youth were from Grade 12 and their average asset score was 36, which is once again considered “fair”.

**Figure 5:** Average Total Asset Scores of Youth by Grade



In order to adjust for the small sample sizes, a test of difference was conducted by aggregating respondents into two groups, namely: middle school (Grades 6, 7 and 8) and high school (Grades 9, 10, 11, and 12). There was no statistically significant difference between the mean total asset score of youth by grade ( $p = 0.1$ ). Although the statistical analysis yielded no significant results, some trends are apparent from the descriptive analysis (see Figure 5). The average asset scores of youth seem to decline steadily as the youth progress in grade level, with the exception of Grade 8.

### ***Comparing Average Asset Scores on Membership-Related Variables***

Youth members at Fusion were asked questions regarding the duration of their membership at Fusion and the frequency of their participation in addition the DAP survey questions.

Fusion youth were asked how long they have been members at Fusion and the responses ranged from 0 months to five years. Eleven youth reported that they have been members for zero to less than six months, eight youth said that they have been members for six months to one year, 24 youth said that they have been members at Fusion for more than one year to less than three years, 11 youth said that they have been members for three to five years, and two youth members said that they have been visiting Fusion for over five years. The average asset scores of youth members were compared by the duration of their membership.

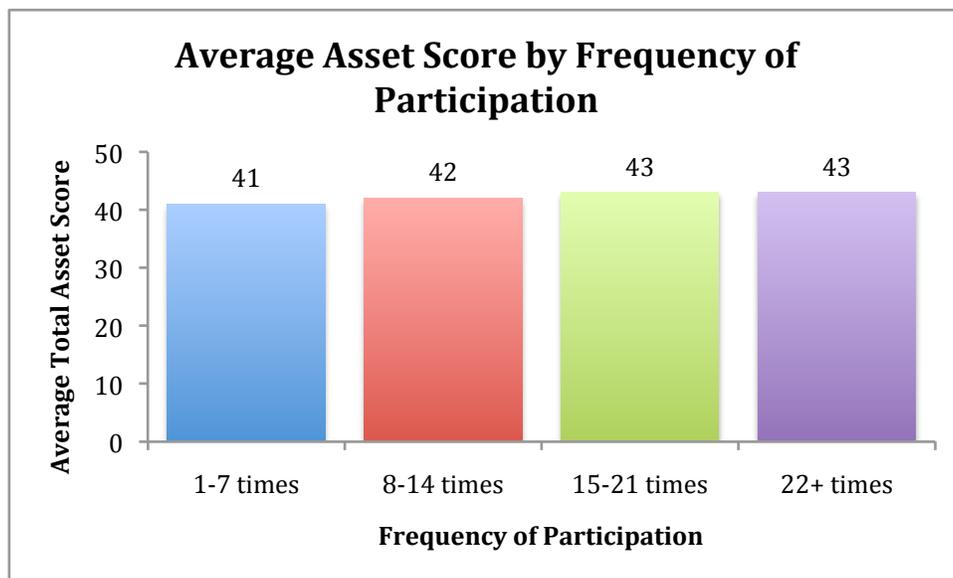
**Figure 6:** Average Asset Score of Youth Members by Duration of Membership



The graphic (Figure 6 above) seems to indicate a downward trend in average asset score by duration of membership. A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in the DAP of youth based on the duration of their membership at Fusion. The test did not yield statistically significant results ( $p= 0.761$ ).

The survey also asked the respondents how frequently they visited Fusion in the 30 days prior to survey administration. The data revealed that youth members visit Fusion frequently: 23 percent of the youth visit Fusion between one to seven times in a month, 23 percent visit Fusion between eight and 14 times in a month, 26 percent of youth visit Fusion 15 to 21 times in a month, and the final 26 percent visit Fusion more than 22 times in one month. The graph (Figure 7) illustrates the comparison of the average total asset scores of youth members across the four categories, which appear to be consistent regardless of frequency of participation.

**Figure 7: Average Asset Score by Frequency of Participation**



Likewise, a Kruskal-Wallis test was performed and no statistically significant difference was found between the mean total asset scores of youth by the frequency of their participation at Fusion ( $p=0.92$ ). As such, it can be said that the DAP of youth participants did not differ depending on how frequently youth members visited Fusion.

### Comparing Average Asset Scores by Program-Related Variables

The DAP of the survey sample was also compared on program-related variables. Members who participate in 23 programs offered at Fusion were represented in the survey<sup>1</sup>. A summary of the asset profiles of youth by program is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Developmental Assets Profile of Youth by Program

Program	# of Participants	Developmental Assets Profile		
		Average Internal Asset Score	Average External Asset Score	Average Total Asset Score
Arts Break	16	14	15	29
Brian's Bistro	13	20	20	40
Drop-In Centre	10	20	21	41
Fusion Fitness	13	21	21	42
Fusion TV	7	20	21	41
Game Development	1	28	29	57
Girls' Group	16	23	22	45
Graphic Design	7	21	23	44
Guitar Lessons	16	23	23	46
Hockey Night	9	21	21	42
Homework Help	1	19	25	44
IMAC Studio	1	28	23	51
IYAC	10	19	22	41
Nutrition	2	19	17	36
Open Jam	18	21	21	42
Photography	6	23	23	46
Radio Broadcasting	7	21	23	44
ReBuild IT	13	21	20	41
Recording Studio	8	22	22	44
Skate Park	10	20	20	40
Snack Shack	11	21	20	41
Soccer Night	6	23	21	44
Sports Night	7	22	20	42

Overall, the youth who participated in Game Development had the highest average asset score and the two youth in the Nutrition Program had the lowest average asset score in this analysis.

<sup>1</sup> The SureStart Program was the only program not represented because it serves youth from the ages of 15 to 25 and it is run in partnership with Community Employment Services.

A test of difference was conducted to determine if the average total asset scores of youth members differed based on the programs that they participated in. No statistically significant difference was found between the groups ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, Table 2 presents a breakdown of the total asset scores ranges, asset score categories, and where each program falls on the scale as per the average total asset score of the youth who represented each program in the survey sample. It is important to note that the average asset scores of the youth who represent the majority of the programs (17 out of 23) rang from 41 to 50, which is considered “good”.

**Table 2:** Breakdown of Total Developmental Assets Category by Program

Total Asset Range	Total Asset Rating	Program(s)
0-30	Low	Arts Break
31-40	Fair	Brian's Bistro Nutrition Skate Park
41-50	Good	Drop In Centre Fusion Fitness Fusion TV Girls' Group Graphic Design Guitar Lessons Hockey Night Homework Help IYAC Open Jam Photography Radio Broadcasting ReBuild IT Recording Studio Snack Shack Soccer Night Sports Night
51-60	Excellent	Game Development IMAC Studio

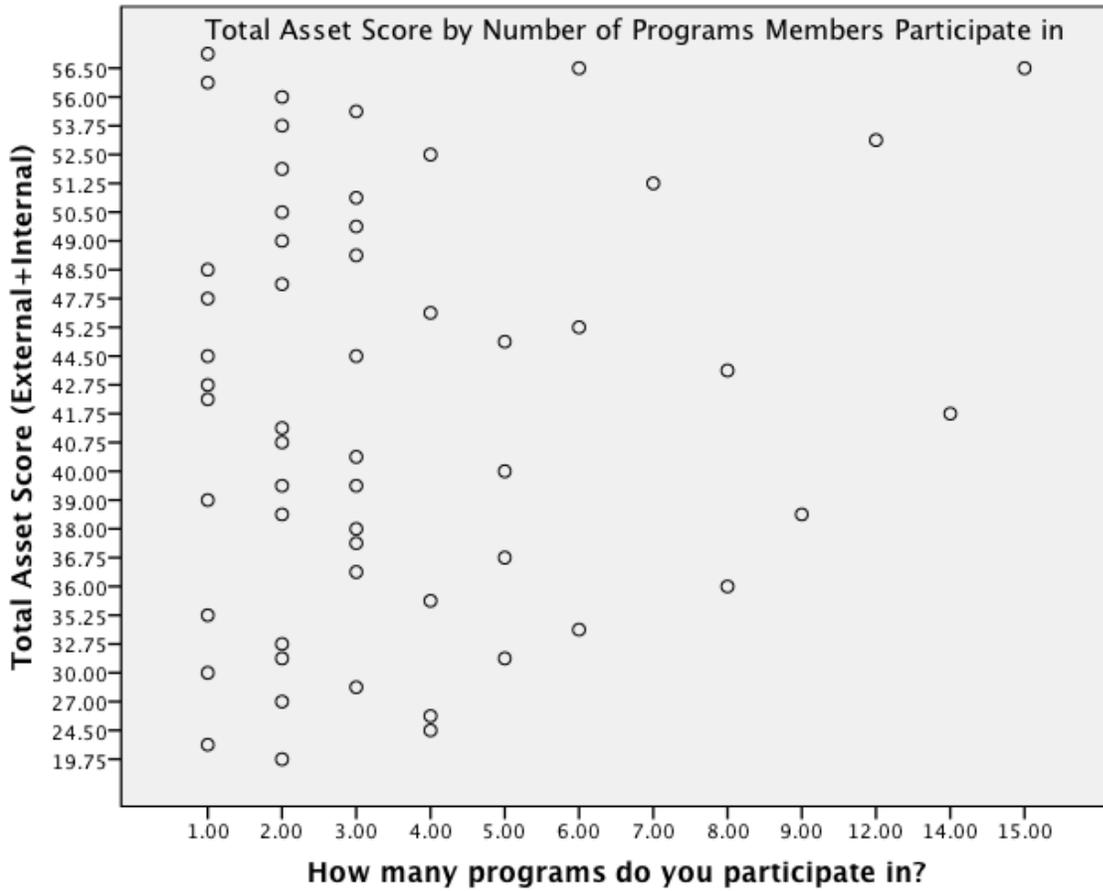
Finally, the average asset score of the youth was analyzed in light of the number of programs the youth members participated in. Table 3 provides a summary of the number of programs the youth who completed the survey participate in, which ranges from 1 to 15.

**Table 3: Number of Programs the Youth Participate in**

# of Programs	# of Youth Participants	% of total
1	11	19 %
2	15	26 %
3	12	21 %
4	4	7 %
5	4	7 %
6	3	5 %
7	1	1.8 %
8	2	4 %
9	1	1.8 %
12	1	1.8 %
14	1	1.8 %
15	1	1.8 %
Missing Data	1	1.8 %
Total	57	100 %

As the table shows, 66 percent of the youth participate in 1 to 3 programs. The total asset scores of youth members were plotted to on a graph (Figure 8) to determine whether there were differences amongst the average asset scores of youth based on the number programs they participated in.

**Figure 8:** Total Asset Score by Number of Programs Members Participate in



Although the graph (Figure 8) indicates considerable score variability within the means of the total asset scores of youth members based on the number of programs they participate in, there is a general indication of increasing scores as the number of programs increases.

### Summary

The DAP survey revealed the following findings:

- The average age of Fusion members is 14;
- The average asset score of Fusion youth is 42 out of 60, which is considered good;

- The average asset score of male and female members is about the same (40 vs. 44);
- The average asset score of youth members declines steadily as they enter higher grades, with the exception of Grade 8;
- The majority of youth have been members at Fusion for 1-3 years; and,
- No statistically significant differences were found when the means of total asset scores of youth members were compared on demographic variables, membership-related variables, and program-related variables.

The key result to keep in mind before moving forward is that the average asset score, as revealed by the DAP survey, of Fusion youth is 42, which is considered good. The next chapter presents the staff's stories as uncovered through the interviews.

## Chapter 6: Portraits of Practice

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*“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”*

– Maya Angelou

### Introduction

“Storytelling” was not identified as a research method for this study. However, the interviews with the staff lent themselves to a representation of the interviews in the form of stories. I felt that showcasing the interviews with the staff in the form of stories would help preserve the lessons that can be learned from the staff members at Fusion. By presenting these “portraits of practice”, this chapter begins to address the second research question: “how do the staff members at Fusion contribute to youth development”. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the confidentiality of the staff members with the exception of the Manager, whose real name is used with his permission.

### Portraits of Practice

The interviews with the staff served as windows into their practice as facilitators of youth development. They illustrated the complex nature of work with youth and the deliberate and intentional role that the staff members play in the lives of youth members at Fusion. The staff stories that will be retold in this chapter will help introduce the practice of youth development at Fusion and will touch upon some of the key themes that emerged from the interviews. This chapter begins with the story of the Manager, Jason, and ends with the story of Sofia, who facilitates the IYAC and co-facilitates the Nutrition Programs at Fusion. It is hoped that the essence of the passionate practice of staff is preserved in these accounts and some of their challenges are given voice.

## **Jason**

*Jason has over 15 years of experience working with youth. He started his career by running youth camps. Then, he managed a youth centre and became the Executive Director of a non-profit organization that worked with at-risk youth. Jason was then recruited to co-create a youth centre for youth in Ingersoll. He has helped Fusion plant its participatory roots in the needs of the local youth. His dedication to the mission of Fusion came through in his interview along with themes of relationship building, empowerment, and organizational culture.*

“I grew up on the other side of the youth centre,” said Jason as he traced the origins of his passion for youth development. “A staff member at a youth centre helped me turn my life around,” he explained. As a result, Fusion’s mission, according to Jason is to “empower youth to make changes.” He says:

The bottom line comes down to empowering youth to make changes. So, we are not making the changes for them; rather, as a staff team, we are working with the youth to empower them, to give the tools that they need to make the changes in their lives that they think need to be made to better their future opportunities.

Fusion is a “community based, youth-driven centre,” says Jason. According to Jason, the ultimate goal of empowering youth cannot be achieved by adults sitting around a table planning programs for youth. To the contrary, he believes that “if it is for them, it needs to be done by them.” He explains:

I think it’s important that if we are going to serve youth, that it is not a bunch of adults sitting in a room going “Hmmm....I think this program would work.” [This process of involving youth in the creation of a centre for them] provides ownership and it provides opportunities for youth to gain leadership skills.

Jason’s participatory inclination permeates the ethos at Fusion. As a result, the staff members are encouraged to provide the youth with as many opportunities for involvement as possible. In addition, the youth are encouraged to “think big” and find ways to keep fusion “innovative, exciting, and fun”.

Jason says that the role of the staff team is to serve as “caretakers of the emotions that kids go through” and to guide youth’s exploration of “what is going to work for them and what is not”. Complementing the role of the staff, Jason says that the programs “provide skills and training”, “give youth the opportunity to explore options and to try and figure out what they want to do with their lives”, and help them “build those relationships” with people they can connect with.

Jason has a big picture perspective and hopes that Fusion contributes to creating a better society by providing a place for youth to grow and by helping youth become strong, prepared adults. To conclude, he says: “At the end of the day, I would hope that youth leave Fusion being impacted in some way, whether they come here every day for 3 years or whether they come here 3 times a year and that’s all”.

### **Sarah**

*Sarah started working at Fusion as a co-op student in a Communications position three years ago. After completing her co-op, Sarah got hired as a full-time staff and has been facilitating the SureStart Program since then. During her interview, the following themes surfaced: relationship building, skill development, youth-orientation, ownership, self-discovery, and learning boundaries.*

“We can make an impact here,” said Sarah as she thought about the role that Fusion plays in the lives of its youth members. Sarah’s approach to youth development is grounded in her experience with the youth at Fusion. As a result of her experience, she espouses “ownership” as a value in her practice. She believes that participation is the only way that change can be facilitated. In this spirit, she has incorporated feedback from youth in the design and delivery of the SureStart program.

In addition, she feels that creating an environment in which the youth feel included and welcome is essential to help foster growth. Quoting Christie (2012), Sarah

emphasized that the youth have described Fusion as being a “safe space” for them and she believes that to be the number one reason why they come back.

One of her challenges has been working with youth who might have mental health concerns. She would love professional development opportunities that could enrich her capacity to work with youth facing psychological challenges. She recognizes that youth are whole beings and if something is affecting one part of their lives, it has the potential to contaminate other areas of life unless it is dealt with. She sees it as her duty to be a positive role model for youth and that includes approaching each individual youth holistically and caring about their needs beyond the confines of her program and of Fusion.

### **Emma**

*Emma has been working at Fusion for almost four years. She is the Program Coordinator for the SureStart Program. Her interview revealed themes of relationship building, skill development, empowerment, youth-orientation, character development, and organizational culture.*

Emma always knew she wanted to work with youth in some capacity. Initially, Fusion was a transition job for her as she waited for a response from Teacher’s College. Fusion offered her a full-time position at the same time as her Teacher’s College acceptance letter rolled in. Emma chose to stay with Fusion because:

[Fusion staff] can impact a youth in a way that perhaps a teacher can’t [...] we have a very flexible program and we aren’t restricted in what we can offer...we don’t have to go through any red tape [to add things to the curriculum]. We have the flexibility to teach what we think they need to learn and what the youth are telling us they want to learn.

In other words, Emma values the flexibility that she has as a facilitator at Fusion. That flexibility is translated into choice for the youth: the staff can empower the youth by giving them choices. For example, if the youth want to focus more on one topic, such as

dress code, rather than another topic in a given session, the design of the SureStart Program is flexible enough to incorporate those changes.

Emma says that a lot of the youth that come to Fusion seem to be “misguided”, as if they have lost hope in their own capabilities. Fusion is a place where youth are encouraged to develop. She thinks that “the most important thing is the relationships [the youth] build with the staff.” She believes that the youth “come back for their relationships and the programs are another way to engage with the staff who they care about and they feel care about them.”

Emma has witnessed changes in self-confidence and self-esteem in the youth members. She says that youth “regain confidence in themselves and feel like they deserve to work towards [the] goals [they set for themselves].” In other words, she has seen youth come to Fusion, connect with a staff member, and regain confidence in themselves.

When asked about the role that Fusion plays in the lives of youth, Emma mentioned four pivotal contributions that Fusion makes: stability, discovery, comfort, and relationships. To quote:

Whether the youth realize it or not, [Fusion] is a part of their lives at a very important time. I think that [for some youth] the stability that could be lacking elsewhere is found here at fusion...it is a safe space for youth to spend their free time. For some youth, it is a place where they get to test out their abilities...A lot of youth find a niche here...they feel comfortable here...the relationships they build with the staff are really important.

## *John*

*John is responsible for youth discipline at Fusion. He believes that it is important for youth to know what is expected of them behaviorally at Fusion and for the staff members to have a consistent response to misconduct. John, through his story, explains why he is interested in helping youth and how the environment that Fusion creates helps youth learn, become themselves, and discover interests that they can pursue outside of Fusion. Respect, boundaries and expectations, learning and growth, and self-expression are four key themes that surfaced in his interview.*

“Fusion’s mission is to not leave any youth behind. To make every youth a priority,” says John, the only staff member at Fusion who has a Corrections background. He says that he decided to take the “youth route” after completing a Corrections course at college because he thought he “could make a bigger impact with youth”. In explaining what kind of impact he hopes to make, he said: “just improving their daily lives, providing them with guidance and helping them make the right choices in the paths that are going on.” His desire to help youth comes from his work experience with youth in a corrections facility. He explains:

Before working at Fusion, I worked at a male and female corrections facility for youth. There, I learned a lot really fast about adolescents. I saw them in their darkest time and how damaged they can be because of family problems – physical or sexual abuse—and how that affects the decisions that they make throughout their lives.

At Fusion, the staff members interact with youth from various socio-economic backgrounds with varying psychological abilities. He explains that some youth at Fusion have mental health challenges and others have learning disabilities. As a result, John says that the staff “have to be adaptable and have to learn from the youth as well” because at Fusion, “no youth is left behind”.

In addition to being adaptable, he thinks the staff members have to be flexible.

John says:

We have to be flexible because we may think that we know what we want to do for programs but the youth might not want to do that. We need to be consistent in our policies and procedures; the kids struggle if we are not consistent. We have to be engaging and have great customer service.

Having great customer service, in John's mind, has roots in respect. He says:

I think if you give the youth respect then things will fall into place. I've been through some things in my life that help me work with the youth. I can definitely put myself in their shoes and look out from their eyes. In return, the youth are expected to take ownership of the property and follow the boundaries we have set up.

Respect, flexibility, adaptability, and boundaries come together to create an environment in which youth can learn. Learning while having fun has led many youth to pursue interests formed at Fusion outside of Fusion. In this way, Fusion helps "provide kids with some kind of direction and a future." However, he recognizes that youth tend to participate irregularly or even sporadically. Lack of consistent participation poses a challenge for the staff. John says that:

One challenge for us is that we don't see the same youth come by every day. Say we have a young male who is 15 years old and needs our help. He starts coming in and we are making some progress and all of a sudden something happens at home and we don't see him again for two months. Then, we have lost all that work we did with that one youth. Being able to keep kids coming on a regular basis and being able to work with them would be ideal.

Despite the challenges, Fusion serves as a refuge for many youth members.

John explains that Fusion is like a second home to some youth members:

If Fusion was not here since 2006, there would be a lot of youth who knows where they would be. We have had hundreds of youth who come here everyday from 2:30 to 9:30 because their family life is not what they want it to be. Whether it is because their parents aren't home, they have been physically or emotionally abused, or they have a broken home, or they don't have food on the table at home. Fusion is a safe and inclusive place for kids to be. I don't want to know what would happen to Ingersoll if this place ever closed down.

## Olivia

*Olivia has been working at Fusion for just over one year. She is interested in working with at-risk youth. The themes that emerged from her interview include relationship building, structure, character development, and skill development.*

“A successful afterschool program needs to grab the attention of the youth. [and provide opportunities] to build their character too,” says Olivia, who is one of the three youth engagement staff at Fusion. Although youth engagement is the primary responsibility of each staff member at Fusion, Olivia is tasked with engaging with the youth who frequent the drop-in environment at Fusion.

She thinks that youth are “a group of people who are trying to figure out who they are”. As a result, the challenge for afterschool programs such as Fusion is “to find that right program, or the right group of programs, that will incorporate the needs or interests of most of the youth that come here.”

Olivia sees herself as a role model for youth members: “I think I am here as a role model and as someone for the youth to look up to. I am here to set a good example.” She cherishes the relationships that she built with youth at Fusion:

I’ve built quite a rapport with some of the kids that I encounter here. I have seen them progress from when I first came to Fusion to where they are today. They have let me into their personal lives and some have let down their personal guards. I think that is pretty neat.

