

What Makes For A Successful Youth Centre?



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WHAT MAKES FOR A SUCCESSFUL YOUTH CENTRE?

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It is Friday night and teens are gathering for a party, not at someone's house or in a backfield, but at the town's youth centre. A local band is playing for the all-ages dance that draws a good crowd, with profits going to a local charity. In another community, groups of young people are hanging out on street corners until they are chased away by local police. Ask teens why they are there, and their reply is that 'there's nothing to do'. In a third community there is a run-down building that has been designated as a youth centre, but it has sporadic hours and few young people or adults are involved.

A recent research survey of 2000 young people and 70 community representatives involved with youth issues across Canada (Malatest & Associates, 2002) found that "nothing to do" was the foremost concern among rural youth and the second most prominent concern among urban youth. Another major youth concern was "respect/being heard." Unfortunately, some communities deal with these issues through enforcement of anti-loitering laws and the harassment of young people. Youth are viewed as problems. Other communities have established youth drop-in centres or teen clubs that provide a place to go on evenings and weekends. Some of these centres have been very successful over a long period of time, others last but a couple of years while others never become a meaningful youth gathering place.

Youth and communities need safe and successful places for youth to gather and be themselves. Why is it that some centres are able to operate consistently for a decade while others sputter and fail within a couple of years? Centres frequently lack funds and resources, but how and why do some overcome these obstacles and survive? This article, based on interview research conducted by the HeartWood Institute with twenty youth centres across Nova Scotia, identifies the key characteristics for creating and sustaining a successful youth centre over time so as to improve community life for young and old.

THE RESEARCH APPROACH

This study utilized a participatory action research (PAR) approach in which the people and organizations being "researched" participate actively in defining the research problems, collecting and analyzing data, and in writing up the results and generating conclusions. In addition, there is an emphasis on "action" such that the results are turned into practical steps to improve programs and organizations (Penuel & Freeman, 1997).

A team of three young people, supported by HeartWood staff, were the lead researchers and brought a youth perspective to all elements of this project. They conducted an initial set of interview/discussions using an appreciative inquiry approach

(Elliot, 1999) with youth centre staff and young people from seventeen centres across all regions of Nova Scotia. This information was then compiled and analysed with the assistance of a focus group of HeartWood youth staff, adult staff and volunteers. The results were then brought back to fifteen youth centres through a second round of interviews and discussions. This allowed the researchers to confirm and revise the interpretations and conclusions based on youth centre feedback. Finally, the researchers again consulted the focus group in defining the final framework presented below. See the appendix for detailed information on the research methodology.

FINDINGS: WHAT MAKES FOR A SUCCESSFUL YOUTH CENTRE?

The research identified five key ingredients for a sustainable youth centre: youth ownership, mentorship, community connectedness effective coordination, and a sustainable energy source. These concepts shift the focus away from the often all-consuming stresses of money and facilities to critical factors such as community support, people resources, and youth-adults relationships. The research indicates that success in these five areas makes it much more likely that a centre will find ways to meet its financial and facility needs. These ingredients are interconnected and serve to build upon each other to produce a successful centre.



Youth Ownership

Youth ownership involves the young people having a sense of responsibility for the centre and a sense that they have input into what happens there. A brightly coloured and hand painted sign in one club says it all – “Respect”. This is a great example of how youth can express themselves and convey the message that they govern their space. Self-policing amongst the users is another good indication of youth ownership. Although in many cases, adults play important roles in establishing rules and regulations for a centre, when youth ownership is present, the young people have input and have agreed

to and adopted them as part of their cultural norms. Honest open communication and respect between adults and youth is crucial to establishing youth ownership.

Youth ownership was evident in the physical appearance of several youth centres – they painted and decorated the walls! One centre sells space on the wall for people to decorate as they see fit, another has a portion of wall space set aside specifically for handprints and names of the youth users.

Youth ownership is not simply about painting walls. Youth need power and control in decision-making to have a sense of ownership and responsibility. They may be involved in formal roles as board members or they may make or influence decisions through an informal meeting process with coordinators or community representatives.

Once decisions are made, it is essential to have a formal or informal process through which they are responsible for implementing and acting on the decisions. Creating a sense of ownership among young people is an ongoing process that strengthens the centre.

Key Questions for Youth Ownership

Ask the youth users of a centre the following questions as a means to assess youth ownership. Use the resulting discussion to let the youth give their opinions and feedback on the operation of the centre.

- Who is responsible for this place?
- Who decides what things happen here?
- What kinds of decisions can you make?
- How much input do you have to what happens around here?
- What are the implications of these decisions?
- How important is this place to you? Why?
- Can you be yourself in this space?