Olivia believes that the youth who are members at Fusion are perceptive. She explains that they expect the programs to be well-prepared and they expect the staff to be confident and dedicated. To quote:

It’s not that fun or it doesn’t look good if the youth come in and your program is not organized and you don’t have all your materials together. You need to have confidence in what you are doing. If the youth come in and see that you are kind of panicky, they are not going to have a good time. They are going to pretty much

take that as “they are not here for me, they are here as a job.” You really need to dedicate yourself to the program and Fusion in general.

Olivia wants the youth to know that she is “their friend” but also an “authority figure”. By perpetuating a culture of respect, Olivia says that Fusion staff are “here to create a safe space for youth to grow and find their potential”.

She tries to get to know youth who do not participate in many activities at Fusion to understand what sparks their interest. Then, she tries to expose youth to new things and encourages them to grow. She says: “It is really just making those activities known and that it is okay to come and put yourself out there and try it.”

Olivia believes that Fusion helps motivate youth and “creates a kind of trust and self-confidence” in them. She says:

Without Fusion, a lot of the youth would not have some of the activities that we offer here. They wouldn’t have some of the chances to learn some of the skills that we offer, which could lead to employment opportunities or realizing a passion of theirs.

Like many of her colleagues, Olivia realizes that skill development and relationship building are interdependent. Encouragement, through relationships, is important to Olivia so that the youth will have the confidence they need to try new things and grow. She hopes that participation at Fusion will teach the youth that “they are worth something”.

### **William**

*William has been working at Fusion since 2010 in full-time, part-time, and casual positions. He is a Child and Youth Worker by training. He works numerous jobs but he continues to work at Fusion because of the relationships that he has formed with the youth members. In his interview, relationship building, flexibility, and self-expression surfaced as themes.*

“Youth is a really sensitive time in which young people are trying to identify

themselves and figure out their roles,” says William who is a youth engagement staff at Fusion. Speaking from his experience, William says that “there seems to be a constant demographic” of youth who frequent Fusion. His description of youth members falls into the at-risk category. He says:

It is not necessarily the most affluent kids in town who have a variety of options and opportunities at home. It is ones, not everyone, but it is the ones that don't necessarily have the freedoms and structure at home. They appear to come from, not necessarily a troubled past, but more divided households and separations and divorces and stuff like that. The kids that don't necessarily have these outlets at their disposal are the ones that we tend to get here.

Since youth is a sensitive time and many of the youth who frequent Fusion do not necessarily have a nurturing environment at home, having a “compassionate staff team” is important for an afterschool program. Like John, William says that “a lot of what we offer is therapeutic in a sense: if they keep coming, they keep getting the gains, they keep getting the support they need to work on the obstacles that they are facing.”

However, given that Fusion is a drop-in centre in conjunction with a structured programming centre, consistent participation of youth is a challenge. One way to make sure the youth keep coming back, according to William, is developing relationships with youth. In his description of his role at Fusion, he expresses a sense of attachment to youth members. He says:

On top of the day-to-day duties and beyond helping out with the programs, my role is to make connections with kids: mentoring them, providing support for them, and just being available for them. I still have those relationships that I fostered with many kids. It's important for them to see that I am here and I haven't abandoned them in a sense.

He believes that Fusion provides youth with a safe and supportive environment in which they can grow. He says:

Fusion's goal is to provide a safe place where youth can come be themselves and explore themselves and find themselves.[.] A place out of stress and harms way where they can come relax and really be able to find their potential at their own pace. A place where they have access to opportunities that they may not have at home.

He says that if Fusion could be described as an entity, "it would be something that encourages, supports, and protects."

### **Hailey**

*Hailey has been working at Fusion for over one year and she has been working with youth for eight years. Hailey expressed an extraordinary level of enthusiasm for her work. Themes of relationship building, skill development, deliberate practice, and successful adulthood surfaced during her interview.*

"I have always had a passion for generating change in the community," says Hailey who is a youth engagement staff member at Fusion. She continues: "In my mind, youth have the strongest power to generate that change. I think there is a lot of passion to tap into at this age."

Like her colleague William, Hailey works numerous jobs but hangs on to Fusion. She says: "Fusion is the one place that I would have difficulty giving up just because of the relationships that I have built with the youth here."

She believes that Fusion is a "very credible centre" because it "caters to the needs of youth" and is "youth-driven". A challenge for her is "ensuring that the youth are getting the most out of the programs" that are available to them at Fusion.

She tries to make sure that the youth feel supported by having "emotionally-based conversations with them". Before going into work, she says she tries to prepare herself by clearing her mind so that she can be there for the youth. To quote:

I try to prepare myself when I am going in for a shift so that I have as much patience as possible...I try to go in with a clear, good mindset and try to leave my

personal life at the door...I just really try to be as positive as I can and give my full attention to the youth.

By being her best self as a role model for the youth, Hailey helps Fusion accomplish its mission of “engaging youth in a safe environment, where they feel included and they feel like they can better themselves.” She believes that Fusion helps youth develop skills so that they can become better people and contributing members of society. This big picture perspective helps Hailey realize the importance of the relationships that she builds with the youth at Fusion. She says: “Just the interaction that they have with the staff and with their peers, I think that is priceless and invaluable.”

### **Liam**

*Liam has over 10 years of experience working with youth in inner city and rural contexts. A newspaper in Saskatoon first exposed him to the work of Fusion. He planned to visit and work at Fusion thereafter. In his interview themes of skill development, safe and welcoming environment, and respect were highlighted.*

Liam defines youth as a “key time” in getting young people to where they will be as adults. He says that Fusion plays a “key role in an area of growth for youth”. He continues: “It is a time in their lives where they are growing and maturing into adulthood and we help them in that growth process.” As Coordinator of the technology programs, Liam oversees the video-editing, photography, graphic design, music, ReBuild IT, radio broadcasting, Internet café, and gaming programs at Fusion. He believes that “the technology programs as a whole encourage youth to explore technology that may be new to them.” He adds:

...the programs help the youth develop skills that will be key for them when it comes to finding employment, whether that be basic computer proficiency or developing skills in a specific field. We try to offer programs that are what the youth are interested in so the programs that we offer are relevant for youth.

Offering programs that are relevant for youth is especially important because Liam identified “willing participants” as the most important element of successful afterschool programs. He says:

The youth participate in these programs because they want to. So, we have to have youth participants who are interested in what the programs have to offer. If the youth aren't interested in coming to our program, then we don't have a program.

Providing opportunities for youth to explore technology-based interests is important to Liam. Once the youth have selected programs that they are interested in and have started participating, Liam believes it important to have structure within the programs. He says:

The youth may not know what specific technology they might be interested in, whether that might be computers or video-editing or something else. We provide those opportunities for youth so that they can try programs out. Then, we also make sure that we have structure within those programs to give youth and staff the ability to track a youth's progress within a program and to measure how much they have learned.

Liam says that the culture at Fusion is “always forward-thinking and looking at ways that we can do things better”. He believes that “it is a culture that is supportive for youth. It encourages them to try new things.” Within this encouraging, supportive culture, the youth are able to develop values. They learn to respect themselves and each other and are able to develop a love for “personal growth and development”.

From Liam's perspective, Fusion helps youth “get the training that they need to move into the next phase of their lives into career” and provides a “safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment” in which they can “be themselves” and “interact with their peers”.

## **Andrew**

*Andrew exemplifies how the staff at Fusion can balance structure with flexibility; how the staff help perpetuate a culture of respect; and, how the staff help the youth grow and learn through encouragement.*

Andrew comes from a family of teachers so teaching youth music at Fusion comes naturally to him. He believes that Fusion is a place where youth, who are transitioning into adulthood, can explore options. As a result, he believes that Fusion needs to be structured properly. He says:

Fusion is meant for showing the options because youth is a transition between childhood and adulthood, that in-between phase of finding yourself. If it is structured properly, we can show them everything that is out there.

This desire for structure does not render Andrew rigid in how he delivers the music programs at Fusion. To the contrary, he is very accommodating and encouraging as a program facilitator. To quote:

This is a space where youth can come in and do what they want. They can feel free to come in and try what they haven't tried before. [...] I try to be okay with how they want to be involved in music. I'm just here to encourage.

Andrew thinks that Fusion helps youth transition more easily "into different age groups by already having a well-known group of people who are already in that age group." He also thinks that the value of respect that is ingrained in youth at Fusion travels with them outside of Fusion.

He hopes that the youth will learn and gain self-confidence as a result of their participation at Fusion. Andrew tries to be "very encouraging in the studio even if the youth are struggling" to facilitate learning and confidence building in youth.

He loves being able to "jam" with youth. He says: "Sometimes I'll have an open jam with one other kid maybe and we'll just be sitting on the couch jamming on the

guitar. That's just the coolest thing for me." "Personally," he says, " I would like some youth to form a band and use this space to practice. I think that would be really cool."

### **Logan**

*Logan started working at Fusion about two years ago. He had previous experience working with adults with disabilities but limited experience with youth. In his interview, relationship building, balancing structure and flexibility, organizational culture, and skill development surfaced as key themes.*

"I connect with a lot of the youth here," says Logan who offers Guitar Lessons within the Music Program at Fusion. Logan says that youth are "looking for guidance and leniency to be able to discover things on their own. Building upon that notion, he thinks that a successful afterschool program needs to be able to balance structure with flexibility. He says: "The rigid structure is almost to make it a legitimate program but the flexibility makes it accommodating to the youth."

In his program, Logan tailors his approach to meet the needs of individual youth. He confers agreements with youth to hold them accountable. He says:

...just giving them something that works for them but at the same time holding them a bit accountable to the program that way they get the responsibility out of it but it is not feeling like an obligation or a chore.

Logan's programming strategy is "Fusion universal" he says. All programs at Fusion have certain elements such as structure and greater goals. He believes that program staff are conducting research for funders that is beneficial. Reflecting on greater goals, or outcomes, for programs help the staff think consciously "beyond lessons and what this lesson does for a youth and what sorts of doors this would open for them." As a result of the reflection process involved, the staff members are now more aware of the impact their interactions or programs might have on youth. Logan says: "I have started considering how the program affects somebody on a greater level

than just learning the guitar.”

Like many of his colleagues, Logan masks skill development as fun. He says: “I try to make them enjoy it first and sneak in the theory when I can.” Like John, Logan says that: “Fusion is sort of like a refuge” for many youth members.

Youth learn technical (music-related) skills in his program along with “soft skills like communication and ability to transfer information”. In addition, he connects with the youth through this program. He says:

I start off every lesson by asking how their week has been, how school is going, and how their family is doing. Getting to know them on a personal level is a big part of it: It’s definitely not just music.

By getting to know youth on a personal level, Logan helps make Fusion a “place where youth can come and feel comfortable”. When youth feel comfortable, they might be “stimulated into areas that they might not have considered before.” Logan asserts that Fusion is a “good place for exploring options”. He says that it is a “one-house place with all these little sub categories that youth can explore”. In addition, youth learn how to build relationships at Fusion. Logan says:

I think Fusion is a pretty compassionate, accommodating place. I think a lot of the youth connect well with each other and they are more inclined to be an ambassador for another person. I can see them connecting better with each other...

In essence, Logan believes that “Fusion prepares youth to hit that point of being 18 and looking for a job, looking for a college, or whatever”; “Fusion really opens doors” for its youth members.

## Thomas

*Thomas has over 10 years of experience working with youth as a Coach and a Teacher. He believes that Fusion caters to the needs of youth by making sure that they are involved in every step from planning to programming. His approach is fun and laid back. He allows youth a lot of choices in programs and hopes to nurture a sense of responsibility and pride in their work as a result. He believes that staff-youth relationships are important at both an individual and organizational level to help Fusion practice its mission. Balancing structure and flexibility is another theme that surfaced in his interview.*

Thomas says that he started working at Fusion because he was “looking to make an impact”. Thomas has over 10 years of experience working with youth as a Coach and Teacher; but, he has never found a place that combines “technology, communications, and working with youth” in the way that Fusion does.

Thomas thinks of youth as more than an age group, he thinks of youth as “a mindset, an energy and a desire to try new things”. From his perspective, he thinks that Fusion creates a space in which the youth feel safe and feel like they belong. To quote:

The youth have a strong sense of community in Fusion. They very much feel like they belong to something. I see kids at varying levels of participation but they all see Fusion as a safe space.

Thomas tries to foster a sense of pride in the youth with respect to the programs that they participate in at Fusion. He says: “I’ve tried very hard to bring a sense of pride to what the youth are doing here.” He uses his sense of humour to connect with the youth. He tries to be as “open, welcoming, and enthusiastic” as he can be. He makes it clear that the program offers a lot of freedom to the youth but “there are also expectations.” He continues to say that what they make of the program is up to them:

I am letting them make a lot of decisions for themselves. I’m always in the room or always beside the room but what they get out of it is really up to them.

Since Fusion is a drop-in centre that offers structured programs, Thomas finds the inconsistent attendance of participants to be a challenge. Like John and William, he says:

The biggest challenge for me is inconsistency: we are sort of a drop-in centre as well as a structured programming centre. You get rolling with an individual and then you don't see them for a couple of weeks. It is difficult to keep going back and sort of establish things. If it were strictly a structured program – i.e. only sign-up -- that would limit our numbers severely but it would make it consistent. It is a bit of a trade-off. I like very much that there is a constant influx of new folks. Maybe they stay for one or two sessions. Maybe it's not for them after a few minutes or maybe they stick around for who knows how long. But, the fact that there are always new people coming through the doors is important for the program. I think we need to get a little more structure while keeping a balance with the drop-in aspect.

To Thomas, the most important thing for Fusion is to be youth-directed. He says:

Everything that we do, I feel, should be going through a youth lens. What are youth going to gain from doing this thing? If there is no good answer to that question, I don't think we should be doing that thing. Whether that's something as simple as a program or something broader like our planning initiatives. Everything has to be directed through the lens of youth as far as I'm concerned.

This youth orientation, the youth are encouraged to grow, learn, and express themselves in an environment that caters to their needs with staff who are there for them.

When asked about the role that Fusion plays in the lives of youth, Thomas says the following:

I think more positive than we know. I think we get sort of hung up on numbers like how many people are participating and such. We also have conversations about youth that are not participating in any of the programs and that kind of brings us down a little bit; we wonder why youth are not participating in any programs. I think it is important that we have a positive space that gives a lot of youth a place to go. A purpose perhaps. something to do in the day. I also think [Fusion provides] many ways of expressing themselves, whether that in a radio program, an artistic program, rebuilding a computer, or taking on a different

persona in a videogame that they are playing online...an avenue, a method, a means to express themselves. I think that is the most important thing.

## Joe

*Joe has been working at Fusion since 2013 as the facilitator of the ReBuild IT program. Themes of relationship building and skill development were most prominent in Joe's interview.*

“Relating with the youth comes naturally,” says Joe, “because most of the things they are going through, I have already gone through.” Joe says that Fusion allows him an opportunity to “teach kids things I already know”. “Adolescents are in their prime for learning,” he continues. He believes that youth members at Fusion are good at taking initiative (starting things) but they need incentives to want to stay. In his program, the incentive is a free computer upon successful completion of program requirements. Because his program has the potential to be dangerous, he has broken down his curriculum into lessons and milestones. Although his approach is primarily hands-on (once the safety-related topics have been addressed), he sometimes finds it challenging to keep youth engaged because they have been at school all day. He incorporates games and other fun things to “try to get them away from the school environment”.

Joe sees Fusion as a “good starting place” for youth to explore their interests. Newly acquired skills or interests that youth have developed at Fusion “could possibly lead into a school option, a career option, or just extra knowledge to use along the way”. Fusion is beneficial to the youth; it helps them diversify. To quote:

Fusion is a good starting place for youth. They learn some skills and get some new interests that could possibly lead into a school or career option or just extra knowledge to use along the way. They can use this stuff throughout their lives.

## **Adam**

*Adam first got involved with youth at Fusion about 3 years ago. He had previous experience with youth but nothing that combined his passion for photography and multimedia with his ability to relate with youth. It was clear from his interview that he valued self-expression, relationship building, and allowing youth space to grow.*

Fusion's mission, according to Adam is "to provide a fun, safe space where youth have access to artistic outlets and opportunities to experiment with them." Adam defines youth as "young adults trying to navigate their way through life." Adam says that the youth that he works with are "creative" and are looking for "an outlet to express who they are."

His approach to teaching youth about photography is hands-on. He says: "the more we can do, the more we can get in, the more they are going to know." Adam hopes that the skills the youth learn from his program will stay with them throughout their lives. He says: "If I can feel like I can set them up with skills they can use for the rest of their lives, I feel that would be great."

He believes that his job is to help youth members find mediums of self-expression that they are comfortable with. He believes that if a youth is not paying attention in his program, lack of interest may be the problem. If he does discover, through conversation, that a youth is not interested in the program, Adam tries to help the youth discover a different means of expression and steers them towards other programs that might peak their interest:

I guess if a participant doesn't want to listen or follow instructions, I guess it's something that I would talk to them about one-on-one just see if it is actually something that they want to do or if there is anything that I can do to gain their interest in it a little more. It has happened before where a youth thought it would be cool to try but, part way into it, they realized that it wasn't something they liked

doing. It is just identifying that early on and then maybe we can find a different outlet for them to try or something.

In addition to helping youth express themselves through photography and multi-media, Adam believes it is important to teach youth how to get along with each other. To this end, he tries to “work on things like teamwork and getting along with others.” He says that he often has “group projects or something like that so everyone can work together and that kind of stuff.”

Adam believes that Fusion gives “kids a nice, fun, safe place to hopefully make changes in their lives”. He says that Fusion instills positive values in youth including “not to bully people, sharing certain things, and earning what is given to you”. He builds on this idea of hard work by saying that his job is to:

...keep youth interested in an outlet of expression and to show them that it is fun but at the same time it is work and it does take some time to develop these skills, it doesn't happen over night.

Through their participation at Fusion, youth members learn positive values, develop skills, and gain insight into what they want to do with their futures. Adam reflects on the role that Fusion plays in the lives of youth:

I think Fusion plays a big role in the lives of youth. I see it almost everyday where kids come in and they learn these positive values. They learn different skills that they can use later in their lives and put towards their lives and their future. Maybe get a little insight into what they want to do in the future, or go to school for that, or try to find a job in that area, or something like that.

### **Evan**

*Evan has been working with youth for approximately eight years. The two most prominent themes that emerged in his interview were relationship building and self-expression.*

“Youth is a time when young people are carrying a giant question mark above their heads,” says Evan. “They are expected to know what they want to do with the rest

of their lives. There is a lot of pressure on them to have answers to questions that adults might even be struggling with,” he continues. As facilitator of the Arts Programs at Fusion, Evan focuses on helping the youth express themselves through a medium of their choosing. In his experience, he has found that engaging in Art helps the youth open up to Evan about their lives:

Sometimes my program is just a way for kids to come in and talk to me about their lives. While they are drawing, they feel like they can open up. It’s the art. Behind the scenes, the Art Program is really a mentorship program as well. I think art always does that to people: it lets you be yourself and it cracks you open. Any kid who draws anything is kind of putting themselves out there and making themselves vulnerable.

Evan says that “just by being” at Fusion, he is able to build relationships with the youth. He has seen that the youth value the staff at Fusion above all else. He says:

Most of the kids that come to all the programs at Fusion don’t really come to the programs, they come to the staff and the programs are just a way to hang out. The staff are the most important people here to the youth.

Fusion, to Evan, is “a place for the youth to call their own”: It is a place where they can “be themselves”. Fusion provides a space where “bonds between people” can be created. The programs teach the youth “something new”. But, the most important thing is to “make every kid feel at home here.”

Like his colleagues, one of the challenges that Evan identifies is trying to run a structured program without consistent youth participation. He finds that straddling the line between drop-in and structured environment renders program planning difficult.

Evan thinks that Fusion is a community. Youth come here, age out, and come back to volunteer. They realize the importance of their time here after they leave. He says: “it was like their home for five years; they will never forget that.”

## Henry

*Having worked at Fusion since 2007, Henry is a well-seasoned staff member. He never intended to work with youth but after starting to work at Fusion, Henry realized how rewarding it is to help youth. His wholehearted dedication to his work came across in his interview along with themes including: relationship building, skill development, and theories of change.*

“The last thing you want in an afterschool program, especially here, is youth feeling like they are in a classroom,” says Henry who runs Henry’s Bistro, Nutrition, and Snack Shack under the umbrella of the Nutrition Programs. “You want to teach them but you don’t want to come across as a teacher. You want to do it in a fun way,” explains Henry. He wants the youth who participate in his programs to learn skills so that they can “have the knowledge to make meals at home and at times of independence.”

Henry explained that when he first moved away for college, he did not know how to cook a single meal. He ate out a lot, which was detrimental for his health and for his budget. He wants to prepare youth members, through his programs, for life as independent adults. Also, he wants to provide them with healthy and affordable meal options.

When participating in his program, he wants “the youth to feel like the program is theirs”. “I want them to have ownership,” he says. Ownership comes from being allowed to make choices, which leads to a sense of belonging according to Henry:

I often act as a guide for the youth and let them make the choices for themselves. For example, if they are making pasta, I ask them what they want to put in it and they can kind of determine that. It makes it fun and adds in the whole ownership piece. The philosophy behind that would be that youth will want to participate in the program more if they have a large sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging is also garnered through respect. Henry expects the youth to treat each other with respect, have fun, and learn new skills. If a youth is not being

respectful in his program, Henry takes that opportunity to build a strong relationship with the youth. He explains:

It is a perfect time to build a relationship because sometimes youth are behaving a certain way because they have issues and it is a good chance to talk them through stuff. If they act inappropriately or misbehave, instead of saying you have to leave Fusion for the day, you can have a conversation about it and that's how youth will understand that you are here to help, or to talk, or whatever it might be. It is to build that trust, to ask those questions, and build a relationship.

By seeking out these opportunities to build relationships with youth that extend beyond "small talk", Henry has seen numerous youth through difficult times. He says:

I am not a counselor by any means but I still help them. It is very rewarding to know that you are helping someone who might not know where to go for advice. Again it all comes down to having those relationships. It's nice because some will actually open up to you. It's super rewarding to know that I just helped that person, if Fusion wasn't here and I wasn't here, what would they have done?