Mentorship

Mentors are individuals who provide inspiration and support to others. The co-ordinator of one community teen centre has built a strong relationship with the youth over two years. Some of the girls say that they think of her as their mom. She is someone that helps them smile when they're down, but she also 'hangs out' and play sports with everyone. Young people from successful centres describe the staff as "approachable and easy to talk to," and "as one of them".

Mentorship can offer young people support, role models to emulate, inspiration for their passions or encouragement to define and seek their life goals. Everyone has mentors in their lives and in turn can be inspirational role models for others. A mentoring

relationship is typically thought of as one in which an adult acts as a role model for a youth. Yet many of the co-ordinators expressed how much they have learned from the youth, whether it is the latest sayings and fashion trends or how to operate a computer and surf the net. In addition, there are innumerable ways that youth can mentor youth. Mentorship allows each person the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others. It builds relationships between youth and adults and between youth that are essential to creating a strong youth centre.

Key Questions for Mentorship

- Do you have any special relationships with someone who gives you support or inspiration or some guidance?
- Who are they? Tell me about the relationship and what makes it special?
- What are you giving and what are you receiving in this relationship?
- What qualities enable this relationship to grow?
- How frequently do these relationships occur through the centre? For you? For others?

Community Connectedness

Successful youth centres depend on support from community members to operate, both in terms of resources and volunteers. In turn the young people frequently give back to these communities to create a two-way connectedness. For example, in one town a dedicated group of teenagers shovels the steps of the local war memorial after each snowstorm. There is lots of laughter and the odd snowball fight as the youth contribute their time and receive recognition for it. Involving youth in direct service to the community has proven to be a highly effective means of empowerment and a means to spark broader citizen involvement important in community renewal (Warner and Langlois, 2002).

Breaking down the barrier between adults and youth takes a commitment from both populations to provide opportunities, services and resources for each other. Open, respectful communication channels must be established. Youth Centres have succeeded at this through:

- holding community meetings
- developing youth-adult partnerships on their governing boards
- allowing members of the public to view the youth centre in operation
- renting facilities for day care, community meetings, special events, etc.
- youth providing community service
- using the networks of adult coordinators or volunteers

At the root of community connectedness is the idea that individuals, businesses and organizations must care and take ownership for their youth and their concerns. Whether

this occurs in a proactive manner or as a reaction to community events and problems, an effective youth-community partnership is vital to the well being of all, particularly the youth centre.

Key Questions for Community Connectedness

- Do young people and the youth centre feel a part of the broader community? How?
- What steps has the community taken to become involved with the youth centre?
- Are there means to ensure communication and conflict resolution between the community as a whole and the youth centre?
- How have the youth centre and its users made an effort to provide services and resources to the community?

Effective Coordination

Effective coordination and the ability to mobilize resources is the key to success rather than the level of resources. The centres in this study varied greatly in terms of the level of resources they utilized and the means through which they obtained these resources. In one county, four centres pool their resources to attract funding and sponsors, allowing them a dedicated staff member for marketing, proposal writing and administrative support functions. This allows the individual co-ordinators to focus on activities and the well being of the youth. On the other end of the spectrum, another successful youth centre had free access to a space in a church hall and dedicated volunteers, but no paid staff or significant funding.

The coordination of a youth centre may fall to the Board of Directors, a youth advisory committee, several interconnected committees or an individual coordinator. Individual coordinators are most frequent in Nova Scotia, but in successful centres, the coordinator does not make all of the decisions or rules. Effective coordinator(s) recognize and utilize the strengths and talents of those around them, particularly the youth users. In turn, they recognize their own limitations. The coordinator(s) identify a pool of interpersonal and technical skills in those connected to the centre, ensuring that the appropriate people are involved on appropriate issues. They provide opportunities for individuals to become involved in issues that are of interest to them. The opportunity for involvement is just as important as the involvement itself, as it creates a sense of connectedness and ownership.

Although many youth centres see a stable and ample level of funding as the key to their success if they are struggling, the research indicated that centres were successful when they had the five key ingredients in place. These ingredients enables a centre to find the resources it needs. Stable, secure funding does not ensure that young people will use or feel connected to the centre.

Key Questions for Effective Coordination

- Has there been an allocation of tasks based on individual strengths and interests?
- How has the issue of youth involvement been addressed?
- Who sets the agenda for getting tasks done and getting the resources to operate?
- Who does the practical work to make the centre operate?