As a result, Henry finds that "a lot of youth definitely value the staff" at Fusion.

Even though Fusion helps youth with their transitions (from middle school to high school, from high school to college/job/moving out) and provides youth with resources and gives them access to opportunities, the most important thing that Fusion offers to these youth are the relationships that they cultivate with staff members. Henry explains:

There are youth members who will come specifically to see certain staff. They get generally upset when a staff isn't working or a staff call in sick or when a staff is not located in a room that they want them to be in. So, they really value our presence here. A lot of youth might not have very many other peers so they tend to come here to hang out with staff or maybe they have that good relationship. [...] The youth who come to specifically see certain staff are often the ones who participate in the programs that those staff run as well. So a youth might like a staff and that leads them to a new program.

Henry describes the intricate nature of youth development at Fusion. He explains that youth are often drawn to specific staff members and build relationships with them.

These relationships often lead them to explore programs and develop skills and interests that they may not have realized they had.

To conclude, Henry reflects on the many changes he has witnessed at Fusion. Although he has no statistical analyses to back up his claims, Henry says that he has seen three major types of changes occur in youth as a result of their participation at Fusion. First, he says that: “Fusion helps youth become more outgoing”. He contends that this “helps them with their transitions”. Second, he says that: “Fusion helps youth prepare for the workforce”. Some youth get direct help with their resumes at Fusion while others explore interests that lead them to pursue certain careers. Finally, he says that: “Fusion helps youth with their education”. Through the programs, the youth learn new skills and through their interactions with the staff, they are encouraged to attend school or they get help with their homework. In a nutshell, Henry emphasizes the importance of relationships at Fusion and explains how youth grow as a result.

### **Lauren**

*Lauren has been working at Fusion for the past five years. She works three other jobs and has a family but keeps her job at Fusion because of the youth that she works with. The main themes that emerged from her interview include relationship building, skill development, character development (confidence), and the dedication of the staff team.*

“Sometimes you can have the best equipment and the best toys to use but unless a relationship is formed between the staff and the participants, the afterschool program is not going to be successful,” says Lauren as she reflects on the elements that make afterschool programs successful.

As facilitator of the Fitness Program, Lauren says: “forming a relationship, I think, is really important”. In her program, she allows the youth to determine how they want to

spend their time. She says: “I think the more choices they can make for their hour and a half of fitness, the better”. She hopes that through her program, the youth will be “more comfortable in a fitness kind of facility”, “they will experience something new”, and gain “more confidence” to try something new. She also hopes to teach youth “teamwork” by “encourag[ing] each other with their exercises” and to “cheer[ing] each other on”.

She believes that Fusion plays a role in helping youth members develop social skills. She says:

There is just such a huge important role regarding society’s respect for each other that they don’t know how to ask for a coat and it’s not until they go to Fusion that they learn how to ask and how to talk to each other.

Lauren explains that youth learn how to be polite at Fusion. They learn how to interact with each other and how to interact with adults.

“Fusion,” says Lauren, “needs to exist for kids who don’t have a big recreation room at home where they can go hang out with their buddies.” Fusion offers youth a place to hang out. It is a place where they learn to “respect each other and property”. They are afforded opportunities and new experiences. And, they can “grow intellectually or physically, depending on what program they are in.” Most importantly, they are surrounded by a group of adults who care immensely about them and are willing to go above-and-beyond the call of duty to ensure that youth members are able to benefit from the programs offered at Fusion. To demonstrate, Lauren shared a heartwarming story about how her co-workers helped a youth in her program. She said:

Sometimes something such as sports bras for girls can be a barrier to participation. They don’t have them. So, are they going to run or do certain exercises without the right equipment? No, they are not. I had co-workers pitch in and buy youth sports bras. How cute is that?

## Alex

*Alex started his career at Fusion as a participant six years ago. He participated in the Ingersoll Youth Advisory Council (IYAC) and now he works for the Sports and Recreation Program. The themes that emerged from his interview include relationship building, balancing structure and flexibility, organizational culture, skill development, and empowerment.*

“I think Fusion strengthens the lives of the youth in the community,” says Alex.

He continues: “There is not really a place like this where kids can go and just hang out with their friends”.

Participating in the IYAC program, Alex realized that he “wanted to work with youth.” He says that each youth has a different reason for coming to Fusion:

I believe that everybody who comes to Fusion has a different reason for coming to Fusion. It may not be just for the programs, it may be just to make friends. Regardless of whether or not they are enrolled in programs elsewhere, they do have that aspect that they want to come here just because they feel accepted and can make friends here.

Alex believes that the fact that Fusion is a supervised place makes it a welcoming environment in which youth feel safe.

In delivering his program, Alex’s main strategy is to “disguise the skills development as just having fun.” Alex helps youth improve their soccer, hockey, and basketball skills. In addition to the technical skills, he encourages teamwork in his program. He has noticed that the “youth appreciate when the staff are there” to facilitate teamwork. He says: “A lot of the kids that participate in basketball may not be friends so by having staff in there, the program attracts different types of youth” who then interact with each other.

Like many of his colleagues, he finds the transition from primarily drop-in style programming to more structured programs to be challenging. Especially because he believes that a lot of relationships are built “during the drop-in hours”. He says that

every staff member at Fusion is “encouraged to branch out and just talk to any youth in the facility”. By talking to the youth about “their interests and what activities they like to participate in”, staff members are able to “build relationships outside program time”.

Alex explains that Fusion’s mantra is that “youth are priority number one”. As a corollary, he believes that youth are empowered at Fusion through the relationships they build, the skills they cultivate, and the leadership opportunities they grasp. He says:

Fusion’s mission is that when youth come here, they feel accepted and welcome to gain new skills and develop positive relationships that will assist them in making positive choices outside of Fusion. When they have leadership at a place like Fusion, they will basically be empowered to make positive choices outside of the Fusion Youth Centre.

### **Maya**

*Maya started working at Fusion as a co-op student in 2010. She got hired as a full-time staff member after she graduated from college with a degree in Community Justice and Service Work. The key themes that emerged from her interview include: ownership, empowerment, skill development, relationship building, self-discovery, and character development.*

“I just like to get to know youth and hear their stories,” says Maya who runs the Girls’ Group Program at Fusion. She says that youth are people between the ages of 12 to 18 who are “searching for their identity; trying to find out who they are.” In the Girls’ Group Program, Maya tries to facilitate this process of self-discovery.

Maya says that the girls who participate in her program “are looking for a place where they can be themselves” and Girls’ Group has become that place for them.

Consistent with Fusion’s focus, her program emphasizes “learning boundaries”, “building relationships”, and expanding experiences. She says:

Two main things that we focus on at Fusion are learning boundaries and building relationships with the staff and other peers and maybe even how to deal with relationships at home...We try and do a whole bunch of different activities to try

to widen the girls' experiences.

When girls join Girls' Group, they have to sign a contract that expands on the rules that are in place at Fusion. Maya explains that the contract was something that the girls wanted to help create a safe space. The girls feel safe, Maya explains, when they know that respect is an expectation.

In general, youth members feel accepted and empowered at Fusion. Fusion's mission, in Maya's words, is to "provide a safe environment for the youth, make them feel empowered, and help them make positive changes in their lives." For example, implementing the girls' idea of a contract is an empowering experience for youth because their voice is being heard.

### **Sofia**

*Sofia has been working at Fusion for two years. She started working with youth after she had children of her own. She went back to school with the intention of becoming a Teacher, but; she realized that she wants to help youth on a one-on-one basis. She applied to Fusion because she thought it was a great place. In her interview, themes of relationship building, skill development, character development, organizational culture, and empowerment came up.*

"I applied here just because I thought "wow, what a great place!" says Sofia who runs the Ingersoll Youth Advisory Council (IYAC) and co-facilitates the Nutrition Program at Fusion. She says that she remembers being a teen and "thinking how great it would have been to have somebody to talk to and to have somewhere to go". To Sofia, Fusion fulfills the need that youth have to belong to a place and it provides them with the opportunity to build connections.

"Youth are trying to find their place in the world," says Sofia. "They are trying to find where they fit in. They are learning and growing as people," she continues. Their

need to belong is human nature, explains Sofia. She believes that it is important for their self-esteem and growth.

Yet, Fusion's role extends beyond helping youth fulfill their need to belong. At Fusion, youth have the opportunity to learn new things and cultivate skills. They are surrounded by staff who care about them and want to learn "skills from them too". In her programs, Sofia strives to create an environment in which the youth feel "safe, included, and comfortable". She shows an interest in each participant and tries to get to know each one as an individual. She believes that being adaptable with youth is important because the needs of each youth are different. She needs to be able to tailor her approach to "suit the youth's needs because it is all about them."

Sofia believes that Fusion helps empower youth by helping them meet their needs, by modeling respect, and by allowing access to opportunities. In explaining what the Ingersoll Youth Advisory Council is all about, she touches upon the theme of empowerment. She says:

The Ingersoll Youth Advisory Council gives youth a voice in Ingersoll. That's actually how the Council started; the Council started about when Fusion started. The youth had a big say in how the Centre was going to be run right down to the colours on the wall. We do a lot of fundraising and really inspire youth to bring about change in their community. [We discuss questions like:] what does change look like, what does it mean to be a leader? It is a leadership program. I really enjoy it because I get to inspire for change and really develop some leadership skills. We have a lot of fun too. And we get to sit down and talk about issues that affect youth and about issues in the community. For me, it is fabulous and hopefully for the kids too. I have a regular group that continues to come and I think it is really positive for them to have their voice and be heard.

Sofia hopes that Fusion is a place where youth can "come and feel valued", "learn new skills", and "come and be themselves". To conclude, Sofia articulates her love for Fusion and for her practice:

Where else can you go and have fun while hopefully empowering youth. I mean it is such a rewarding thing. It makes you feel like you are doing something that is making a difference. That maybe, perhaps maybe, you are making a positive influence on somebody's life. Somebody who is learning and growing and trying to find their way. If you can be positive and be a good role model, that's what makes it great. It's a great place to work. We are here for these youth...I think you should have one of these in every town.

## Summary

Nineteen portraits of practice were presented in this chapter. These stories illustrated how the themes of relationship building, skill development, empowerment, character development, organizational culture, and holistic approach to youth come together to inform the practice of youth development at Fusion. In addition, the staff stories shed light on key themes including: self-discovery, self-expression, ownership, theories of change, and deliberate practice. The stories also show that staff members at Fusion are complex thinkers: They understand the intricate nature of youth development and see youth as human beings with various needs. Ultimately, relationships, according to the staff, are the starting point, the yardstick, and the end result of what they do. The following chapter illustrates how Fusion, as an organization, facilitates youth development and elaborates on the key themes that emerged from the interviews.

## Chapter 7: Facilitating Youth Development

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*“Good habits formed at youth make all the difference.”*

– Aristotle

### Introduction

Drawing upon the staff stories presented in the previous chapter, this chapter addresses the second and third research questions. It is contended that youth development is facilitated at Fusion through the positive perceptions of youth members, the supportive organizational culture, and the roles the staff members play in the lives of the youth.

### Understanding Fusion’s Youth Members

The ethos of Fusion as an organization and the work of Fusion staff are contingent upon their positive perceptions of youth. Every staff member interviewed communicated having positive perceptions of youth when they were asked to define youth in general and describe the youth members who they work with at Fusion. More specifically, the staff defined youth as more than an age group. They defined youth as an energetic period of growth and as a formative stage of development in which the youth need guidance, direction, role models, and access to opportunities. To illustrate, one staff member noted: “Youth is a period of transition and growth. I think it is a period in which people are discovering who they are.” Preserving the idea of discovery, another staff member added that: “A youth is someone who is looking for direction and is really seeking support for what they want do and where they want to head.” One staff member mentioned that she feels there is a lot of “potential to tap into” between the ages of 12 to 18.

Despite having converging ideas of youth in general, the descriptions of Fusion youth that the staff offered were heterogeneous. Some of the staff described the qualities of youth members. They said that Fusion youth are “eager”, “willing to learn”, “hard working”, willing to take “initiative”, “innovative”, and ready to be “leaders”. Other staff described the life circumstances of Fusion youth and categorized them as being “rural youth” and as “at-risk”. For instance, one staff member said: “There are certainly some youth here who would fit into the at-risk category”. Both the description of youth and their circumstances denote the challenges that youth members face. Another staff member described the youth as being: “youth with barriers”. In addition, at least five staff members recognized that some of the youth who come to Fusion as members are from lower-socio economic backgrounds. As a result, they lack access to opportunities that youth from more affluent backgrounds might have. These youth, from the staff’s perspective, often lack access to positive role models as well. Having said that, the staff members were careful not to over-generalize: the staff assert that “youth can’t all be lumped together”.

Building upon the foundation of goodness that the staff members perceive as existing within the youth members, the staff expressed having expectations of the youth and having hopes for the youth. The expectation that came up most frequently in the interviews was around making the most of the opportunities offered by Fusion. To illustrate, one staff member said: “I expect them to make the most of what is at their fingertips.” Ultimately, the staff hope that “the youth will learn”, that they will “realize that they are better than they thought they were”, and that they will “become better people”

and better members of society. One member captured the hopes that they have for youth most eloquently:

I guess the ultimate big picture of things is to create better members of the community who will ultimately give back and foster change in other people as well. I think that we want to create strong, independent, skillful youth who can be successful long-term and generate that cycle back to future youth.

Building upon the idea of cultivating youth who will give back, another staff member remarked:

I think, ultimately, we contribute to them becoming successful adults, being involved in giving back to the community, pursuing career, and pursuing education. I think that's the type of stuff that we are really pushing on a daily basis.

These two staff members contend that Fusion helps youth develop psychologically, socially, and skill-wise and helps them become people who will contribute to their families and their communities.

## **Understanding Fusion as an Organization**

An analysis at the organizational level is important in order to learn about youth development at Fusion. Accordingly, the mission, philosophy, and policies that frame the staff's approach to youth as well as the culture that the staff members perceive Fusion as having are articulated in this section. This section draws heavily upon interviews with the manager and two staff members in supervisory positions.

There is consensus amongst the staff team and management that Fusion's mission is to empower youth and help them transition into different phases of their lives. The word empowerment was mentioned 19 times by seven staff members during the interviews. The staff explained that Fusion empowers youth members by: "creating a safe space" for the youth; "providing access to opportunities they not might otherwise

have” by “connect[ing] with adults who care about them”. Empowerment, according to the Manager, leads to the youth being able to make positive changes in their lives. He says:

Bottom line comes down to empowering youth to make changes. So, we are not making the changes for them; rather, as a staff team, we are working with them to give them the tools that they need to make the changes in their lives that they think need to be made.

The idea that change is not being made for youth helps create a culture that is empowering at Fusion. The management encourages staff to give the youth options and opportunities in their interactions with them. Every choice that youth are able to make helps perpetuate a participatory culture, which has been a trademark of Fusion since its inception. The staff members describe the culture as being “laid back”, “fun” and “easy-going”, which stems from allowing the youth to have supervised “limitlessness”.

Fusion’s participatory culture is balanced by policies that ensure every youth feels safe enough to participate. Fusion creates a safe space in which youth can “come and become” who they want to be in their formative, adolescent years. Many staff members prioritize the environment that Fusion creates for the youth members. For instance, one staff member said:

The environment that you create is important. I don’t necessarily think that the equipment and the technology is priority. I think as long as you are creating an environment where the youth feel comfortable, and there is no judgment, and they enjoy coming that’s when they will come back.

Comfort, non-judgmentally, and enjoyment came up in the interviews as key features of a “safe environment”. Five other staff members brought up the importance of creating an environment that is “safe” and “inclusive”. Safety referred to the youth feeling respected. As one staff member said: “I think respect is really important for

youth. They wouldn't come here if they didn't feel respected." Respect was also tied to feeling accepted: "they want to come here just because they feel accepted and can make friends here." This culture of respect is canonized in the stop signs that are up on the walls within the facility that highlight respect as a value and a behavioral expectation at Fusion. The respectful interactions between the management and the staff, the staff and the staff, and the staff and the youth help perpetuate this culture. Interestingly, respect is a policy and a value at Fusion.

The philosophy that guides Fusion's mission is summed up in a mantra that is a popular refrain at Fusion: "youth are priority number one." To quote one staff member:

Our mantra is that youth are priority number one. So, our mission is that when youth come here, they feel accepted and welcome to gain new skills and develop positive relationships that assist them in making positive choices outside of Fusion.

In practice, this means that the staff members are mandated to put youth first. They are hired to engage with the youth as their priority, while balancing other bureaucratic responsibilities. This mandate allows the staff to remain approachable to the youth and allows the youth the much-needed opportunity to engage with adults. Based on their experience, a handful of staff explained that many of the youth members lack access to good role models. One staff member linked this deficit to the socio-economic background of the youth:

They probably come from backgrounds where their parents have lower-income, lower education backgrounds, and they don't have as many experiences that other kids might have. The experiences that they do have are not necessarily, good, positive experiences. Generally lacking role models in other adults.

As a reaction to the perceived lack of positive role models, staff members help youth feel supported and cared for. One staff member said it best: "[Fusion's mission is

to] make youth feel like they are supported and that they have a good role model to come to, someone who cares for them.” The Manager describes the primary role of the staff as “caretakers of youth’s emotions”.

Another guiding philosophy for Fusion is the recognition that youth need a place where they can build skills that are relevant. For many youth, Fusion is a hub of creativity or a “one-stop hub of opportunity”, as one staff member put it. It is a place that encourages youth to learn and grow. As one staff member said eloquently: “Fusion provides youth with opportunities early in life, opportunities they might not have had otherwise.” This access to opportunity helps them “transition into adulthood” and “make informed decisions about their futures”. In support of the former, one staff member said:

Having them in the same vicinity as different age groups and having different idols and even having us in the same vicinity and talking to more adults as equals [allows youth to have] easier transitions into different age groups by already knowing a group of people in that age group.

According to this staff member, having a Centre that allows 12 to 18 year olds to share a space helps them get to know each other in a way that makes transitioning from Middle School to High School a easier experience for youth members. In support of the latter, another staff member noted:

I think Fusion plays a big role in the lives of youth. I see it almost everyday where kids come in and they learn these positive values; they learn different skills that they can use later in their lives and put towards their lives and their future. Maybe get a little insight into what they want to do in the future, or go to school for that, or try to find a job in that area, or something like that.

Here the staff member captures the essence of a youth’s journey at Fusion: youth learn skills and values at Fusion that they can benefit from throughout their lives. In particular,

they can learn about what they want to do with their future, which helps them make decisions about their adult lives.

In exploring the staff's perceptions regarding the role that Fusion plays in the lives of youth members, it was found that the staff value Fusion. One staff member testified to the credibility of Fusion in the following manner:

Fusion is a very credible centre that has great youth engagement practices. I love their philosophy, their mission, and their values. I love the variety of the programs and I love their approach to working with youth. I think it is very realistic, not extremely policy- or bureaucratically-driven.

Similarly, almost all staff members repeatedly expressed appreciation for the service that Fusion provides for the youth in the community. John in particular noted that he did not want to imagine Ingersoll without Fusion.

To summarize, Fusion as an organization:

- Allows youth to make decisions for themselves by guiding empowerment through expansion of possibilities;
- Creates an environment that is safe for all youth by perpetuating a culture of respect and caring; and,
- Allows youth opportunities to learn relevant skills before they have to make important decisions about their lives by encouraging growth and learning.

Associated with Fusion's mission, philosophy, and policies are values (empowerment, respect, and learning) that the staff have internalized and that influence staff-youth interactions at Fusion.

## **Understanding the Role of Fusion Staff**

To facilitate the understanding of the role that Fusion’s staff team plays in the lives of youth members, this section highlights the six main themes that surfaced in the interviews with the staff. Using the grounded theory approach (refer to Appendix E for mind map), the following themes were identified:

- Relationship building;
- Skill development;
- Holistic approach to youth development;
- Balancing structure and flexibility;
- Respect, ownership, and empowerment; and,
- Theories of change.

These themes were often tied together as the staff members expressed themselves during the interviews. It is important to note that it was hard to disentangle the themes for the sake of this research while preserving the voices of the staff team. Furnished with direct quotes from the staff interviews, each theme is detailed below.

### ***Relationship Building***

The theme of “relationship building” was dominant in the interviews as the staff mentioned the importance of their relationships with the youth. They used the terms “relationships” and “connections” synonymously just as they used the terms “relationship building” and “relationship development” to mean the same thing. In speaking about relationship building, the staff members elaborated on: 1) the importance of relationships for youth members (background); 2) how relationships are formed and maintained; 3) when relationships are built with youth; 4) where the

relationships are formed; and, 5) how staff-youth relationships help youth develop.

Relationship building is the foundational theme upon which the remaining five themes are dependent.

To begin with, the staff members believe that relationships are essential for successful afterschool programming. As one staff member states:

You can have the best gadgets, toys, and equipment but unless a relationship is formed between the staff and youth, it is not going to be successful.

Along the same lines, another staff member notes that building and maintaining relationships is and should be the primary goal of staff members at Fusion. It is suggested that relationships are at the root of the changes that Fusion inspires in youth:

I have witnessed a lot of changes here at Fusion. What I maintain, and what I have been doing since the beginning, is just having fun and emphasizing the youth engagement. A lot of the times, we can forget the kids when we are doing all the bureaucratic stuff and the stats recording stuff. But, we need to remember that the youth are our primary goal and we wouldn't have those positions or the stats to record if we didn't have the youth attendance. We need to maintain those relationships and really nurture them and ensure that they are our primary focus at all times. Then we will continue to gain the youth's attendance and their acceptance.

One key finding to note at the outset is that staff members do not expect to engineer change. They hope to make connections with the youth and help them make the changes, big or small, that they feel they need to make in their own lives. One staff member says:

I just applied here because I thought "wow, what a great place!" for youth to go and you can make an impact here. And maybe make some connections to youth because they are going through a lot of changes and trying to find out who they are.

Another staff member highlights the importance of relationships in his work by likening

his practice to that of a counselor. He says that the relationships that the staff members build with the youth are important because they help the youth when they are in times of need:

I am not a counselor by any means but I still help youth. It is very rewarding to know that you are helping someone who might not know where to go for advice. Again it all comes down to having those relationships. It's nice because some will actually open up to you. It's super rewarding to know that I just helped that person. If Fusion wasn't here and I wasn't here, what would they have done?