Sustainable Energy Source

The sustainable energy source was most often a person driving the project, motivating and drawing in others to help. Learning to build off of this energy and dedication without draining it, is a key to successful centres that maintain themselves over years. A former steelworker turned youth worker, is an exceptional example of the dedication and passion of many people associated with youth centres. His endless energy is undoubtedly one of the main reasons the youth club continues to survive in an otherwise struggling community. The club provides young people with a safe space to be themselves, and a dedicated individual to support them in their endeavours.

Much like fuel for heating or transportation, to be sustainable, a youth centre's energy source must be discovered, tapped, monitored and eventually transferred to a new source. The energy source must be constantly monitored to ensure that it does not burn out prematurely. Each person has unique ways of coping with stress and large workloads, which both the person and those around them must recognize and support. It is also important to avoid exclusively depending on one individual, both to prevent burnout and provide opportunities for others to grow and learn as they take on challenging responsibilities.

What happens if the person providing the core energy departs? This does not have to be a disaster, and can be a great way to strengthen others' connections to the project. Several centres in Nova Scotia have gone through a number of successful transitions of their primary coordinators. A key is having the other key ingredients in place, including a governing committee or Board of Directors, youth ownership and community connectedness.

We also witnessed in our research energy sources that are alluring but not sustainable. These are most often grant money or the offer of a facility. Building a centre on grant money or the promise of a facility alone, without sufficient attention to the other four factors is a weak foundation from which to build. The other four components play a crucial role in leveraging the source of energy. The fuel will run out if they are not in place.

Key Questions for Sustainable Energy Source

- Who (individual or group of people) or what is the energy source here? When push comes to shove, who or what makes this place tick?
- Is there a person behind the centre who you find motivating or inspirational?
- How has the energy source changed?
- As an energy source, how do you ensure that you do not burn out?
- As an organizations how do you ensure this?
- If the source of energy (a person or other) were to leave or cease to exist, what would be the result?

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

From the start, this research aimed to assist in the development and growth of youth centre programs and organisations. The question of “what do you need” was posed in all of the interviews. Frequently the response was money and resources. Another key priority was the opportunity to network and learn from others. This became the focus for action based on the research.

An interesting networking role developed for the research team during their travels, as they were able to provide up to date information to each centre regarding the events and status of other centres across the province. Centres were eager to learn of other organisations in their area or of those experiencing similar difficulties. It was reassuring for them to hear that they were not alone. Although no formal network exists for youth centres in Nova Scotia, the research team was able to distribute a current list to all participating centres to facilitate connections.

A second step has been to produce a video for those interested in setting up a centre, or for staff, youth or volunteers involved in a centre. It describes the five key ingredients for a successful youth centre based on the results of the research and the video footage collected through the research process.

The third step has involved the development of a series of workshops on each of the minimum specifications by the HeartWood Institute that are being offered to youth centres across Nova Scotia. Utilizing an experiential learning process, youth facilitators, with support from HeartWood staff, guide the participants through a series of self-discovery tasks that communicate the key elements, and allow them to assess their organisation or initiative and take steps to strengthen it.

CONCLUSION

This research has identified the key ingredients that make youth centres successful through youth researchers spending time in a wide range of youth centres across the province and through interviewing those with the greatest investment in them. Although each ingredient is described sequentially, the success comes in the interconnections between them. If funding is cut, it is youth ownership, community connectedness and effective coordination that are the keys to survival. Youth develop ownership if the coordination process gives them opportunities to grow and learn, and if they find meaningful opportunities to mentor or be mentored through special relationships developed at the centre. Community connectedness grows and volunteers get involved when adults see that youth care about the centre. If energy is focused on all five interconnected concepts, a special youth gathering place can result. HeartWood hopes to facilitate this process through the distribution of the videotape on success factors and the facilitation of training workshops on the key ingredients to strengthen youth centres.

NOTES

¹ Sandra Luken was one member of the youth research team who conducted this research along with John Atherton and Chris Smith. Alan Warner is the Research Director of HeartWood. Thanks to Marc Langlois as well as other staff members of the HeartWood Institute for their feedback and suggestions for revision.

² HeartWood's mission is to link youth leadership and community development in preparing young people for healthy futures. HeartWood creates learning experiences that develop personal leadership qualities through adventure, teamwork, environmental appreciation and service to others. The priority focus is to work with other youth serving organizations to support youth initiatives and leadership in local communities.