The voices of the staff members presented above show that relationships are an integral part of the work of Fusion staff. One supervisor explains that their work is often therapeutic:

A lot of what we offer is therapeutic in a sense: if they keep coming, they keep getting the gains, they keep getting the support they need to work on the obstacles they are facing.

The staff members at Fusion build relationships with the youth by spending time with them, listening to them, finding common ground with them, and by being genuinely curious about their lives. One staff member builds relationships with youth by treating them as he would a treat a friend:

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

Another staff member explains that he builds relationships with youth by finding common ground with them:

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

Similarly, another staff member relates with the youth by drawing upon his own experience. He says: “They remind me to keep my experience upfront from my past and I can share it with them and it kind of helps them sometimes.” Spending one-on-one time with youth is the way Henry builds strong relationships with youth. He says:

Personally, I try to interact with youth in a fun and friendly way. I think that is a good step in starting to build a relationship. Treating everyone as equals. That’s more the small relationship. It’s when you have the one-on-one time with them, whether that be in my program or a program or just in general. That’s when you start to build a stronger relationship because those are the times when you start talking about issues beyond small talk and general conversation. You start to expand on personal lives, learning about each other and the issues that the youth might be facing. To me, that’s when you build a relationship...

Showing an interest in the youth is another starting point of a relationship that the staff mentioned. Emma said that “being genuinely curious about how their day was or what is going on in their lives” helps in forming a relationship. If the youth share something that is going on in their lives, the staff members do not forget it, as Sofia put it:

Then, when they come back in, say they’ve told you something, you remember that and you ask them about that. Sometimes it is a really slow build and sometimes it is quick. I think just listening to them and that really helps them to open up more.

Five staff members mentioned that relationships begin by showing an interest but they are maintained because the staff put in effort to sustain that interest. They show the youth that they care and were truly listening by remembering what the youth said and asking them about it at a later date. John notes that this is a strength of the staff team:

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

Relationships with youth are often built inside and outside of structured programs. Both youth engagement staff and staff members who facilitate structured programs mentioned the importance of the drop-in hours and drop-in style environment for relationship building. For instance, as Alex who runs the Sports Program said:

You talk to them about their interests and what activities they like to participate in. You build relationships outside your program time and youth will just understand that “this person does the sports program so if I’m interested in sports, I’ll talk to them about sports”.

Another staff member, Lauren who runs the Fitness Program, also mentioned the importance of the drop-in hours for building relationships with youth. The staff members note that the drop-in hours help the staff get to know the youth and guide them towards programs that might spark their interest. In addition, the staff note that youth tend to participate in programs *because* of the relationships they have with staff members. As Evan explains:

Most of the kids that come to the programs at Fusion don’t really come to the programs. They come to staff and the programs are just a way to hang out. The staff are the most important people here to the youth.

Another staff member notes that words of encouragement offered to youth members during program time help the youth connect with the staff. The staff member said:

You’ll just develop a stronger relationship with the youth because they’ll feel encouraged or something by the words you say while they are playing a game.

Fusion creates an environment in which the staff members are able to build relationships with the youth and the youth are able to connect with each other:

I believe that everybody who comes to Fusion has a different reason for coming to Fusion. It may not be just for the programs, it may be just to make friends. Regardless of whether or not they are enrolled in programs elsewhere, they do

have that aspect that they want to come here just because they feel accepted and can make friends here.

When youth are cared for in this way, caring becomes part of the ethos at Fusion.

Almost as a result, youth are able to care about themselves and each other. Logan makes this connection:

I think the culture at Fusion is pretty compassionate. [...] I think a lot of the youth connect well with other youth and they are more inclined to be an ambassador for another person.

The same staff member extends that this “culture of caring” helps the youth transition into High School. He continues:

I can see them connecting better with each other in High School because of Fusion. Because they’ve seen each other here and it’s sort of closer quarters so they’ve had the chance to meet each other and talk probably. All the youth here know each other on a first-name basis. I feel like that gives them the confidence of at least knowing people.

At least three other staff members concur that Fusion helps youth with their transitions from one phase of life into the next. Henry furthers the argument to say that Fusion helps youth become more socially inclined. He suggests:

Fusion helps youth become more outgoing. There might not be a statistic behind it but working here for this long, I have seen so many youth who come in here who are very shy. They will come here, you don’t hear a peep out of them and then the more that they start participating here, the more comfortable they get with the staff and the youth and the next thing you know, they are the loudest kids here. It makes them very much more outgoing and I think that that helps them with their transitions. For example, [...]when they transition into high school, they are going to start seeing familiar faces and know some more people and that might help that transition.

Relationship building is an important theme that surfaced during the interviews.

The staff members noted that relationships are important to youth because many of them lack role models at home and it is important for the youth to know that they are

cared for. The staff members mentioned various strategies, both implicit and explicit, for building relationships including: spending time with youth, listening to youth, showing an interest in youth, and treating youth like friends. The staff members also stated that the drop-in centre environment is important for the development of relationships with youth; it gives the staff a chance to get to know the youth and understand their interests.

Fusion's culture supports the focus on youth engagement and relationship building. The staff mention that as a result of the "culture of caring" at Fusion, the youth are better able to connect with each other and have an easier time transitioning from middle school into high school and from high school into the next phase of their lives. In general, the relationships that youth build at Fusion help them become more socially inclined.

### ***Skill Development***

Skill development was a prominent theme that came up in the interviews with the staff. The staff members spoke about the importance of skill development, described the skills that they help the youth develop, explained how they facilitate skill development, and spoke about how the youth can capitalize on the opportunities available to them at Fusion.

Skill development at Fusion is important because the staff assert that many youth members "lack direction" and do not have access to opportunities that could help them make informed decisions about their future. Keeping this in mind, the staff try to "expose the youth to what is out there". Some staff members recognize that the deep-rooted problem is that the youth lack belief in themselves: "It seems like they are lacking direction because they have lost hope in what they are capable of." As such, building

relationships with youth to help them develop skills is important. As one staff member notes: “A lot of them need to be reminded what it feels like to have clear-cut goals and that they deserve to work toward their goals.” Learning with an adult who believes in their potential helps the youth believe in themselves. Skill development at Fusion is contingent upon the relationships that have been built with the staff within and outside of program time. The staff members believe that the relationships built with the youth not only attract them to new programs but they also help them feel comfortable, learn, and grow within those programs.

The word “opportunities” came up 63 times in the interviews. The staff spoke about “expanding opportunities”, “providing opportunities”, and youth “lacking opportunities”. The staff mentioned wanting to provide youth with opportunities for “engagement”, “leadership”, “connections”, and “practice”. They also expressed their desire to provide youth with opportunities to express themselves; opportunities to lead; and, to learn and develop early in life.

At Fusion, the youth have access to technological, creative, recreational, and leisure programs. Through the programs and activities offered at Fusion, the youth are able to build technical, social, cognitive, and leadership skills. Through programs like the Radio Broadcasting program, the ReBuilt IT program, the Music program, the Photography program, the Arts Program, the Nutrition Programs, and the Sports Programs, the youth are able to build technological skills, physical, and culinary skills while honing their creative talents. These programs also allow youth ample opportunity to build soft skills such as the ability to relate to each other, cooperate with each other, and work in teams. As William says:

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

Youth learn both the technical and the soft skills at Fusion without even realizing that they are learning. Although the Fusion staff team prioritizes youth learning (the word learning came up 25 times in the interviews with nine staff members), they work hard to create an environment in which the youth can learn while having fun. One supervisor explains that the youth excel in Fusion's programs because they are able to relate with the staff and because the environment is conducive to learning. He says:

Believe it or not, a lot of kids are hard workers. They struggle at school, in that type of atmosphere, but when they come to Fusion, they excel within our programs.

Why do you think that is?

I think it is because our staff are younger. They can relate to the youth a lot better than some teachers can. The kids don't sit in desks here so it more of a laid back atmosphere. It's almost as if we tricking kids to learn. For example, in our radio program or in the recording studio, kids don't even think that they are learning but they really are and they are having fun doing it.

This "laid back atmosphere" allows the youth members to have fun. At least three staff members who run structured programs described learning as a by-product of program participation. One staff member says that his strategy is "to disguise the skills development as just having fun." He explains his rationale for his strategy as:

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

The staff members are realistic in their approach with the youth; they do not expect the youth to intrinsically value learning. Rather, they try to show them that learning indeed

can be fun.

Working in tandem with skill development is a focus on character development at Fusion. The staff members not only want the youth to have a set of skills, they want them to have the work ethic, the attitude, and the resiliency they need to be able to thrive in any environment. One staff member says that his job is to keep the youth interested in the programs that they decide to participate in:

...my job is to keep them interested in it and show them that it is fun but at the same time it is work and it does take some time to develop these skills, it doesn't happen over night.

Another staff member summarizes by saying that "developing their character is something that we like to do at Fusion."

The staff members invest their time, effort, and energy into helping the youth develop skills because they believe that these skills, both the technical and the soft, will help the youth in their future. Various staff members explain that many youth end up discovering their passions through their participation in programs at Fusion. To quote John:

A lot of youth come here and participate in programs end up finding a skill or discovering a passion, whether that is graphic design or radio or music. Then, they want to go to college so then they have something to work towards. We have had multiple youth who are now in college because they started taking radio broadcasting or they became interesting in recording or art through our programs. And, they were successful in school. A lot of kids don't have any idea what they want to do when they are 9, 10, or 11 but all of a sudden if they come and figure something out at Fusion then after that they have some kind of passion, some kind of direction. We like to provide the kids with some kind of direction and a future.

Fusion, according to John and many others, helps youth, who come in to Fusion without guidance, find direction. In addition, participation at Fusion helps the youth become self-aware, involved in the community, and helps them gain the confidence that they need to take on leadership opportunities within and outside of Fusion. To some extent, the staff

members help the youth realize that they are capable of achieving what they dream of just by being positive role models for the youth.

Overall, the staff members at Fusion believe that many of the youth that come to Fusion lack opportunities, direction, and positive role models. Fusion provides youth with the opportunities they need to be able to cultivate technical and soft skills in an environment that is fun and supportive. Through this process, many youth end up discovering passions and pursuing them after they have “aged out” of Fusion. The staff members want to see youth members succeed personally and professionally and they hope that their participation at Fusion benefits them in the long run.

### *Holistic Approach to Youth Development*

This theme was formed by collapsing together various smaller themes that emerged from the interviews. During the interviews, the staff spoke about their positive perceptions of youth; how they think of youth as more than participants in their programs; how they believe that youth are heterogeneous, each with varying needs and interests; and, how dedicated they are to helping the youth develop holistically. Some staff members summed this concept up in phrases like “Fusion is youth-centered” or “youth-friendly” or “youth-focused”; while others alluded to the concept by sharing stories of how they broke down barriers to participation for youth members. This theme pays tribute to the deliberate practice of the Fusion staff as they try to help the youth cope better with the small and big challenges they face in their lives.

The staff members at Fusion approach youth development holistically by thinking of the youth’s needs in all realms of their lives. One staff member says that she goes

out of her way to ensure that the needs of the youth in her program are met even if they have nothing to do with the program. She says:

I think [we] have gone out of our way for youth to accommodate what it is that they really need even if even if it has nothing to with the program. For example, if it made sense that we thought a youth needed to be connected to a certain service or that they needed to talk about a certain situation, we've never said "that's not our job, that doesn't have anything to do with the program, it doesn't have to do with employment." We have kind of always tried to support them with whatever it is, not just employment. We agree that even if it doesn't seem like it is directly related to employment, if something is affecting their life, it will eventually affect employment. If we don't give them the tools to address certain issues then employment might be placed on the backburner. We have tried to think about youth in a holistic way [...] We have tried to kind of think about everything and we try to have the best interest of each individual youth and not just them as a participant to get their numbers.

Similarly, another staff member spoke about breaking down barriers to participation for youth. She relayed a story of how the staff team came together to purchase requisite equipment for a youth so that she could participate in the Fitness Program. Thereby illustrating that the staff think about the youth's circumstances, their environments, and their privileges or lack thereof to be able to cater to their needs holistically.

The staff members also recognize that each youth is an individual and each individual has varying needs. Their hope is to make a difference by "providing a safe and fun place where the youth feel they belong".

As a corollary, the youth members at Fusion are put first. This means that the staff do not try to confine the youth to one program or a particular genre of programs; rather, they are concerned with the development of youth and encourage youth to expand their horizons and try their hands at all mediums of expression available to them. As one staff member notes:

It has happened before where a youth thought it would be cool to try but part way into it, they realized that it wasn't something they liked doing. It is just identifying that early on and then maybe we find a different outlet for them to try or something.

On a bigger scale, putting the youth first means that everything that Fusion is and does goes through a “youth lens”. The staff members say that Fusion is “youth-oriented”, “youth-directed”, and “youth focused”. In other words, Fusion is by the youth, for the youth, with the youth.

Overall, the interviews attested to the staff's holistic approach to youth development. The staff team conveyed that they understood each youth as individuals, that they were cognizant of the environmental and circumstantial forces at play that can help or hinder the growth of youth, and that the youth finding a medium of expression that they are comfortable with is more important to the staff than the youth's identity as participants in specific programs. The staff's holistic approach to youth development authorizes the youth to co-design the path to development with staff members.

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

The fourth theme that surfaced from the interviews is termed balancing structure and flexibility. Like good parents, the staff members at Fusion strive to strike a balance between structure and flexibility in their practice. This theme permeates their practice as they try to balance “authority figure” with “friend” in their interactions with the youth; as they try to balance “legitimacy” with “creativity” in their programs; and, as they try to balance “structured programming” with the “drop-in style environment”. In speaking about the balance between structure and flexibility at Fusion, the staff mentioned why they think both are important, how they try to achieve said balances, and the benefits of allowing the youth to grow in an environment that provides both structure and flexibility.

Structure and flexibility were both mentioned during the interviews with the staff members albeit not equally. The word structure came up 61 times in the interviews and every staff member brought it up; whereas, the word flexibility came up only 13 times during the interviews. When structure was mentioned, the staff referred to “trying to teach youth that structure is okay”, the importance of structure to be able to effectively and efficiently show youth “what is out there for them”, and the challenges that achieving structure poses for the staff members were mentioned. When flexibility was mentioned, the staff referred to Fusion being more flexible than the school environment, Fusion being adaptable and flexible enough to cater to the needs of youth, and the flexibility that is offered to staff in terms of scheduling.

The staff at Fusion balance structure and flexibility in their interactions with youth members. The three drop-in centre staff in particular mentioned that they want the youth to know that the staff members are their friends but they also want the youth to know that the staff are in-charge. One staff member mentioned that some youth “don’t necessarily have structure at home” so spending time in a place that has rules and structure can sometimes be challenging for these youth. Showing the youth that the staff members are flexible, adaptable, and approachable is also important at Fusion and the staff achieve this by being cordial with the youth, showing an interest in them, and trying to build relationships with youth.

In order to balance structure and flexibility within programs, the program staff provide structure for the youth within which they can work with youth to help them learn. One staff member mentioned that having a plan for programs and being prepared for the programs gives credence to the programs in the eyes of youth. Another staff

member mentions that structure at Fusion accords legitimacy to the Centre; while, flexibility allows the centre and the programs offered within to cater to the needs and garner the interest of youth. To quote:

I think both structure and flexibility are important. The rigid structure is almost to make it a legit program but the flexibility to make it accommodating to the youth.

Moreover, another staff member mentions that flexibility allows youth members the opportunity to be creative within programs and helps the staff tailor the programs to the needs of youth.

Building upon this point, one staff member explains how she brings together structure and flexibility within her program. She says:

I tend to let the youth be really involved in setting out what their day is going to look like when they come to the Fitness Program. Some kids just come in and we will play basketball, dodge ball or something like that. Or we will actually do weight training, running. It depends on what they want to do. I kind of set up stations within the gym so that they can pick and choose what activities they do.

This staff member sets the gym for the youth (providing structure) but allows them the flexibility to pick the activities that interest them. Each staff member has a preference for structure and/or flexibility in their approach to programming; however, each staff member tries to accomplish both within their interactions with youth and their approach to programming.

One staff member mentions that Fusion's drop-in environment, which offers flexibility to the youth members even in programs, distinguishes Fusion from other afterschool programs. He says:

I think being fluid and reactive [is an element that makes an afterschool program successful]. A lot of afterschool programs tend to be really regimented and we do have a certain element of that here like things are a certain time and stuff. But, the kids that frequent this facility, I feel, are drop-in driven and they can really thrive from a drop-in style recreation centre/afterschool program.

The majority of the staff members appreciate the value of both structure and flexibility at an afterschool program such as Fusion. A few of the staff members mentioned the shift in Fusion's focus from a primarily drop-in style environment to a focus on structured programming. This recent shift in Fusion's focus has required a shift in mindset of the staff. Some of the staff members used the interviews as a space in which they reflected on this change. Their stream of consciousness revealed a struggle as they tried to come to terms with the conceptual differences between structured programming and drop-in style environment that Fusion offers. Moreover, some staff tried to wrap their head around the expectation that they should be able to offer both at the same time. To this end, one staff member said:

I find the biggest challenge for me is inconsistency with this: we are sort of a drop in centre as well a structured programming centre. So, you get rolling with an individual and then you don't see them for a couple of weeks. So it is difficult to have to keep going back and sort of establish things. If it were strictly a structured program, only sign- up, that would limit our numbers severely but it would make it consistent. So, it is a bit of a trade-off. I like very much that there is a constant influx of new folks...The fact that there are always new people coming through the door is important for the program, I think.

This quote shows the internal struggle that the staff is experiencing: they struggle with inconsistency that is inherent in the sporadic participation of youth in a drop-in style environment while appreciating that they get a constant influx of new youth in a drop-in style environment. They understand that it is a trade-off between structured programming and drop-in style programming yet they are still grappling with how the two fit together.

Another staff member, who identified the balance between structure and flexibility as a challenge explained Fusion's transition from focus on the latter to focus on the

former as follows:

Well, being a drop-in centre, one of the big challenges is that it is really hard to run a structured program. For example, I run the sports program so we will be using the gym every time. When a kid comes in to play soccer during the basketball hours, it is hard to really convince the kid to focus and participate in a structured basketball program.

*Can you tell me the history behind that shift in focus from drop-in to structured?*  
I believe at the beginning, there was more of a focus on drop-in than there is now. I believe our participants remain heavily as drop-in participants. It is very hard to receive funding for drop-in programs. In order for us to receive funding, we have to emphasize outcomes. So moving forward from the drop-in programs, we have to develop more structured programs to show that we are having an impact to measure outcomes. It becomes a challenge to measure drop-in in comparison to measuring a program. I think a big problem with it is just transitioning from drop-in to structured programs so that we can measure outcomes and get more funding so that we can continue to offer our drop-in.

Despite the internal challenges that the staff might face as they try to balance structure and flexibility, they assert that it is important for youth to have both as they grow and learn at Fusion.

Fusion's staff team balances structure and flexibility in their interactions with the youth, in their approach to programming, and in the environment that Fusion creates for youth members. Although each staff member has their own preference for structure and/or flexibility, they ensure that both are present in their practice at varying degrees. They express the importance of helping the youth grow in an environment that offers both structure and flexibility to them. In addition, the staff members linked flexibility in particular with ownership and empowerment.

### ***Respect, Ownership, and Empowerment***

The fifth theme that emerged from the interviews relates to respect, ownership, and empowerment. The staff members at Fusion believe that respect sets the foundation that allows youth to feel like they have a sense of ownership to the programs

that they participate in and to Fusion as a youth centre. Respect and ownership then allow the youth to feel empowered: they are able to voice their opinions, make the changes that they desire, and feel like they can make a difference. Empowerment was mentioned in the previous section on Fusion as an organization. This section will speak to respect and ownership, the reasons why the staff want to empower, how they go about empowering youth, and the perceived benefits of empowered youth.

As mentioned in the previous section on organizational culture, respect is both a value and a practice at Fusion. The staff members show that they respect youth in their interactions with them and, in return, they expect the youth to treat the staff, themselves, and other youth members with respect. In addition, respect is a foundation upon which ownership and empowerment take root at Fusion. Ownership requires respect because once the youth feel like they are respected at a place like Fusion, they begin to feel like they can call it their own. The staff make the youth feel comfortable by first respecting them. Then, the staff members ask the youth for their input. At this point, the youth offer input willingly because they know that their opinions and contributions will be respected.

The word “ownership” came up 13 times in the interviews. The staff referred to the youth feeling ownership of the “space”, feeling like they have ownership over the values that Fusion has in place, ownership of the property and programs, and ownership over their own learning and growth. In addition, the staff members linked ownership to leadership and participation in programs during the interviews. For example, one staff member noted:

We try to be pretty laid back so that the youth feel that it is their space. It is important that they feel that it is their space and they can take ownership of the space here and what's available for them.

Having ownership over the space and feeling like the space is theirs helps the youth become active participants at Fusion. Through active participation, which includes voicing their concerns and making sure that their opinions are taken into account, the youth become empowered. To nurture empowerment, the staff members provide youth with options and choices; thereby, helping the youth feel like they are in control of their environment and how they spend their time at Fusion. This leads to the youth feeling empowered. Respect lays the groundwork for ownership, which paves the way for empowerment. As one staff member explains:

Creating a culture of respect goes a long way. Initially, when we opened, we worked with the youth to create the boundaries that we have created. They made stop signs throughout the building with the rules that they actually chose themselves. By having them involved in that process, they respect those values and take ownership of them.

Empowering youth is important to Fusion staff because it helps the youth make sound decisions about their present and their future. It helps them feel like they are in control of their destiny and that they can achieve their potential. As one staff member says: "I think our mission is to provide a safe environment for youth, make them feel empowered, and help them make positive changes in their lives."

Respect, ownership, and empowerment were tangled together as a theme in the interviews with Fusion staff. The staff stated that respecting the youth means involving them in the process of their development, listening to what they have to say, and empowering them by giving them choices. The seeds of ownership are involvement and active participation, respect is the fertile ground on which the seed is sowed, and

empowerment is the fruit of their efforts.

### *Theories of Change*

The final theme that emerged from the interviews is called “theories of change”. In this section, the implicit and explicit theories of change that the staff articulated during the interviews will be presented. The staff members believe that participation at Fusion leads to specific outcomes or changes in youth members. The staff mentioned that participation at Fusion helps youth with their transitions; helps them prepare for the workforce; helps them commit to learning and even develop a liking for learning; helps them learn boundaries; helps them with motivation, self-esteem, and self-confidence; and, helps them feel like they belong.