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APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHOD

Participatory Action Research

This study utilized a participatory action research (PAR) approach in which the people and organizations being “researched” participate actively in defining the research problems, collecting and analyzing data, and in writing up the results and generating conclusions. In addition, there is an emphasis on “action” such that the results are turned into practical steps to improve programs and organizations (Penuel & Freeman, 1997). A team of three young people, supported by HeartWood staff, were the lead researchers and brought a youth perspective to all elements of this project. They conducted two sets of interview/discussions with youth centre staff and young people using the centres.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organisational development methodology to collect information through storytelling that guided the process of the research interviews (Elliot, 1999). Participants are asked to describe an event or situation that exemplifies a particularly successful time for the relevant young people or organization. The stories are then used to reflect on the key factors that enabled the events to occur and on how to encourage more successes in the future. Appreciative Inquiry can be broken down into four stages: appreciating – what happened, envisioning – what might be, dialoguing – what should be, and innovating – what will be. All highlights and illuminates the positive, life-giving forces of the organisation so as to strengthen them for the benefit of those involved or interested in similar initiatives. It strives to find what is working, learn from it, and implement what needs to be done to re-create and expand within the organisation.

Interviews, Centre Visits and Focus Groups

The youth researchers began the research process by generating a set of appreciative inquiry style questions, in consultation with HeartWood staff, to be used in interviews with youth centre coordinators during visits to centres across Nova Scotia. They identified seventeen such centres, including every region of the province, with the assistance of a range of youth professionals and organizations. They then visited all of them and completed an initial round of informal interviews with the co-ordinators as well as interacting with the young people when they were present.

The interviews were open-ended such that the researchers generated additional questions based on their expertise and the flow of the interviews. Many of the questions centred on the operations and activities of each centre. These interviews provided the research team with a good introduction and overview of the nature and purpose of each centre in their community. Detailed field notes were kept on each interview and visit, and some of the interviews were videotaped.

A summary list of the common themes and key topics was then compiled by the researchers from the notes and video footage, including answers to questions such as 'what makes your centre special/unique?' 'why do youth come here?' or 'what is it that keeps this centre operational?'

Two focus group discussions were then held including the youth research team (3), adult staff (5), and youth staff (3) associated with HeartWood. This group discussed and analysed the information, assisting the research team in organizing the data into major categories that seemed crucial to the success of these youth centres. For each category, the group then asked, 'If this aspect was not present at the youth centre, would the centre still be successful?' This process identified a list of key ingredients that became a working draft of the minimum specifications for a successful and sustainable youth centre.

The research team then re-organized the interview data into a chart that described the status of each centre with respect to the five categories. With chart in hand, the research team re-visited twelve centres, as well as an additional three centres that had been identified since the first set of interviews, for a more in-depth conversation with youth users, co-ordinators, volunteers and community members. The researchers, where possible, spoke with both the coordinator and several youth members at each location. Several times it was also possible to speak with community members and/or volunteers of the centre. Information gaps in the chart were one focus of the conversation, and in others it was a chance to explore the operation of the centre in further depth in relation to the minimum specifications. The chart proved to be an excellent means to record and verify data during the interviews. In total, the minimum specifications were applied to twenty youth centres.

After supplementing the chart with the new information based on notes gathered from the second round of visits, the focus group re-assembled to discuss the new data and refine the minimum specifications. The youth research team then drafted a one page summary for each minimum specification that described the basic concept, several specific examples encountered during the visits and a list of thought-provoking questions that could be used as the basis for developing educational workshops, brochures or discussion sessions with youth centres.

Youth Video Development

To strengthen the voices and role of youth using the centres in the research, and to give the research team an opportunity to become more familiar with the youth perspectives, the research team approached two centres with the opportunity for their youth to make their own video about their centre. Both youth centres readily agreed. The research team provided the technical expertise and equipment; the youth provided the ideas, script and direction. The time spent with the youth, adults and community members associated with these centres gave the research team a unique insight into their culture while producing useful videos for the respective centres.

This approach also gave the researchers a chance to test the minimum specifications through an alternative process. By giving creative control of the content of the video to the young people, their priorities became readily apparent.

The primary means for assessing a qualitative research process such as this one is the standard of trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (p.290). First, the lead researchers in this project brought a youth perspective to the work including one who had been connected to a youth centre, In addition, the team benefited from the support of experienced HeartWood youth and adult staff, including adult staff with a research background. Second, the researchers kept detailed field notes and were able to review some interviews on videotape. Third, this methodology provided for initial results and interpretations to be checked with the interviewees. Fourth, the approach utilized a focus group of youth and adult staff to assist in the analysis of the data across multiple sessions. Finally, the work with youth on the development of their own videotapes provided an alternative process through which to glean insights from the young people using centres.