One staff member says that participation at Fusion helps youth transition from middle school to high school by exposing them to youth from different age groups at Fusion. He says:

Having them in the same vicinity as different age groups and having different idols and even having us in the same vicinity and talking to more adults as equals and having easier transitions into different age groups by already having a well-known group of people that are already in that age group.

Fusion staff believe that Fusion helps youth prepare for the workforce by providing them with access to opportunities, helping them with their resumes, and allowing them to tap into networks that might help them find jobs. To quote, Hailey says:

I think Fusion helps youth prepare for the workforce. That’s accomplished in many ways. We help a lot of the youth with resumes here. We constantly suggest that the youth get jobs. If a youth is saying that they don’t have any money or we realize that they are at an age and they are not really doing much, sometimes we will suggest getting a job or applying for different places.

Other staff members confirm that Fusion helps youth with their resumes and adds that Fusion helps youth form contacts for jobs. He says: “We help them with their resumes and we help them with job connections that we might have.”

Many staff members also believe that participation at Fusion helps youth with their education. Some staff members suggest that Fusion helps youth directly by providing homework help and encouraging youth to attend school. Other staff members believe that Fusion helps youth develop a liking for learning because their participation shows them that learning can be fun. Henry says:

Fusion plays a role in their education, whether that be directly or indirectly. We help youth with homework [...] We encourage youth to attend school [...] We also educate youth [...].

In addition to helping youth with their formal education, Fusion helps youth learn informal life skills such as learning boundaries. This is helpful to the youth in the long run as they realize that “structure is okay”. Olivia says:

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

Many staff members draw the link between participation at Fusion and increased motivation, self-esteem, and self-confidence in youth. One staff member says that participation at Fusion helps youth trust themselves and build their self-confidence because of the access to opportunities they have. To quote:

It definitely motivates them and it creates a kind of trust and self-confidence in our youth. Without Fusion a lot of them would not have some of the activities that we offer here. They wouldn't have some of the chances to learn some of the skills that we offer which could lead to employment opportunities or realizing a passion of theirs.

Another staff member, Maya, says that building self-confidence and self-esteem is a key focus of her program. She says: “One of the main things I focus on in the Girls’ Group program is on being healthy as an individual and building your self-confidence and self-esteem.”

Finally, the staff members assert that Fusion helps youth feel like they belong. One staff member says: “They have a strong sense of community in Fusion: They very much feel like they belong to something.” In explaining the importance of a sense of belonging, Sofia says that it is a human need:

Youth are trying to find their place in the world, they are trying to find where they fit in [...]. I think it is human nature to want to fit in and we want to feel like belong to something. I think it is important for their self-esteem.

The staff members linked belonging to self-esteem, to ownership, and to active participation.

It is safe to say that all staff members share a common interest in the holistic social, psychological, emotional, and economic development of youth. Development occurs through the relationships that are cultivated with the youth, the opportunities that they are encouraged to grasp, and a culture that is respectful and caring. Ultimately, the staff want to help youth become better people who are able to connect with others, are prepared for the workforce, are passionate about learning, are comfortable with boundaries, are confident in themselves, have a sense of belonging, and are willing to make changes in their lives. To sum up, one staff member says:

I think we are a piece of the puzzle. We provide them with positive role models and a positive environment to grow in. I think, ultimately, we contribute to them becoming successful adults, being involved in giving back to the community,

pursuing career, and pursuing education. I think that's the type of stuff that we are really pushing on a daily basis [...].

## Summary

Youth members at Fusion are viewed in a positive light, as beings with potential that needs to be harnessed. Fusion supports the development of youth by fostering an environment that is participatory and empowering and by creating fertile ground for the cultivation of relationships. The staff members at Fusion contribute to youth development through the relationships they cultivate with youth members. Youth, according to the staff, are not equipped to succeed as adults except for those who are able to connect with others, explore interests and build skills, and understand their own self worth and feel empowered. So, youth practitioners, such as Fusion staff, need to be able to cultivate genuine, sincere relationships with youth. Through those relationships, they can encourage youth to “extend beyond who they are at that moment”, provide opportunities for youth to develop new skills, balance structure and flexibility, and co-design the path to development with youth. As a result, the youth feel empowered and are better able to make positive choices in their lives.

## Chapter 8: Asset Building Capacity

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### Introduction

This chapter presents the Asset Building Capacity Framework as an outcome of this research. The Framework, which is informed by the Developmental Assets Framework (Search Institute, 1990), brings together the key findings presented in the previous two chapters. The Framework is made up of 11 collective and individual willingness and abilities of Fusion and Fusion staff. After introducing the Framework, each component is explained below.

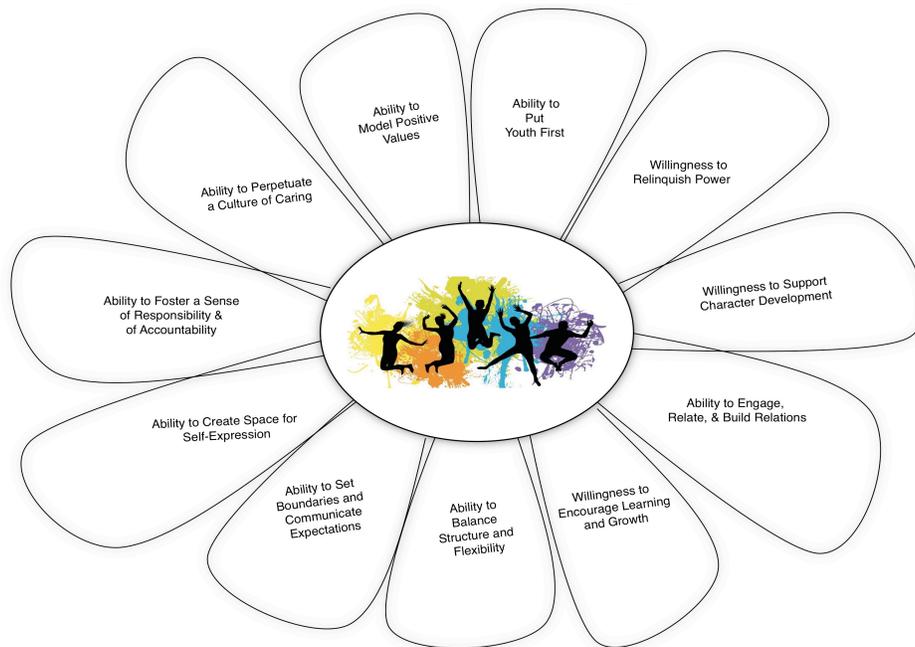
### The Asset Building Capacity Framework

The relationships that the staff members cultivate with the youth in afterschool programs are the most important for youth development. Organizational culture influences the strength and quality of those relationships. The literature on youth development, afterschool programs, and developmental relationships to date is disjointed and does not consider how organizations and individuals interact to foster youth development. The “Asset Building Capacity” framework keeps the goal of helping youth become contributing, thriving, productive, caring, healthy, and happy adults in mind while charting a path on which staff and organizations can walk in pursuit of youth development. It brings together both the Developmental Assets Framework (Search Institute, 2014) and the Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2014) along with key concepts from capacity development. In addition, it touches upon the cornerstones of effective afterschool programs (Christie, 2012; Durlak et al., 2009; Little et al., 2007; Lerner, 2005). In bringing these bodies of literature together, the framework seeks to help youth development practitioners turn the theory of positive

youth development into practice. The literature outlines “what” works and explains “why” but does not provide practical advice for how to create an environment and relationships within it that can facilitate the development of youth on positive trajectories. The Asset Building Capacity framework seeks to fill this void.

Asset Building Capacity has 11 elements that work in unison to help youth develop in the context of afterschool programs. Each element speaks to a willingness or ability that will help practitioners as they strive to help youth in the process of development. The illustration (Figure 9) was inspired by Baser and Morgan (2008)’s capacity flower.

**Figure 9:** Asset Building Capacity Framework



Source of Youth Image: <https://www.ric.edu/educationalstudies/youthDevelopment.php>  
Figure Adapted from: Baser and Morgan (2008)

### ***Putting Youth First***

As already mentioned, Fusion’s mission is “to put youth first”. This means that everything that Fusion does has to go “through a youth-lens”. From planning of

programs to implementation of activities, everything is designed by the youth, with the youth, for the youth so that no one “falls through the cracks”. The concept of putting youth first means that the staff’s main concern is the youth. Some staff describe Fusion as “youth friendly”; while, others describe Fusion as being “youth oriented” or “youth directed”. Fusion caters to the needs of youth because it puts youth first.

### ***Willingness To Relinquish Power***

The ability to put youth first, in practice not just in theory, is contingent upon the staff’s willingness to relinquish power and provide decision-making opportunities for youth. This liberty trickles down from management onto staff: if management is unwilling to share power, the staff may practice restraint in their willingness to give power to the youth through decision-making opportunities. In practice, sharing power with youth often means relegating to the background and gently pushing the youth into the foreground of any decision-making process. Fusion’s culture is participatory in nature so surrendering to the needs and voices of the youth comes naturally to the staff. The staff members report a desire to help the youth feel “a sense of ownership to the place”. The staff members are cognizant of the fact that ownership occurs when the youth get to make choices about how they spend their time at Fusion.

### ***Willingness to Supporting Character Development***

Helping youth develop their character is important to the staff at Fusion. The staff members express a desire to help youth become better people through their participation at Fusion. Character building, as an idea, is facilitated through the formal and informal code of conduct at Fusion. The staff members try to plant the seeds of respect, camaraderie, compassion, and leadership in the youth members. According to

the staff, these components of character can take the youth much further than any job-specific skills and/or training can dream to endeavour.

### *Ability to Engage with, Relate to, and Build Relationships with Youth*

The primary responsibility of each staff member at Fusion is youth engagement. The underlying assumption and understanding is that youth value the relationships they build with the staff at Fusion above all else.

Many of the staff members begin cultivating a relationship with the youth through daily interactions. The extent to which the staff members build relationships with youth intentionally varies from person to person but the common thread is the perception of relationships as an integral part of their work day. One staff member in particular notes the importance of leveraging moments of vulnerability, such as tantrums or outbursts that are out of character, to catapult shallow relationships with youth to a deeper level of connection. At least three members of the staff team also mentioned the importance of one-on-one time in building relationships with the youth.

When asked about how they build relationships, 17 out of 19 staff members noted that they never thought about how they engaged with the youth; rather, the process came very naturally to them. It was interesting to see the sense of responsibility and obligation that the staff felt towards the youth. Some expressed thinking of themselves as the “stewards” or “caretakers” of the emotions of the youth. Many of the staff members, at least three in particular, work more than two jobs and feel exhausted but they hold steadfast to their job at Fusion because of the relationships they have with the youth. One staff member went so far as to say that he does not want to leave Fusion because he does not want the youth to feel “abandoned”.

Another one of the key findings was that relationships are often built outside of program time. Although previous research has suggested that the youth seem to benefit the most from their membership at Fusion when they are involved in programs, the findings reveal that the drop-in centre is an essential part of what makes Fusion successful. In those drop-in hours, the staff are able to talk to various youth, build relationships, and eventually attract youth to programming. If the drop-in centre environment did not exist, the ability of staff to expand youth's horizons through their relationships with youth would be diminished. As one staff member explains:

I used to work a Saturday shift, like 9 hours on a Saturday, and that would help me build relationships. Then, I would ask the youth to come to [my program] and then they would come in and tell me all their drama [...] and they would stay and do a program. So, I really feel that now, because there are only 3 hours allotted in the budget for Fitness, that I can't build those relationships because I'm already in the gym. I'm showing up in the gym, running my program and I'm not out in the lounges building relationships. I think that's a missing link to how small the program is now.

### *Willingness to Encourage Learning and Growth*

Skill development is a key theme that emerged from the interviews with Fusion staff. The staff members want to help "give youth opportunity early in life" so that they can make informed decisions about their futures. They understand that youth, especially those who grow up in rural areas, are rarely aware of the vast opportunities available to them in terms of career. By affording them opportunities to learn how to draw from a professional artist, for example, or to learn how to play the guitar from a musician, they are helping the youth realize that these life choices are within their reach. The staff members also understand, at a deeper level, the importance of connection in facilitating learning. For example, they say that some of the youth connect with a staff member and

they join a program to spend more time with that particular staff member rather than with the objective of learning.

Other staff members recognize that the youth are tired of being forced to learn all day so they try to make their programs fun. Interestingly, 13 out of 15 program staff mentioned something to the effect of tricking youth into learning while focusing on fun: they speak about “tricking the youth into learning” by camouflaging it as “fun”. As such, they are able to engage the youth in a form of play that produces learning as a corollary.

In addition, two staff members said that participation in programs, and excelling in them, increases the youth’s commitment to learning outside of the walls of the afterschool program. The staff’s approach is very laid back so the onus of the learning remains on the youth and staff are there to encourage.

### ***Ability to Balance Structure and Flexibility***

The staff members at Fusion recognize that in order to grow, youth need both flexibility and structure. The staff members are aware that structure and flexibility can be polarizing forces that are often at odds with each other. The structure, they say, is needed to showcase the opportunities for the youth in an appropriate and efficient fashion. Flexibility, on the other hand, is needed so Fusion can cater to the needs of youth in an environment that the youth feel is youth-friendly (Christie, 2012).

Many of the youth that frequent Fusion do not necessarily have structure at home, according to the staff. As such, learning to conduct themselves within a set of confinements is difficult for them at first. In addition, the program staff are required to orchestrate structured programs for youth who “tend to thrive in a drop-in style

environment”. Instead of being wedded to a set of predetermined plans, the staff essentially have to create a framework within which they can facilitate youth learning, a structure that the youth can come to expect while being allowed freedom within that.

The structure, in an afterschool environment in general and the programs in particular, brings with it a sense of legitimacy in the minds of the staff and youth alike.

The comfort level with and preferences for structure, flexibility, and/or both vary significantly from staff member to staff member. For example, some staff members have a high need for structure, therefore, they engage youth in the design of learning agreements. Instead of imposing structure upon the youth, one staff member recognizes his own need for structure and solicits the input of the youth in the process. Thus, creating the walls of structure within which he can help breed creativity. On the opposing end of the spectrum, some staff members prefer to be flexible and take things one day at a time. They have a general idea of the direction in which they want to run things but, on the whole, they allow free reign to the youth to engage their creativity in ways that they feel are best suited to themselves. In these particular instances, the staff are careful to stick around so that the youth know that they are available for guidance and feedback.

The balance between structure and flexibility is not always easy to strike for the staff. Yet, they recognize the importance of both as they facilitate youth development at Fusion.

### *Ability to Set Boundaries and Communicate Expectations*

It was found that Fusion, at an organizational level, has created an environment that is conducive to youth development. There are policies and procedures in place within which the staff members operate and the youth are engaged. As a result of these policies, the staff's approach to setting boundaries and expectations for youth is consistent. As one staff member puts it: "how to deal with misconduct is Fusion-universal". An example of a "Fusion-Universal" policy is the mantra that was often repeated during the course of the interviews: "youth are priority number one". There are structures in place to support staff at Fusion.

One of the challenges that the staff expressed during the interviews was trying to balance being a "friend" to the youth while maintaining a sense of "authority". The staff members want the youth to know that they care about them but, at the same time, they want them to know that their conduct has to be in accordance with the Fusion-Universal boundaries and rules. More specifically, they want the behavior of the youth to be governed by the basic operating principle of respect at all times.

An interesting dichotomy of experience was also drawn in the interviews: the ability to set boundaries and communicate expectations was reported as taking on different manifestations in a drop-in environment versus structured programming. The drop-in staff set the rules and follow the guidelines that are pan-Fusion. When and/or if a youth does not abide by the rules that are explicitly stated, the staff proceed to enforce the rules by first engaging in conversation with the youth about their conduct. Then, if the behavior persists, the youth are given a warning. If the misconduct continues, the youth

are asked to leave Fusion for the day. Some staff members do not hesitate to ask the youth to leave for the day; while others, see it as a last resort.

In the context of structured programming, the process by which rules are set and expectations communicated is more varied and intricate. For example, in the Girls Group program, each participant signs a formal contract designed to create a safe space within the program for each participant to enjoy. This contract was drafted at the request of the girls to ensure that a high caliber of non-judgmentality was maintained and to create an inclusive environment. Some of the specifics of the contract were borrowed from the rules and boundaries that are applied at Fusion in general; while others, take into account and are tailored towards the needs of the girls. Another program example is the Music Program, the staff member who organizes and conducts the music lessons with the youth agrees upon an individual contract with each youth learner. This, the staff acknowledges, is a reflection of the need for structure that the staff member has, and communicates the expectations of both the youth and instructor clearly within the confines of the program. The staff members set boundaries with the youth members and communicate their expectations of the youth clearly.

Both drop-in staff and program staff make an effort to welcome the youth back with arms wide open. They seek to give youth members second chances without letting misconduct label youth or taint the staff's perceptions of youth.

### ***Ability to Create Space for Self-Expression***

Building upon the foundation of trust and respect that is palpable in the facility, the youth can “come and become” who they want to be at Fusion. Self-expression came up

numerous times in the interviews with Fusion staff; the staff believe that Fusion is a place where youth can freely express themselves.

The staff members take pride in giving the youth the space they need to be who they want to be – outside of the critical gaze of adults and without fearing the judgment of their peers. They encourage the youth to find mediums for self-expression that suit them. If one program or medium of expression does not work for youth, the staff members encourage the youth to try other options.

Some staff create the space for self-expression intentionally and jointly with the youth members in particular programs. For example, the Girls Group Program, the youth participants would feel comfortable enough to express themselves without worrying about judgment or lack of respect. The contract serves as a tool that assures the youth that this is a safe space for them to express themselves and be who they want to be.

The staff members also recognize that some youth are there to hang out while the others are there to learn. Although many of the program staff silently wish for all youth to be interested in learning, the staff are keen to facilitate both forms of self-expression and ensure that the environment is welcoming and conducive to both. Also, the staff members are genuine in the way they express themselves with the youth so the youth are comfortable being themselves around the staff.

### ***Ability to Foster a Sense of Responsibility and Accountability***

Three staff members mentioned that they wanted the youth to be mature. The staff members treat the youth like adults in their programs so that they can learn to be mature, responsible, and accountable for their actions.

By involving youth in the process of their development, the staff members are able to foster a sense of accountability and responsibility. Incorporating the youth's ideas and feedback into program design and implementation places the onus of responsibility of both success and participation on the youth's shoulders to a large extent. Ownership is a word that the staff used in conjunction with accountability, responsibility, participation, and empowerment.

### ***Perpetuating a Culture of Respect and Caring***

The staff's wholehearted devotion to the youth helps perpetuate a culture of respect and caring at Fusion. The youth, the staff note, are very perceptive and notice when the staff are engaging in a task as a job or because they care about it. The youth expect care, not just in the way that they are treated, but also in the way that the programs and the drop-in centre are managed. Caring and respect are "contagious" so the youth learn to stand up for themselves and become "ambassadors" for each other through their observation of the staff. The climate, as they say, is conducive for caring.

The staff members care about the youth holistically; they recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intertwined with their mental, physical, social, and emotional health. For example, in the SureStart Program, if the staff members encounter a youth who is having trouble with something at home or at school, they take the time to be there for the youth and support them to their fullest capacity but they realize that if the

youth is not functioning well in one realm of their lives, it is likely to trickle into other aspects. The staff members acknowledge that they go above and beyond for the youth but happily so. Similarly, other staff members have reported making it a point to check in with the youth on an emotional level.

As a corollary, the youth begin to care about themselves and each other. They begin to stand up for each other. The staff team noted circumstances in which the youth will remember to ask each other about events in their lives even if they do not share the same circle of friends outside of Fusion.

The culture is caring and respectful because respect is one of the rules at Fusion. Youth are treated with respect and they are expected to treat themselves, each other, and the property with respect at Fusion. Respect is a value that is central to the work that Fusion does. Respect, as one staff member said, “kind of travels” so perpetuating a culture of respect is easy for the staff at Fusion.

### ***Ability to Model Positive Values***

The staff members embody the positive values that they try to instill in the youth. Every single staff member interviewed understood their place as role models and mentors in the lives of Fusion youth. Many of the staff mentioned that the youth that come to Fusion do not have access to positive role models in their lives. In building a strong, trusting, and reciprocal relationship with the youth, the staff members help the youth “have a positive imagine of adults and they learn to trust adults”. At least two staff members recounted stories of youth who were used to being treated a certain way by adults and who came into their own as they found that the staff at Fusion treat them better than they are expecting to be treated. The youth, as one staff member noted,

learn to behave how they are expected to behave. As such, the staff team works hard to communicate the best of expectations and ensure that their actions are in congruence with what they have said. They accept the youth for who they are and as separate from their actions so the youth can see themselves in a positive light as well. The value of accepting others is one of the three core values that the staff team at Fusion internalizes, displays, and tries to develop in their youth members.

## Summary

Through the interviews, it was found that 11 elements (willingness and abilities) help foster youth development at Fusion. These are:

1. To put youth first;
2. To empower youth with choices and opportunities;
3. To support character development;
4. To engage with, relate to, and build relationships with youth;
5. To encourage learning and growth;
6. To balance structure and flexibility;
7. To set boundaries and communicate expectations;
8. To create a safe space for self-expression;
9. To foster sense of maturity, responsibility, and accountability;
10. To perpetuate a culture of caring and respect; and,
11. To model positive values.

These eleven components require organizational and individual capacity to help foster positive youth development in general and asset development in particular in youth members.

## Chapter 9: Discussion

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*“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”*

- Frederick Douglass

### Introduction

In this chapter, the findings of this study are discussed in light of relevant literature and relevant theories. Loosely mirroring the organization of the literature review, this chapter is divided into five sections. The first section addresses asset development in youth members at Fusion. The second section considers the role of Fusion as an organization in facilitating youth development and links it back to the literature on successful afterschool programs. The third section speaks to the "developmental" nature of the relationship formed between staff at Fusion and youth members. The fourth section highlights the interaction between organizational capacity and staff capacity to help build assets in youth members at Fusion. The final section discusses some of the challenges and tensions that were voiced during the interviews with the staff team and prescribes recommendations for Fusion accordingly. Overall, the findings confirm and extend the literature on the contribution of afterschool programs, and afterschool program staff, to the positive development of youth.

### Supporting Asset Development in Youth

The first objective of this study was to understand youth members at Fusion through the lens of the Developmental Assets Framework posited by the Search Institute (2004). Although no statistically significant differences were found between demographic-related, program-related, and membership-related variables, the DAP survey revealed that the youth members at Fusion have an average total asset score of

42, which is considered “good”. “Good” average total asset scores signify that youth members are likely to become caring, competent, contributing, healthy, productive, and thriving members of their communities and society (Search Institute, 2012).

The average scores of youth members on the eight asset categories ranged from 18 to 22 out of 30. The average score of youth members on the external asset categories of support, empowerment, and boundaries and expectations was 22, which is considered good. This means that the youth feel supported, empowered, and feel like they know what their boundaries are and what is expected of them. Similarly, the average score of youth members on the internal asset categories of positive values, social competencies, and positive identity was 21, which is also considered good. This means that the youth members report having positive values, report being socially competent, and report having strong positive identities. However, the average asset scores on the external category entitled “constructive use of time” and the internal category of “commitment to learning” were 18 and 20, respectively, which are considered fair. The lowest scoring asset category was “constructive use of time” which means that the youth reported rarely participating in recreational or creative activities. This is worrisome because high scores on the “constructive use of time” category are strongly associated with thriving in adulthood (Search Institute, 2005). Since Fusion is a centre that offers recreational and creative activities, encouraging youth to participate actively in programs and investigating why youth members chose not to participate might be worthwhile.

The data from the interviews validated the survey findings. The staff members at Fusion support youth members as they develop. The staff help youth develop external

assets by: being there for them; empowering them with choices, opportunities, and experiences; teaching them boundaries; and, encouraging the youth to use their time constructively through participation in activities/programs that interest them. The staff help the youth develop internal assets by encouraging them to learn and by supporting their learning, by instilling positive values such as respect and caring in the youth, by providing youth with opportunities for teamwork and social interaction, and by helping the youth develop self-confidence and self-esteem (Christie, 2012; Khan, 2012). Overall, the interviews made clear that the staff perceive that participation at Fusion helps youth develop assets that will help them grow into their roles as adults.

Previous research with Fusion also supports the claim that participation at Fusion helps youth develop internal and external assets. Khan (2012) found that participation at Fusion helped youth with identity work, basic skills, positive relationships, teamwork and social skills. In addition, Khan (2012) found that the more frequently the youth participated in programs and the longer they had been members at Fusion, the more they benefited in the above-mentioned domains. As a result, this study used frequency of participation and duration of membership as variables. However, no statistically significant results were found to support the claim that the more frequently the youth participate and the longer the youth have been members, the more the developmental assets they have. My findings are consistent with reports in literature that suggest that the amount of participation in afterschool programs does not necessarily relate to developmental outcomes (Roth et al., 2010).

A number of guesses can be made for why the survey did not yield statistically significant differences between categories that were hypothesized to have varying total

asset scores based on previous research. One reason worth noting is that the survey sample was small. Compared to Khan (2012), who was able to obtain 122 completed surveys of which she analyzed 113, only 61 surveys were completed for this study of which 57 were deemed to be appropriate for analysis. Moreover, two confounding factors might have contributed to this disparity in the number of survey participants: 1) the staff report that Fusion has been experiencing low participation numbers this year; and, 2) word-of-mouth was relied upon to spread the word about the DAP survey whereas Khan (2012) used posters to market the survey.

Despite the lack of statistically significant findings, descriptive analyses of the surveys showed that the survey findings were consistent with the literature. The majority of youth who participate in afterschool programs have total asset scores that range between 42 to 51 (Lofquist, 2009). The asset scores tend to increase until age 13 (Grade 8) and decrease thereafter (Benson, 2006). And, 'constructive use of time' seems to be the asset category that youth tend to score lowest on (Lofquist, 2009). However, no casual link can be made between participation at Fusion and developmental assets as a result of this study since the sample was self-selected, there was no control group, and the survey was conducted at one period in time.

### **Caveats**

Developmental assets provide a framework that helps understand the complex web of interconnected influences that impact youth as they are growing into adulthood. However, it is hard to disentangle some of the assets from each other. For example, boundaries and expectations and constructive use of time overlaps in the case of Fusion. Likewise, positive values and positive identity coincide and are contingent upon

each other to some extent. In addition, although the lens of developmental assets provides a comprehensive look at the values, skills, and traits youth need to succeed as adults, it is less instructive in helping aspiring practitioners to understand their role as they assist youth with the development of these assets.

To summarize, Fusion's youth members have "good" DAPs, which means that they are likely to become successful adults. The youth members achieved the lowest score on the external asset category of "constructive use of time". The interviews, when analyzed with the Developmental Assets Framework in mind, revealed that the staff help the youth develop the four external and four internal categories articulated by the Search Institute (2004). Although the Developmental Assets Framework has proven to be useful for this study, the Framework does have some shortcomings such as the overlap between some categories.

### **Situating Fusion within the Literature on Afterschool Programs**

The second objective of this study was to explore how Fusion, as an organization, supports the development of its youth members. It was found that Fusion's participatory culture, vision of empowering youth, and foundation of respect helps the staff build connections with youth, helps the youth learn boundaries, and helps the youth develop skills that can help them personally and/or professionally. Fusion is built upon Lerner (2004)'s three pillars of programs that promote positive youth development: Fusion fosters positive and sustained adult-youth relationships; provides youth with access to skill-building activities and programs; and, provides opportunities for youth to apply these skills.

Moreover, Fusion meets the 11 criteria of successful afterschool programs. Fusion's mission, vision, and programming is tailored to the context of Ingersoll in Oxford County and meets the needs of specific youth (Christie, 2012; Crooks and Burns, 2009; Durlak, Berger and Celio, 2009). Fusion balances structure with flexibility by having ground rules and structured programming in unison with opportunities for youth involvement in a dynamic culture (Crooks and Burns, 2009; Durlak et al., 2009). Fusion provides youth members with a range of skill-building activities to choose from and provides leadership opportunities for youth (Crooks and Burns, 2009; Durlak et al., 2009). Fusion has strong community-partnerships and is working towards gaining parental support (Durlak et al., 2009). Fusion has policies and procedures in place that help clearly communicate the learning and behavioral expectations of youth members (Durlak et al., 2009). Finally, Fusion has allocated resources for organizational learning, especially through its partnership with the University of Guelph (Durlak, et al., 2009).

Fusion is built upon the three foundational pillars identified by Lerner (2004) and strives to meet all criteria for successful afterschool programs identified by Crooks and Burns (2009) and Durlak et al (2009). Christie (2012)'s research confirms that Fusion has a "youth-friendly" culture and that the youth perceive Fusion as a "safe space" in which they can grow. These findings confirm the view of afterschool programs as one context that facilitates the development of youth along a positive trajectory (Cross, 2012; Christie, 2012; Khan, 2012).

### **Cultivating Developmental Relationships with Youth**

The third objective of this study was to understand how the staff members at Fusion contribute to youth development. Validating findings from Christie (2012) that,

from the youth's perspective, development flows from the relationships at Fusion, this study found that the relationships that the staff cultivate with youth members contribute to the cognitive, ethical, physical, and social development of youth (Fusion, 2014). Li and Julian (2012) describe relationships that are characterized by "attachment, reciprocity, progressive complexity, and balance of power" as being "developmental" (p. 157). The interviews revealed that the staff are attached to the youth, see the relationships as mutually beneficially and growing in complexity, and that the staff treat the youth as equals and give them as many opportunities to participate as possible. As such, the relationships that the staff at Fusion build with youth members can be described as being "developmental relationships". In addition, the developmental relationships the staff have cultivated with youth members meet the five categories of actions that the Search Institute says are foundational for developmental relationships (Search Institute, 2014). They are: expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities (Search Institute, 2014).

However, the Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2014) neglects to acknowledge the influence of organizational culture on the formation and crystallization of developmental relationships. The interviews shed light on the importance of internalizing a supportive, engaging, and empowering organizational culture. In addition, the staff members spoke about youth empowerment, youth engagement, and youth discipline in chorus, symbolizing a cohesive staff voice. The unified approach to these elements of concern help the staff as they strive to develop meaningful relationships with youth members.

## **Interaction Between Organizational Culture and Role of Staff**

An outcome of this research was the enhanced understanding of the interaction between organizational and individual forces that shape youth development. The culture of Fusion, which fosters positive youth development, is built on positive perceptions of youth and believing in youth's potential. Staff members at Fusion would agree with Lerner (2002) as he contends that: "youth are resources to be developed, not problems to be solved" (p.30). Scholars argue that afterschool programs that are rooted in PYD principles are more effective than others in impacting the lives of youth (Lerner, 2005). In addition, Fusion has a multi-disciplinary staff team and is able to offer a holistic approach to youth development. Moreover, Fusion is context-specific and respectful of the individual differences in the capacities of its youth members. By these standards, Fusion successfully creates an environment and a climate in which youth development can be nurtured.

Research on effective afterschool programs and developmental relationships confirm the importance of positive youth orientation (Lerner, 2005) and developmental relationships (Li and Julian, 2012) in fostering youth development. However, the interaction between the two remains to be studied in the literature. This research reveals that organizational culture helps set the stage for connections to be built between staff and youth in the context of an afterschool program. Thus, developmental relationships do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are cultivated in a supportive, youth-focused organizational context.

## **Asset Building Capacity Framework**

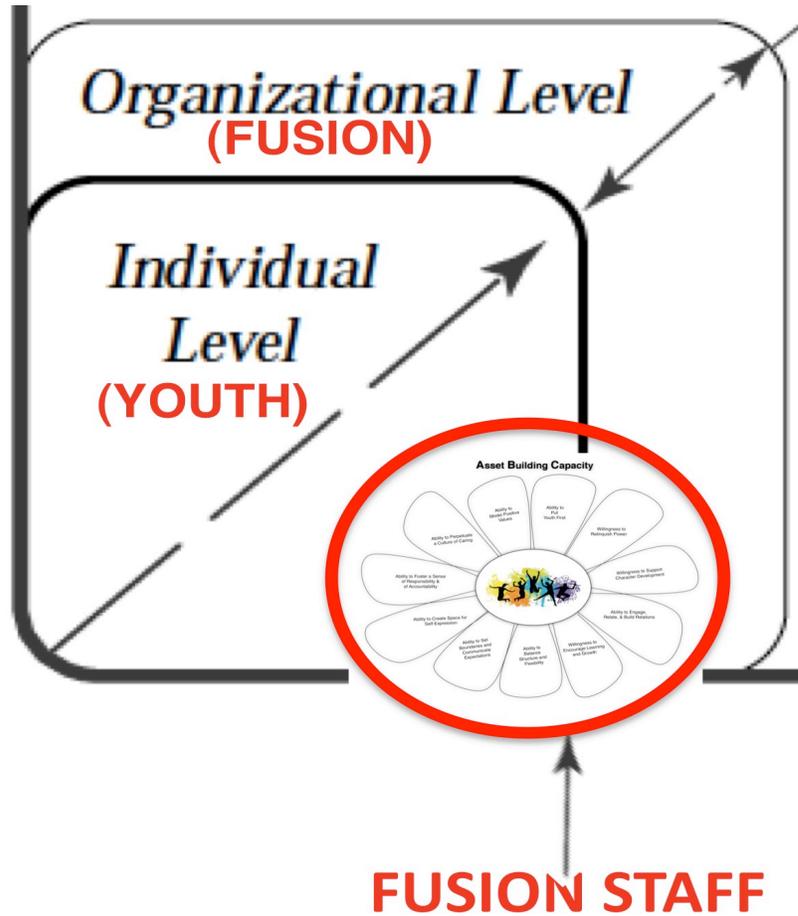
According to the analysis, youth members at Fusion have good developmental

assets and Fusion can be classified as a successful afterschool program in which staff members are able to cultivate developmental relationships with youth members. The pressing question of "how" the staff members individually and Fusion as an organization collectively contributes to development of youth is not answered by looking separately at Fusion as an afterschool program that fosters youth development or staff members as youth development practitioners. Rather, considering the interaction between the organizational capacity and staff capacity can help address the question of how youth development is facilitated within the walls of Fusion.

Resting at the intersection of organizational and individual capacity, the Asset Building Capacity Framework, presented as an outcome of this research in the previous chapter, identifies 11 collective and individual willingness and abilities of Fusion as an organization and staff members as individuals that help foster youth development. The framework brings together the Developmental Assets Framework (Search Institute, 2004) and the Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2014) by exploring the practice of youth development at Fusion. The theories of change that the staff articulated align well with the Developmental Assets Framework as the objectives of both are to help youth develop skills, traits, and values that provide youth with the internal and external resources they need to become caring, competent, healthy, happy, contributing, productive, and thriving members of their communities and society (Search Institute, 2014; Lerner, 2005; Search Institute, 1990). In addition, the Framework furthers the work of the Search Institute as it confirms and expands upon the five categories of actions articulated in the Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2014).

The Asset Building Capacity Framework attempts to fill the gap in the literature at the intersection of individual and organizational capacity, which was identified at the closing of Chapter 2 (Figure 2).

**Figure 10:** Asset Building Capacity Flower Filling the Gap in the Literature



Adapted from Bolger (2000)

This means that if the goal is positive youth development in general and asset development in particular, relationships and organizational culture must be understood together to fully capture their effect on youth development. Some implications for afterschool programs and youth development practitioners as a result of this framework are articulated in a handout (Appendix H).

## Challenges and Tensions

Through the interviews, the staff mentioned some of the challenges and tensions that they are facing in their practice. Many staff members mentioned a need for additional training in order to better support youth who may be going through mental health challenges. Since Fusion has a diverse staff team, the majority of the staff do not come from Child and Youth Worker backgrounds. As a result, the majority of the staff feel like they need more training to better serve youth who have mental health challenges such as depression or learning disabilities.

The staff members also mention that sometimes it is challenging to balance their role as friend for the youth with their role as authority figures. They want the youth to be able to relate to them but they also want them to follow the rules that have been set out. Trying to strike a balance between being a friend and authority figure reflects a bigger challenge that the staff at Fusion are facing in their practice. Some of the staff are having a hard time adjusting to the shift from drop-in style dominant programming to structured programming. Although the rationale is clear to the majority of the staff members, the interview data suggests that the some staff are still trying to work through an understanding of the transition. In other words, they understand that structured programming might be more beneficial for the development of youth but they feel that the youth who come to Fusion benefit from drop-in style environments.

To add to this challenge, at least six staff members directly mentioned the importance of drop-in style environments to help cultivate relationships with youth that might lead to them to programs. Three staff members said that relationships are often formed outside of program time. Three other staff members mentioned that youth often

participate in programs just to spend more time with staff members they get along with. This is important to highlight because the shift from drop-in style environments to primarily structured programming might be detrimental for the relationship-building component of Fusion's contribution to youth members.

### **Recommendations for Fusion**

The recommendations for Fusion are:

1. Invest in training and development of staff. This may take the form of knowledge exchange amongst the staff. Fusion diverse and interdisciplinary staff team can support each other through challenges by tapping into their collective wealth of experiences and knowledge. For example, if some staff members are looking for training to help serve youth with mental health challenges, they can connect with staff members with backgrounds in Child and Youth Work and come up with strategies to help youth with mental health challenges.
2. Have conversations about the transition from primarily drop-in to primarily structured style programming. Although this did not come up explicitly as an issue, it was evident through the interviews that the staff members are struggling with the transition. Perhaps, Fusion needs to devote time and energy into understanding why they are prioritizing drop-in vs. structured programs. Especially if relationship building is important for youth development, then drop-in style environments and time outside of programming hours to build relationships with youth should be given priority.

3. Keep the organizational culture alive. Fusion's mission, vision, and values set the organization apart from other afterschool programs for youth. Keeping this fire alive is essential to sustain Fusion's contribution to youth development.

## Summary

This research revealed that youth members at Fusion have good DAPs and that the staff team helps youth develop assets that will facilitate the youth's journey towards successful adulthood. In addition, it was found that the organizational culture at Fusion helps staff build relationships with youth that then help the youth develop skills, traits, values, and qualities that research has linked to successful adulthood (Search Institute, 2014). More specifically, these "developmental relationships" are built on foundations of mutual respect and caring and are formed, maintained, and strengthened in an organizational ethos of engagement, encouragement, and empowerment. These findings are consistent with the Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2014), which describes expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities as the foundational elements of developmental relationships (Search Institute, 2014).

However, the Developmental Relationships Framework is missing pieces that featured prominently in the interviews with Fusion staff. An alternative framework, focusing on staff capacity in the context of organizational culture, is proposed in this chapter. This framework, called Asset Building Capacity, furthers the work of the Search Institute (2014) because it captures the individual and collective attitudes, skills, and practices of Fusion staff and Fusion as an organization that help youth grow. In addition,

this chapter presents some of the concerns that Fusion staff voiced in the interviews and offers recommendations to Fusion.

## Chapter 10: Conclusion

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*“If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain.”*

– Emily Dickinson

### Introduction

The overall goal of this research was to understand how youth development is fostered at the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre (Fusion) in Ingersoll, Ontario. The objectives were divided into two categories. First, it was confirmed that indeed participation at Fusion does benefit youth positively and that Fusion does meet the criteria outlined for successful afterschool programs. Then, the role of afterschool program staff as practitioners of youth development was explored. The objectives of this study were achieved and the findings illuminated how organizations and individuals interact to affect youth development. This interaction became apparent in stories of staff that I wrote to present the people who practice youth development at Fusion. While the stories were originally intended as written “portraits of practice”, they highlighted the important role that organizational culture played as a key source of influence on the style of their practice. The Asset Building Capacity Framework that emerged as a way to organize and present the interaction of organizational and individual capacity to facilitate youth development is arguably the most significant outcome of this study. This chapter will summarize the key findings of this research, acknowledge Fusion as a community that helps youth grow, highlight guiding principles for afterschool programs and youth development practitioners, and offer suggestions for future research.

## Facilitating Youth Development at Fusion

The period of life known as youth, between the ages of 12 to 18, is turbulent because of the physical, psychological, and social changes that young people have to undergo (Lerner, 2005; Erikson, 1968; Hall, 1904). These changes and the challenges that accompany them are rendered more difficult for youth today because of the expectations that our complex society has of adults without providing youth with a roadmap of how to become adults (Guichard et al., 2012). Afterschool programs provide youth with opportunities to develop complementary skills that are essential for their full functioning as adults (Lauzon, 2013). Fusion is one such afterschool program that has helped youth in Ingersoll escape the perils of substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and youth violence while serving as a hub of opportunity, creativity, and learning for youth members. This research sought to investigate how Fusion contributes to the development of youth. More specifically, the research assessed the DAP of youth members, examined the organizational culture of Fusion, and explored the practice of Fusion staff as facilitators of youth development.

This mixed methods study used the DAP survey, a standardized, reliable, and low-risk tool, to quantitatively assess the asset profile of youth members at Fusion. In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 staff members. These two methods addressed the research questions concerning the youth members at Fusion, Fusion as an organization, and Fusion's staff team.

The surveys revealed that Fusion's youth members have an average total asset score of 42, which is considered good. This means that the youth members are likely to become caring, contributing, and thriving members of their communities and society

(Search Institute, 2014; Benson, 2006; Lerner, 2005). The interviews revealed that Fusion collectively and the staff members individually support positive development of youth and the development of assets in youth members.

In addition, the interviews revealed that the staff members at Fusion have positive perceptions of youth and Fusion's approach to youth development aligns with the positive youth development paradigm. Fusion's culture is youth-focused, caring, empowering, and respectful which creates an environment that is conducive to directing youth on a positive developmental trajectory. Six key themes emerged from the interviews, including:

- Relationship building;
- Skill development;
- Holistic approach to youth development;
- Balancing structure and flexibility;
- Respect, ownership, and empowerment; and,
- Theories of change.

Overall, it was found that the staff team at Fusion contributes to youth development primarily through the relationships that they cultivate with youth members. Through these relationships, which can be classified as being developmental (Li and Julian, 2012), the staff encourage the youth to explore and learn, provide youth with opportunities to develop their skills, and co-create development with youth. Through their practice, the staff members at Fusion:

- Teach youth positive values such as respect;

- Empower youth with access to opportunities, activities, and experiences;
- Balance structure and flexibility to teach that structure is okay;
- And, ensure that everything that Fusion engages in and offers goes through a youth lens.

These findings enriched the current literature by highlighting the organizational influence on developmental relationships. It was found that the empowering culture at Fusion created an environment in which youth and staff could engage with each other in meaningful ways.

Grounded in key findings, the nexus of youth development at the intersection of organizational culture and developmental relationships was captured in a Framework proposed in this thesis called Asset Building Capacity. This Framework captures the interaction between the organizational infrastructure that supports youth development at Fusion and the everyday practice of staff members as facilitators of youth development. The Asset Building Capacity Framework makes sense of the research findings in light of the Developmental Assets Framework (Search Institute, 2004) and the Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2014). Moreover, the Framework is influenced by key concepts in Capacity Development studies such as the focus on context, on process, and on development as a journey (Bolger, 2000; Meadows, 2000).

### **Fusion as an Asset Building Community**

Since the youth members at Fusion have good developmental asset profiles, the organizational culture is supportive of youth development, and the staff engage deliberately in their practice to facilitate the develop of assets in youth, it can be concluded that Fusion serves as an Asset Building Community for its youth members

(Benson, 2007). According to Benson (2007), an Asset Building Community is any place or setting that provides “a constant and equitable flow of asset-building energy to all children and adolescents” (Benson, 2007, p. 33). At Fusion, organizational culture and staff work together to help youth develop the skills, traits, and qualities they need to become happy, healthy, caring, thriving, productive, and contributing adults in their communities and in society (Search Institute, 2012). As such, Fusion provides a “constant and equitable flow of asset-building energy” to their youth members.

### **Guiding Principles for Programs and Practitioners**

Since the Asset Building Capacity Framework rests at the intersection of organizational capacity and staff capacity, lessons can be gleaned for both afterschool programs and youth development practitioners who are striving to facilitate youth development. This research offers guiding principles for the theory and practice of youth development. Five guiding principles can help afterschool programs create environments and cultures that are conducive for youth development. Moreover, three guiding principles can help youth development practitioners cultivate meaningful relationships with youth.

Five guiding principles for afterschool programs are listed below. Learning from the practice of Fusion, afterschool programs should:

1. *Be rooted in principles of PYD.* The environment and culture that Fusion is able to create as an afterschool program is rooted in having positive perceptions of youth. The management and staff at Fusion recognize that youth are full of potential; they are looking for direction; and, looking for opportunities that will help them become better people.

2. *Cater to the needs of youth and be tailored to specific contexts.* Fusion, from the beginning, has involved youth in the process of their development. Fusion was developed in consultation with the youth and eight years after its opening, it continues to be youth-oriented, youth-centered, youth-directed, and youth-friendly.
3. *Create a culture that is dynamic, empowering, caring, and respectful.* Fusion's culture helps create an environment that is youth-focused. Fusion's mission is related to youth engagement and its vision is related to youth empowerment. As such, the staff members are mandated to engage with youth as their priority. In addition, the staff members are empowered with flexibility in their programming. This flexibility accorded to the staff translates into more room for youth input. As a result, the culture at Fusion remains dynamic and empowering because the youth are constantly involved. Fusion also has ground rules that revolve around respect. When the staff members treat the youth with respect and the youth treat themselves, each other, and the property with respect, a safe space is created in which caring can be demonstrated.
4. *Prioritize youth engagement.* As already mentioned, the staff are mandated to engage with the youth as their priority. Even though pressure from funders is mounting, Fusion maintains youth as a priority and does not allow staff to get blindsided by paperwork.
5. *Invest in organizational learning.* Fusion has invested in partnering with the University of Guelph to learn about the impact of their work. This research is communicated back to the staff and it helps inform their practice. Investing in

organizational level research has benefits for the youth members, staff members, and Fusion as an organization. In addition, the research showed that professional development and training of staff is important to the staff and it is a point on which Fusion is trying to improve.

Learning from the practice of Fusion staff, youth development practitioners can benefit from:

1. *Engaging in work as 'deliberate practice'*. Reflect on why you are doing this, what your motivations are and what you want to achieve. The staff members at Fusion are aware of their role in the lives of youth and take their roles as “role model”, “mentor”, or even “surrogate parent” seriously.
2. *Focusing on process*. Know that change cannot be engineered and accept youth for who they are right now. No staff member at Fusion wanted to change the lives of the youth; rather, they wanted to be there for the youth for the little things trusting that big changes might result from it.
3. *Cultivating genuine, sincere relationships with youth*. Cultivating relationships with youth begins with self-awareness, accepting the youth for who they are, and expressing oneself genuinely. The staff members show that they care about the youth by listening to them and by remembering what the youth have told them about their lives. In addition, they show the youth that they care about them by trying to learn from them and by treating them better than they are expecting to be treated. The staff members treat the youth as equals and respect them as individuals. As a result, genuine friendships emerge naturally.

Since this research focused on development, it has the potential to have implications for community-based practice with people of any age in any region of the world. The research confirms that afterschool programs help youth develop and provides some insight into how this youth development can be facilitated from the vantage point of the organization and of individual staff. This research also serves as a beacon of hope for youth who might think that governments, organizations, and people no longer care about their wellbeing and development because of the government austerity measures and organizational downsizing that is taking place worldwide.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Although research has been conducted with Fusion in the past, it is such a unique afterschool program that many more avenues of research can be pursued in this context. Four recommendations for further research with Fusion and seven recommendations for further research on youth development are proposed below.

#### **1. Does participation at Fusion enhance academic performance?**

A study that compares the academic performance of youth members at Fusion over time would be interesting as it would confirm or refute the literature on the positive effects of participation in afterschool programs on academic performance.

#### **2. Why do some youth participate in programs at Fusion while others do not?**

The Manager and other staff members noted that they would like to know why some youth participate in programs at Fusion while others use the space to just hang out with their friends.

**3. Does membership at Fusion have long-term benefits for youth?**

A study that tracks youth members at Fusion over time would highlight the long-term impact of membership at Fusion on the development of youth. Some of the staff mentioned that the youth might not understand the role that Fusion plays in their lives until they have become adults. So, it would be interesting to interview youth who were members at Fusion after they have become adults.

**4. What lessons can the practice of “development” at Fusion offer to organizations and projects that are striving to achieve participatory development?**

Fusion has lessons to offer to international development practitioners who often pay lip service to participatory development without understanding how community-based, community-oriented, and community-directed programs can actually be conducted. Fusion stands as an example of participatory development in action and this should be publicized for the benefit of youth programs nationally and development projects internationally.

**5. Do the components of the Asset Building Capacity Framework resonate with staff at other afterschool programs?**

The interviews with the staff revealed 11 willingness and abilities of staff that help them as they strive to help youth. The universality of these 11 elements remains to be tested.

**6. Can the Asset Building Capacity Framework be applied to other youth development contexts?**

The elements that make up the Asset Building Capacity Framework seem to be intuitive. The extents to which these elements can help youth develop across settings remains to be studied.

**7. Are there specific discipline-rated, personality-related, and other factors, which inhibit, detract from, or support the formation of developmental relationships?**

The literature and this research shed light on the importance of developmental relationships; however, the composition of developmental relationships requires closer attention.

**8. How do youth respond to the Asset Building Capacity Framework?**

Fusion's Manager, Jason, mentioned that he was speaking to one of the youth about factors that facilitate the development of youth. The youth brought up all 11 of the components captured in the Framework. As such, asking youth for their input on the Framework might be worthwhile.

**9. How do youth learn at Fusion?**

The staff stories presented in this study and previous research with Fusion proves that youth do indeed learn at Fusion. However, the form, function, and fashion of this learning remains to be explored. A study on learning at Fusion could consider both the youth and the staff perspective on the subject.

**10. If a similar study were to be conducted at another afterschool program, would it unveil similar willingness and abilities of staff and the organization to support youth development?**

Since this study highlights the interplay of staff and organizational capacity to facilitate youth development, it seems important to understand the extent to which the two interact and which, if any, is more influential in the practice of youth development within afterschool programs.

**11. What interventions can be instituted to support organizations as they seek to foster youth development?**

Evaluations of afterschool programs prove that not all programs are successful. Youth development, as this study highlights, is a deliberate practice. As a result, research that offers organizations and individuals with steps for improvement is needed.

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## Appendices

**Appendix A: Fusion’s Current Programs and Activities**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Program Description</b>
<b>Art Breaks</b>	Art breaks is a program offered to youth between 12 and 18. The program offers basic and advanced drawing techniques from object and figure drawing, character design, perspective and basic design. The program also provides professional grade artists materials from sketch book, canvases, paints, markers, spray paint, clay etc.
<b>Digital Game Development</b>	This program is offered in collaboration with Fanshawe College whereby youth learn what is required to create and develop original games, applications and web-based interactive media using the latest in game development software and Fusion's gaming computers.
<b>Fitness Program</b>	This program focuses on choice and suitability as Fusion youth have a range of choices to participate in different forms of traditional sport through to functional fitness exercise. The focus of the program is on well-being and teaching the youth about fitness, nutrition, health and wellness and healthy lifestyle choices.
<b>Girls' Group</b>	The girls get together to discuss difficult topics. In addition, they may collectively participate in recreational activities and learn different life skills including cooking and personal hygiene. Also, various guest speakers are brought in to address topics of interest to the female adolescents such as eating disorders, self-esteem, domestic abuse and other health issues.
<b>Hockey Night at Fusion</b>	This program is intended to provide youth with physical exercise while promoting sportsmanship, improving hockey skills, making new friends and having fun.
<b>Ingersoll Youth Advisory Group</b>	This leadership development program is intended to act as an advisory body that brings forth youth issues in Ingersoll, communicating them and promoting action to be taken to appropriate stakeholders. In doing this it promotes a positive image of youth in the community and promotes youth to be involved in meaningful community activities with other stakeholders and partners.
<b>It's All About the Guys</b>	This program is a leadership program for male adolescents and provides opportunities to discuss issues of concern to them, engage in competitive and cooperative sports, appreciate cinema through private screenings and learning about and utilizing other community programs and services.
<b>Nutrition Program</b>	Youth learn about nutritious meal planning, preparation, and cleaning through hands-on experience in Fusion's kitchen.
<b>Tracy's Diner</b>	Youth who participate in this learn about and participate in meal preparation in addition to receiving a free meal. Meals are available for other youth who do not participate in this program for a minimal charge.

<b>Music Program</b>	Free music lessons are available to youth in the following areas: drums, guitar, bass and percussion. Participants learn such concepts as tempo, bars, beats, chords and are encouraged to practice. One on one instruction is provided to youth with programs tailored to their specific abilities. Instruments are provided.
<b>Open Jam</b>	This program brings youth together to use making music and dancing with others as a form of self-expression and as a means of managing stress.
<b>Photography and Graphic Design</b>	Youth are introduced to cameras and are taught everything from the basics through to advanced photography. In addition, youth are introduced to programs such as Adobe Creative Suite Illustrator and Photoshop and are taught about logo and poster design for businesses.
<b>Radio Broadcasting</b>	In partnership with 104.7 Heart FM youth develop their broadcasting skills with the help of real life on the air personalities. Youth have an opportunity to host a show on Fusion's closed circuit radio station.
<b>ReBuildIT Program</b>	Youth learn to use, build, troubleshoot and repair computers. There is also an emphasis on environmental responsibility and the appropriate disposal of electronics through recycling. Currently Fusion partners with an e-waste firm in disassembling electronics for safe disposal.
<b>Recording Studio</b>	In Fusion's state-of-the-art professional studio youth learn about all areas of production and development of production skills. Youth are encouraged to record and mix their own music or music of their friends.
<b>Video Editing</b>	Youth learn all facets of video production from pre-production through to editing and post-production. They have an opportunity to put their skills to work by assisting with Fusion TV, a Fusion based show which is aired on the local cable channel.
<b>SureStart Program</b>	The main goals of YEPP are to be able to provide resources and support to youth with creative business ideas.

## Appendix B: DAP Survey

Name/Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Career, Community and

Possible

RHow long have you been a member at Fusion?WLess than 6 months

- a. 6 months to 1 year
  - b. 1 year to less than 3 years
  - c. 3 years to less than 5 years
  - d. 5 years or longer
2. In the last 30 days, how many times have you come to Fusion?
- a. 1 to 7 times
  - b. 8 to 14 times
  - c. 15 to 21 times
  - d. More than 21 times
3. Please circle the programs you participate in:
- a. Arts Break Program
  - b. Guitar Lessons/Music Lessons
  - c. Open Jam Session
  - d. Graphic Design
  - e. Photography
  - f. Girl's Group and Go Girls!
  - g. Guy's Group
  - h. Ingersoll Youth Advisory Council
  - i. Homework Help
  - j. Snack shack
  - k. Brian's Bistro
  - l. Fusion Fitness
  - m. Soccer Night
  - n. Floor Hockey Night
  - o. Sports Night (all other sports)
  - p. Skate Park
  - q. Fusion TV
  - r. Imac Studio – Video Editing
  - s. Digital Game Development
  - t. Radio Broadcasting
  - u. ReBuildIT
  - v. Recording Studio
  - w. Drop-In Centre
4. How often do you participate in these programs?
- a. Less than once a month
  - b. Once a month
  - c. Bi-weekly
  - d. Once a week
  - e. More than once a week
5. Comments/Additional Detai

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## DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS PROFILE

Self-Report for Ages 11-18

---

**NAME / ID:** \_\_\_\_\_ **TODAY'S DATE:** Mo: \_\_\_\_\_ Day: \_\_\_\_\_ Yr: \_\_\_\_\_

**SEX:** † Male † Female **AGE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **GRADE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **BIRTH DATE:** Mo: \_\_\_\_\_ Day: \_\_\_\_\_ Yr: \_\_\_\_\_

**RACE/ETHNICITY** (Check all that apply): † American Indian or Alaska Native † Asian

† Black or African American † Hispanic or Latino/Latina † Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

† White † Other (*please specify*): \_\_\_\_\_

---

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Below is a list of positive things that you might have in *yourself, your family, friends, neighborhood, school, and community*. For each item that describes you **now or within the past 3 months**, check if the item is true:

**Not At All or Rarely      Somewhat or Sometimes      Very or Often      Extremely or Almost Always**

If you do not want to answer an item, leave it blank. But please try to answer all items as best you can.

---

Not At All or <u>Rarely</u>	Somewhat or <u>Sometimes</u>	Very or <u>Often</u>	Extremely or <u>Almost Always</u>
-----------------------------------	------------------------------------	----------------------------	---

**I . . .**

- |   |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| † | † | † | † | 1. Stand up for what I believe in.                   |
| † | † | † | † | 2. Feel in control of my life and future.            |
| † | † | † | † | 3. Feel good about myself.                           |
| † | † | † | † | 4. Avoid things that are dangerous or unhealthy.     |
| † | † | † | † | 5. Enjoy reading or being read to.                   |
| † | † | † | † | 6. Build friendships with other people.              |
| † | † | † | † | 7. Care about school.                                |
| † | † | † | † | 8. Do my homework.                                   |
| † | † | † | † | 9. Stay away from tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. |
| † | † | † | † | 10. Enjoy learning.                                  |
| † | † | † | † | 11. Express my feelings in proper ways.              |
| † | † | † | † | 12. Feel good about my future.                       |
| † | † | † | † | 13. Seek advice from my parents.                     |
| † | † | † | † | 14. Deal with frustration in positive ways.          |
| † | † | † | † | 15. Overcome challenges in positive ways.            |
| † | † | † | † | 16. Think it is important to help other people.      |
| † | † | † | † | 17. Feel safe and secure at home.                    |
| † | † | † | † | 18. Plan ahead and make good choices.                |
| † | † | † | † | 19. Resist bad influences.                           |
| † | † | † | † | 20. Resolve conflicts without anyone getting hurt.   |
| † | † | † | † | 21. Feel valued and appreciated by others.           |
| † | † | † | † | 22. Take responsibility for what I do.               |
| † | † | † | † | 23. Tell the truth even when it is not easy.         |
| † | † | † | † | 24. Accept people who are different from me.         |
| † | † | † | † | 25. Feel safe at school.                             |
-

**PLEASE TURN OVER AND COMPLETE THE BACK.**

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Note: The term "Parent(s)" means 1 or more adults who are responsible for raising you.

Not At All  
or  
Rarely

Somewhat  
or  
Sometimes

Very  
or  
Often

Extremely  
or  
Almost Always

**I AM . . .**

- |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| † | † | † | † | 26. Actively engaged in learning new things.                    |
| † | † | † | † | 27. Developing a sense of purpose in my life.                   |
| † | † | † | † | 28. Encouraged to try things that might be good for me.         |
| † | † | † | † | 29. Included in family tasks and decisions.                     |
| † | † | † | † | 30. Helping to make my community a better place.                |
| † | † | † | † | 31. Involved in a religious group or activity.                  |
| † | † | † | † | 32. Developing good health habits.                              |
| † | † | † | † | 33. Encouraged to help others.                                  |
| † | † | † | † | 34. Involved in a sport, club, or other group.                  |
| † | † | † | † | 35. Trying to help solve social problems.                       |
| † | † | † | † | 36. Given useful roles and responsibilities.                    |
| † | † | † | † | 37. Developing respect for other people.                        |
| † | † | † | † | 38. Eager to do well in school and other activities.            |
| † | † | † | † | 39. Sensitive to the needs and feelings of others.              |
| † | † | † | † | 40. Involved in creative things such as music, theater, or art. |
| † | † | † | † | 41. Serving others in my community.                             |
| † | † | † | † | 42. Spending quality time at home with my parent(s).            |

**I HAVE . . .**

- |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| † | † | † | † | 43. Friends who set good examples for me.                   |
| † | † | † | † | 44. A school that gives students clear rules.               |
| † | † | † | † | 45. Adults who are good role models for me.                 |
| † | † | † | † | 46. A safe neighborhood.                                    |
| † | † | † | † | 47. Parent(s) who try to help me succeed.                   |
| † | † | † | † | 48. Good neighbors who care about me.                       |
| † | † | † | † | 49. A school that cares about kids and encourages them.     |
| † | † | † | † | 50. Teachers who urge me to develop and achieve.            |
| † | † | † | † | 51. Support from adults other than my parents.              |
| † | † | † | † | 52. A family that provides me with clear rules.             |
| † | † | † | † | 53. Parent(s) who urge me to do well in school.             |
| † | † | † | † | 54. A family that gives me love and support.                |
| † | † | † | † | 55. Neighbors who help watch out for me.                    |
| † | † | † | † | 56. Parent(s) who are good at talking with me about things. |
| † | † | † | † | 57. A school that enforces rules fairly.                    |
| † | † | † | † | 58. A family that knows where I am and what I am doing.     |

THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS FORM.

## Appendix C: Example of Manual Scoring of an Asset Category

Example of Manually Computing a Scale Score for an Asset Category  
 II. EMPOWERMENT

Question Score	Question Number	Question Summary
3	17.	Safe at home
2	21.	Feels valued
3	25.	Safe at school
2	29.	Family tasks
1	36.	Useful roles
2	46.	Safe neighborhood
<hr/>		
13		RAW SUM
6		# OF COMPLETED ITEMS
2.16		AVERAGE
21.6		x 10
22		SCALE SCORE (Rounded to nearest integer)

(Adapted from Search Institute, 2005, p. 55)

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## Appendix D: Item Mapping onto the Category and Context Scales

## Item Mapping onto the Category and Context Scales DAP

Asset Scale

Items

13. I seek advice from my parents.	Support
47. I have parent(s) who try to help me succeed.	Support
48. I have good neighbors who care about me.	Support
49. I have a school that cares about kids and encourages them.	Support
51. I have support from adults other than my parents.	Support
54. I have a family that gives me love and support.	Support
56. I have parent(s) who are good at talking with me about things.	Support
17. I feel safe and secure at home.	Empowerment
21. I feel valued and appreciated by others.	Empowerment
25. I feel safe at school.	Empowerment
29. I am included in family tasks and decisions.	Empowerment
36. I am given useful roles and responsibilities.	Empowerment
46. I have a safe neighborhood.	Empowerment
43. I have friends who set good examples for me.	Boundaries & Exp.
44. I have a school that gives students clear rules.	Boundaries & Exp.
45. I have adults who are good role models for me.	Boundaries & Exp.
50. I have teachers who urge me to develop and achieve.	Boundaries & Exp.
52. I have a family that provides me with clear rules.	Boundaries & Exp.
53. I have parent(s) who urge me to do well in school.	Boundaries & Exp.
55. I have neighbors who help watch out for me.	Boundaries & Exp.
57. I have a school that enforces rules fairly.	Boundaries & Exp.
58. I have a family that knows where I am and what I am doing.	Boundaries & Exp.
31. I am involved in a religious group or activity.	Const. Use of Time
34. I am involved in a sport, club, or other group.	Const. Use of Time
40. I am involved in creative things such as music, theater, or art.	Const. Use of Time
42. I am spending quality time at home with my parent(s).	Const. Use of Time
5. I enjoy reading or being read to.	Commit. to Learning
7. I care about school.	Commit. to Learning
8. I do my homework.	Commit. to Learning
10. I enjoy learning.	Commit. to Learning
26. I am actively engaged in learning new things.	Commit. to Learning
28. I am encouraged to try things that might be good for me.	Commit. to Learning
38. I am eager to do well in school and other activities.	Commit. to Learning
1. I stand up for what I believe in	Positive Values
9. I stay away from tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.	Positive Values
16. I think it is important to help other people.	Positive Values
22. I take responsibility for what I do.	Positive Values
23. I tell the truth even when it is not easy.	Positive Values
30. I am helping to make my community a better place.	Positive Values
32. I am developing good health habits.	Positive Values
33. I am encouraged to help others.	Positive Values
35. I am trying to help solve social problems.	Positive Values
37. I am developing respect for other people.	Positive Values
41. I am serving others in my community.	Positive Values
4. I avoid things that are dangerous or unhealthy.	Social Competencies
6. I build friendships with other people.	Social Competencies
11. I express my feelings in proper ways.	Social Competencies
18. I plan ahead and make good choices.	Social Competencies
19. I resist bad influences.	Social Competencies
20. I resolve conflicts without anyone getting hurt.	Social Competencies
24. I accept people who are different from me.	Social Competencies
39. I am sensitive to the needs and feelings of others.	Social Competencies
2. I feel in control of my life and future.	Personal Identity
3. I feel good about myself.	Personal Identity
12. I feel good about my future.	Personal Identity
14. I deal with frustration in positive ways.	Personal Identity
15. I overcome challenges in positive ways.	Personal Identity
27. I am developing a sense of purpose in my life.	Personal Identity

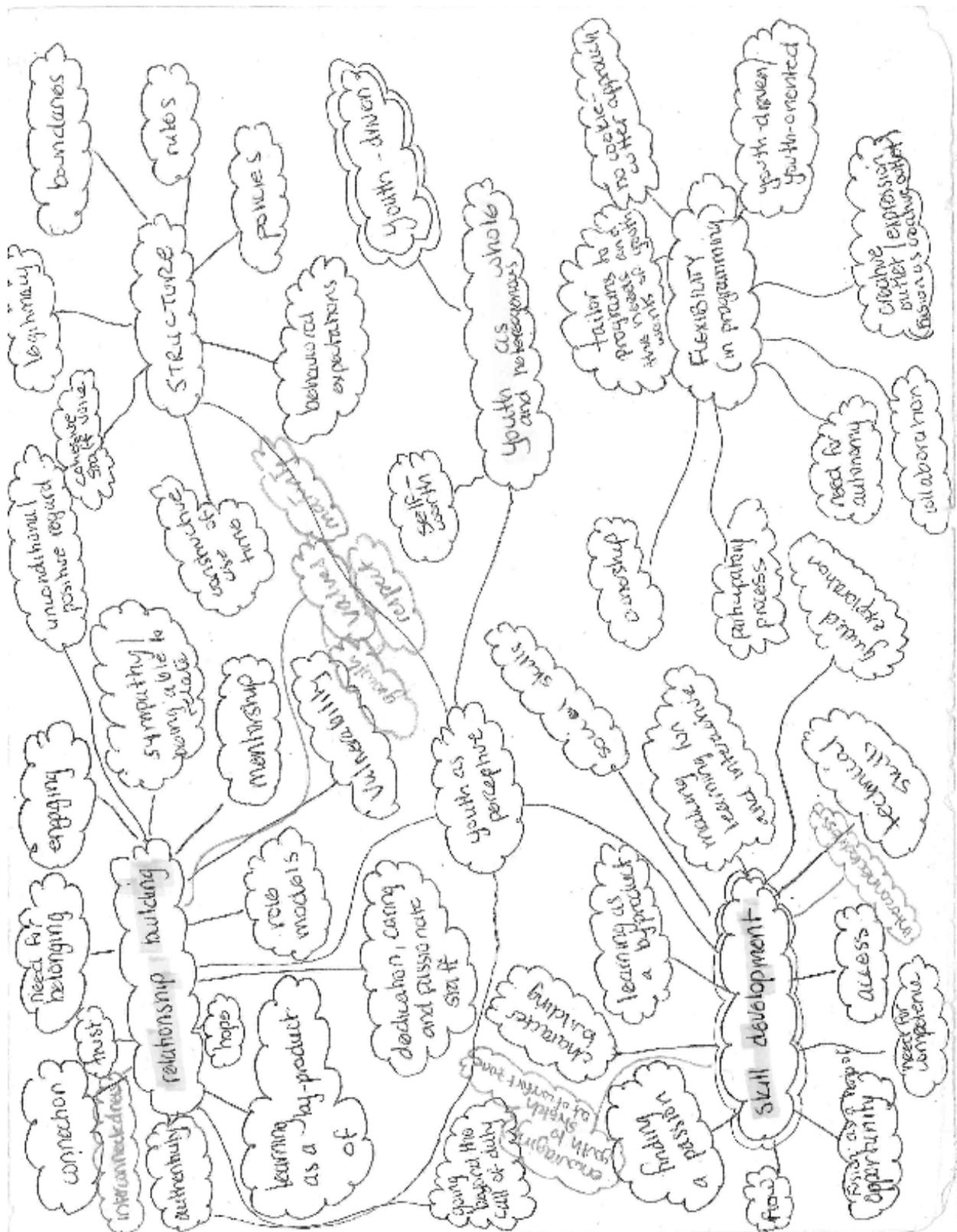
(Adapted from Search Institute, 2005, p. 66)

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## Appendix E: Interview Questions

1. How would you define youth?
2. How, when, and why did you start working with youth?
3. What brought you to Fusion? How long have you been here? What makes you stay?
4. How would you describe the youth that you work with?
5. What elements do you think an afterschool program needs to be successful?
6. What are some of the challenges of working in an afterschool program?
7. Tell me about your program.
8. What do you expect of the youth that participate in your program?
9. What do the participants expect from the program and you?
10. What strategies do you use to implement your program? What is the philosophy behind those strategies?
11. What do you do when a participant doesn't listen or follow instructions?
12. How do you build relationships with the youth participants?
13. What is Fusion's mission and philosophy?
14. How would you describe the culture at Fusion?
15. What are the values Fusion tries to instill in youth? How is this accomplished?
16. What is one thing you love about working at Fusion?
17. What is one thing you want to change in your practice with youth?
18. What are some of the barriers to participation for youth?
19. What role do you think Fusion plays in the lives of youth?

## Appendix F: Mind map



## Appendix G: Poster

# Young and Full of Potential: Cultivating Tomorrow's Leaders through Afterschool Programming

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**Introduction**  
*"It is easier to build strong youth than to repair broken adults."* –Anonymous

Young people, between the ages of 10-20, make up a vital component of society. Yet, the needs of youth are often overlooked within communities. Aside from recreation centres, **youth-specific places and youth-friendly spaces** are few and far between. In an ideal world, rural communities stricken with worries of **youth out-migration** would strive to facilitate the development of youth into **healthy and happy adults** who will want to stay in and give back to their communities. In Ingersoll, Ontario, an innovative afterschool program, the **Fusion Youth and Technology Centre**, has carved out this much needed space for youth. Essentially, Fusion's mission is three-fold: to provide a **safe space** where all youth feel welcome and included; to provide youth with **access to opportunities and role models**; and, to help **youth transition into adulthood**. The goal of this research is to explore how the staff at Fusion contribute to the development of youth in their formative years.

## Context

Ingersoll is a small town in rural Ontario located between Woodstock and London. It has a population of approximately 12 000 people, of which approximately 20 percent are below the age of 14 (Statistics Canada, 2011). In addition to the challenges that come with living in a rural environment, the youth in Ingersoll are **at-risk** or early exposure to addictive substances and premature sexual activity that may lead them down **unintended life paths**.

## Method of Inquiry

Over the course of one month, **19 qualitative interviews** were conducted with staff at Fusion. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and lasted between 25 minutes to one hour.

## Acknowledgements

For their time and support, I thank the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre, Al Lammie, and Near Perfection.



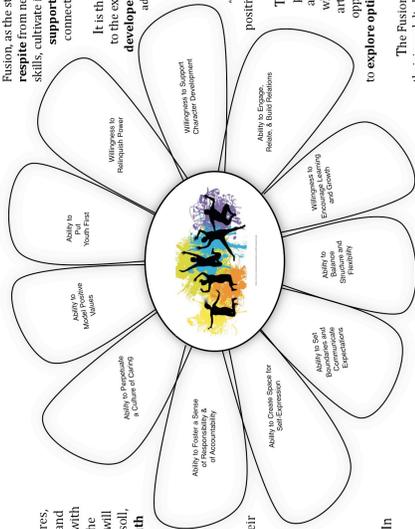
## Preliminary Findings

The Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre creates a **safe space** where youth can come and become who they want to be in their formative years. Fusion, as the staff note, serves many purposes in the lives of youth: it serves as a **respite** from negative forces, as a **hub of creativity** where youth can learn new skills, cultivate interests, develop their character, and, as a **social safety and support network**. The staff emphasize how they know each other and build connections with adult role models.

It is the Fusion staff, rather than the centre itself, that give meaning to the experience for youth. The staff see the youth as **"resources to be developed, not problems to be solved"** (Benson and Lerner, 2003). In addition, the staff recognize the importance of the relationships they build with the youth: "everything else is great but the youth come here for the staff." When the youth feel safe with the staff they become open to trying new things and "stretch beyond who they are at the present moment." Perhaps most importantly, the staff expressed a desire to help the youth "become better people" and to "empower the youth to make positive changes in their own lives and the lives of those around them."

The staff shared stories of youth in whose lives Fusion has played a **pivotal role**. One such youth became a member at Fusion at the age of 12 and **discovered their passion** for broadcasting, which they are following to this day. As one staff member articulated: "Fusion provides youth with opportunities early in life, opportunities that give them a chance to explore options and make **informed decisions** about their future."

The Fusion staff contribute to the development of healthy, happy, and thriving adults because they see the **untapped potential** in youth, they **care** about the youth, and they give credence to the **process** of development. Ultimately, Fusion serves as an **asset building community** for the youth that frequent the facility.



Adapted from: Ingersoll and Morgan (2016)

## Figure 1: An Illustration of the 11 Asset Building Capacities Afterschool Program Staff need to Foster Positive Youth Development.

The 11 Asset Building Capacities identified above are the ABCs of Positive Youth Development. They are: the ability to put youth first; the willingness to relinquish power to and provide decision-making opportunity for youth; the willingness to support character development; the ability to engage, relate, and build warm relationships with youth; the willingness to encourage skill development, learning, and growth; the ability to balance structure and flexibility, legitimacy and creativity; the ability to set boundaries and communicate expectations; the ability to create space for self-expression; the ability to foster a sense of responsibility and of accountability; the ability to perpetuate a culture of caring; and, the ability to model positive values.

**These Asset Building Capacities work in unison to provide youth with the space, tools, and connections needed to "become better people" who can take care of themselves, contribute to their families, and give back to their communities.**

## Implications

The Asset Building Capacities articulated here can help development practitioners, planners, teachers, mentors, educators, researchers, youth enthusiasts, and their likes cultivate the skill set needed to become meaningfully involved in the positive development of tomorrow's leaders.

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 Statistics Canada. (2011). *Population and Housing Statistics*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.

## Appendix H: List of Key Words

<b>Keyword(s)</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Structure	61	Context ranges from “trying to teach youth that structure is okay” to the challenges that structure presents for the staff to the potential for structure to help youth explore their options
Flexibility	13	Context ranges from being more flexible compared to school, flexibility to cater to the youths needs, flexible scheduling for the staff; - flexibility is linked to ownership and empowerment
Ownership	12	Ownership of space, values, programs, learning, growth, property, planning and design; - linked to leadership and participation
Participation/Participate	41	- mostly used around youth; willing participants; barriers to participation; interest + participation; fluctuating numbers of participants - describes characteristics of participants (attentive, interested, regular, enthusiastic)
Empower/Empowerment	13	-about making choices; leadership; positive changes; - linked with being youth-centered - mentioned by three staff
Leadership	12	Used in reference to leadership at Fusion (lacking, good); leadership opportunities for youth; strong leaders as a value; teaching leadership; program leadership; - mentioned by five staff
Decisions	7	Purposeful decision making as staff; decision-making opportunities for youth; linked with ownership, learning, and growth; decisions about behavior (context of holding youth accountable); strong decision-making as a value - mentioned by 4 staff
Character	2	- building the character of youth - developing character of youth

		- mentioned by two staff
Growth	<b>11</b>	- defining youth as a period of growth; Fusion as a place that fosters growth; growing and maturing into adulthood; physical or intellectual growth; growth of staff from mgmt perspective "environment of growth" - mentioned by 5 staff members
Learning	<b>25</b>	- learning something new; learning about themselves; learning style; learning approach; learning the basics; learning environment; learning important things but only realizing their importance in retrospect; learning skills; prime period for learning; learning disabilities or challenges; tricking into learning; eager to learn; hands-on learning; learning about each other, from each other; learning responsibilities; learning as not exciting; learning boundaries; desire to learn - mentioned by nine staff members
Explore/Exploring/Exploration	<b>10</b>	Explore technology; explore themselves; explore options; explore advice; career exploration; -mentioned by six staff
Belonging	<b>6</b>	Space belonging to the youth; ownership as being linked with belonging; youth belonging to the centre; - mentioned by 4 staff
Genuine Expression	<b>7</b>	- youth can express who they are at Fusion through programs or just hanging out - mentioned by 4 staff
Passion	<b>25</b>	Youth discovering passion; passionate staff team; passion of youth; - mentioned by 8 staff
Caring, compassion, empathy	<b>Care: 12 by 9 staff Compassion: 2 by 2 staff</b>	- caring adults; showing that the staff care about the youth; the youth can careless or carefree;

	<b>Empathetic: 1 by 1 staff</b>	staff as caregiver and caretaker - compassionate staff - empathetic as quality of a staff member
Connect/Connection	<b>25 by 15 staff</b>	- variety of staff members with whom youth can connect; connecting youth to services; making connections with youth; connecting with local partners to provide more opportunities to youth; disconnect within the staff team in the past; challenge of connecting with all youth; connecting with youth to encourage learning; connecting with equipment; connecting with other youth; connecting with youth through music; connecting youth to resources or services;
Bond	<b>3 by 3 staff</b>	Bond between staff and youth; bond between youth and youth
Relationships	<b>51 by 19 staff</b>	Relationships between staff and youth; the youth come back for the relationships; encourage youth to grow through relationships; relationships as being built outside of program time; peer-to-peer relationships (challenge and opportunity); approaches to relationship building; building relationships at moments of vulnerability; relationships as attracting and retaining youth participation at Fusion; maintaining relationships a challenge for part-time staff
Options	<b>6 by 5 staff</b>	Showing options; exploring options; empower with options
Opportunities	<b>63 by 14 staff</b>	Expanding opportunities; providing opportunities; lacking opportunities; opportunities for engagement; opportunity for feedback (both youth and staff); opportunities to explore; opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have; opportunities for youth through community connections; opportunity to

		practice; helping them transition into adulthood through opportunities; opportunity to express themselves; opportunity to learn and develop; opportunity early in life; opportunity that other communities don't have; opportunity to lead; opportunity to grow (staff)
Choices	<b>7 by 5 staff</b>	Choices within and outside of Fusion (positive choices, responsible choices)
Transition	<b>24 by 9 staff</b>	Youth as transition period; helping youth transition; easing transition to adulthood; transition from drop-in centre to structured programming as a challenge
Support	<b>36 by 9 staff</b>	Youth seeking support; staff giving support; supporting youth socially; community support; network of support; supportive culture; make sure youth feel supported;
Safe space	<b>8 by five staff</b>	Fusion as a safe space for youth
Encourage	<b>26 by 9 staff</b>	Encourage youth to extend beyond who they are; encourage exploration; encourage parents; encourage them to be accepting of each other; encourage teamwork; staff are encouraged to engage youth
Respect	<b>70 times by 19 staff</b>	Varying contexts

## Appendix I: Findings Handout

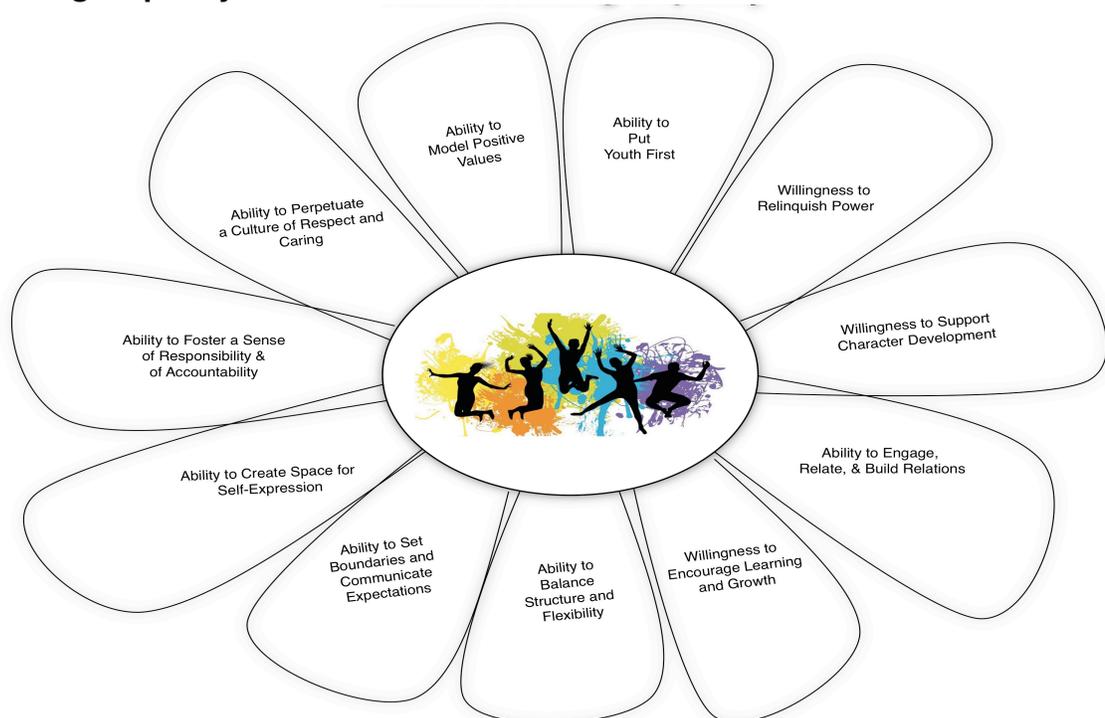
## Facilitating Youth Development: Examining How Organizations and Practitioners can Nurture Growth

Youth (12-18 years) is a turbulent time because of the physical, social, psychological, and emotional changes young people undergo. Youth need support to be able to navigate the adolescent years and grow into successful adults. Yet, the changes in family structures and in society at large are rendering the period known as youth more difficult. Instead of nurturing their minds, bodies, and hearts, the majority of North American youth are spending a considerable amount of their time unsupervised and engaged in discretionary, often harmful, activities. While the education system attempts to prepare youth for their economic role in society, afterschool programs have been lauded for their contribution to the social, personal, political, and professional development of youth.

Over 30 years of research focusing on afterschool programs has revealed the ingredients that make afterschool programs successful (See Wong, 2014 and Durlak et al., 2009) and the benefits of participation in afterschool programming for youth (see Shernoff, 2010). However, the role that afterschool program staff play as facilitators of youth development is overlooked. In other words, the questions “what” makes afterschool programs successful and “why” they are important for the development of youth have both been studied extensively but there is a gap in the literature with regards to “how” youth development is practiced in the context of afterschool programs. Research with the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre (Fusion) sheds light on how youth development is facilitated.

Fusion as a collective and staff as individuals have 11 willingness and abilities that allow them to serve as facilitators of youth development. The illustration below captures the key elements of their practice and presents it as a framework:

### Asset Building Capacity



Source of Youth Image: <https://www.eric.edu/educationalstudies/youthDevelopment.php>  
Figure Inspired by: Baser and Morgan (2008)

**Ability to Put Youth First**

Fusion is youth-focused, youth-directed, and youth-oriented. Everything that Fusion does goes through a youth-lens: from planning of programs to implementation of activities, everything is designed by the youth, with the youth, for the youth so that no one “falls through the cracks”. Putting youth first allows Fusion to cater to the needs of its youth members.

**Willingness to Relinquish Power**

Fusion’s participatory culture helps staff relinquish their power to the youth and provides youth with opportunities to make decisions. In practice, sharing power with youth and other staff often means relegating to the background and gently pushing the youth into the foreground of any decision-making process.

**Willingness to Support Character Development**

Character development is facilitated through formal and informal interactions at Fusion. The staff members try to plant the seeds of respect, camaraderie, compassion, and leadership in the youth members.

**Ability to Engage, Relate, and Build Relationships**

Fusion, as an organization, prioritizes youth engagement. As such, staff members are encouraged to interact with the youth, find ways to relate with them, and to build relationships with youth. Staff members cultivate relationships by showing the youth that they care about them, showing interest in the youth, listening to the youth, remembering what they have shared, and by being there for the youth.

**Willingness to Encourage Learning and Growth**

Fusion’s staff team encourages learning and growth by first developing relationships with youth. Through these relationships, the staff members get to know the interests of youth. Then, the staff members gently nudge the youth in the direction of their interests and encourage them to “expand beyond who they are at that moment.”

**Ability to Balance Structure and Flexibility**

Both structure and flexibility are provided for youth at Fusion in their interactions with staff, their engagement with Fusion’s space, and their participation in programs. The balance between structure and flexibility isn’t always easy to strike for the staff. Yet, staff members recognize the

importance of both as they facilitate youth development at Fusion.

**Ability to Set Boundaries and Communicate Expectations**

Fusion as an organization has set boundaries for youth and has communicated behavioral expectations in the contract that youth have to sign when they become members. In addition, the staff members ensure that the youth members respect the boundaries that are in place and create open channels of communication between themselves and the youth so that the expectations of both parties are clear.

**Ability to Create Space for Self-Expression**

The staff members take pride in giving the youth the space they need to be who they want to be – outside of the critical gaze of adults and without fearing the judgment of their peers. They encourage the youth to find mediums of self-expression that suit them. If one program or medium of expression doesn’t work for youth, the staff members encourage the youth to try other options.

**Ability to Foster a Sense of Responsibility & Accountability**

The staff members treat the youth like adults in their programs so that they can learn to be mature, responsible, and accountable for their actions. By involving youth in the process of their development, the staff members are able to foster a sense of accountability and responsibility in youth.

**Ability to Perpetuate a Culture of Respect & Caring**

The wholehearted devotion of Fusion staff to the youth helps perpetuate a culture of respect and caring at Fusion. Respect and caring are contagious so the youth learn to stand up for themselves and become “ambassadors” for each other through their observation of the staff.

**Ability to Model Positive Values**

The staff embody the positive values that they try to instill in the youth. Every single staff member interviewed understood their place as roles models and mentors in the lives of Fusion youth. The staff try to model respect, caring, enthusiasm, passion, and love for learning for the youth members.

## Questions and Answers on the Asset Building Capacity Framework

### What is asset-building capacity and why does it matter?

The term Asset Building Capacity refers to the ability of an individual, organization, sector, or environment to facilitate the development of attitudes, skills, traits, and values in youth that help them develop into caring and contributing adults. Asset building capacity matters because the 11 willingnesses and abilities identified in this framework do not exist in a vacuum; individuals, organizations, networks, and environments need to come together to help youth develop.

### Where does this framework come from?

This framework is the outcome of research conducted with the Fusion Youth Activity and Technology. In particular, this framework captures the qualities, strategies, and voices of the 19 staff members who were interviewed.

The framework brings together the Developmental Assets Framework (Search Institute, 1990) and the Developmental Relationships Framework (Search Institute, 2014). It was influenced by the researcher's graduate level training in Capacity Development and Extension. The illustration was inspired by Baser and Morgan (2000)'s capacity flower. It is a work in progress and seeks to bring attention to the interaction and intersection of organizational and individual capacity in fostering youth development.

### What can other afterschool programs learn from this research?

This framework offers five lessons to afterschool programs:

6. **Be rooted in principles of PYD.** The environment and culture that Fusion is able to create as an afterschool program is rooted in having positive perceptions of youth.
7. **Cater to the needs of youth and be tailored to specific contexts.** Fusion was developed in consultation with the youth and eight years after its opening, it continues to be youth-oriented, youth-centered, youth-directed, and youth-friendly.
8. **Create a culture that is dynamic, empowering, caring, and respectful.**
9. **Prioritize youth engagement.** Fusion's staff team is mandated to engage with the youth as their priority. Even though pressure from funders is mounting, Fusion maintains youth as a priority and does not allow staff to get blindsided by paperwork.
10. **Invest in organizational learning.** Fusion has invested in partnering with the University of Guelph to learn about the impact of their work.

### What can other youth development practitioners learn from this research?

This framework offers three lessons to youth development practitioners:

4. **Engage in work as 'deliberate practice'.** The staff members at Fusion are aware of their role in the lives of youth and take their roles as "role model", "mentor", or even "surrogate parent" seriously.
5. **Focus on process.** Know that change cannot be engineered and accept youth for who they are right now.
6. **Cultivate genuine, sincere relationships with youth.** Staff members at Fusion are authentic, genuinely interested in the youth, caring, and compassionate. These qualities help them build relationships with youth.

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