

**LINKS CULTURAL EXCHANGE PROGRAM
OUTCOME EVALUATION**

Prepared for the Native Counselling Services of Alberta

by

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INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the impact of a community-based program for university students and homeless youth in Edmonton, Alberta. The Links project began in 2005 as a three-year program to address the support and attachment needs of the growing youth homeless population in Edmonton. This paper describes the Links Program and the objectives, design and findings of the outcome evaluation.

Homelessness is on the rise in Edmonton. As the province continues to ride an oil boom, the rising cost of housing in its capital city appears to be putting more people on the street. In 2006, 3.6% of Edmonton's total population, or 2,618 persons were homeless, representing an increase of 20% from the previous year (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee, 2006). Youth, aged 17-30, make up more than a quarter of this homeless population. Among homeless youth, almost 75% are absolutely homeless, a percentage higher than any other age category. The remaining 25% live in emergency accommodation. Research suggests one of the main reasons youth turn to the streets are family problems including abuse, abandonment and substance abuse (Gratrix & LaBoucane-Benson, 2005; Munroe, LaBoucane-Benson & Benson, 2003). When youth leave home at ages considered early by societal standards individual-level functioning is decreased and outcomes are often poor (Harkins, 1978). Research in Edmonton suggests homeless youth often feel down, depressed or hopeless and one third have attempted suicide (Gratrix & LaBoucane-Benson, 2005). When 106 Youth Participants in Edmonton were asked how they coped through an average day, 19% cited alcohol abuse and 41% cited drug abuse. Thus, substance abuse and the resulting barriers to services it can cause are outstanding health concerns for this population (Crerar, 2006).

Yet, homeless youth also reported an awareness of adaptive coping methods such as turning to friends and faith, school, work, exercise or reading (Crerar, 2006). A cited obstacle in turning to more adaptive methods of coping was the absence of healthy role models that youth could relate to. As a key tenet of social learning theory, the modeling of adaptive behaviours by relevant and credible others is a powerful source of information (Bandura, 1977). Research suggests homeless youth in Edmonton relate most strongly to same-age peers (Munroe, LaBoucane-Benson & Benson, 2003). Thus, based on the tenets of social learning theory, a program in Edmonton that models adaptive coping and healthy lifestyle choices to homeless youth by same-age peers may promote these behaviours over more destructive alternatives like substance abuse.

THE LINKS PROGRAM

Background

The Links program is a community-based initiative that brought university students and homeless youth together over a twelve week period to exchange information as two distinct cultural groups. Culture was defined as "a distinct pattern of life and the ways in which social groups give expression to their social and material life experiences" (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 72). In a 2003 survey, street youth reported that many homeless services in Edmonton treated clients with a lack of respect (Munroe, LaBoucane-Benson & Benson, 2003). In the Links program,

concentrated efforts were made to ensure both students and youth were respected as credible and relevant participants. The rationale for a *youth-centered* program was that homeless persons aged 18-30 were: (1) at special risk for gang recruitment and prostitution, (2) were more likely to face absolute homelessness than other age groups, and (3) could be age-matched with university students who represented an accessible group eager to learn from others and share information. University students also represent individuals who may become decision makers and community service workers in the future. Thus, raising awareness about issues facing homeless youth and breaking down stereotypes among university students would also allow for the dissemination of ideas to community members who may become instrumental in the future elimination of the problem. For students in Links, it was envisioned the program would provide opportunities to gain a better understanding of the realities of homelessness from same age-peers and challenge personal stereotypes through constructive interaction. For the street/homeless/transitioning youth (who will be called 'Youth Participants' throughout this discussion), it was envisioned the program would provide opportunities to interact with same-age peers who would provide healthy role modeling and inspiration in their lives.

The program was developed on the tenet that the sharing of information and life experiences between students and youth in a safe, fun and encouraging environment would foster supportive, empathic connections between these two groups. Previous research has documented that University Students and low-income/homeless youth can effectively share knowledge and build empathic connections through programs that promote interaction and writing exercises (Chandler, 2002; Salzman, 2000). Peer support programs were also found to enhance a sense of empowerment among disenfranchised youth and improve their ability to cope with challenges (Hibbard et al., 2002).

The Program

Six separate groups of University Students and Youth Participants completed the Links program between 2005 and 2007. Student recruitment was done through mass emails, posters and presentations at the University of Alberta. To take part in the program, students had to be 18-30 years of age and enroll in an independent study course created for Links. Youth Participants were recruited through posters at Cunningham Place, a homeless shelter for youth in Edmonton, and word of mouth by staff at the centre. To take part, homeless youth had to be 18-30 years of age, receiving services, and undergoing an assessment with the project manager or another service provider. These steps were taken to increase commitment to the program and the safety of all participants.

Group size was limited to 10 participants (5 students, 5 youth) to allow for optimal levels of group discussion and bonding. Each group completed twelve sessions of 90-120 minutes over a four month period. The first four sessions were dedicated to orientation, during which group facilitators worked with participants to overcome anticipated barriers including a lack of understanding and rapport, a lack of commitment, logistical barriers and problems such as addictions, learning disabilities and mental illness. Once orientation was complete, group sessions began with an opening circle, followed by an activity and a closing circle. Participants were grouped into smaller units (i.e., groups of 2 to 4) to plan and facilitate group activities. Activities were selected by participants on the basis that they provided an opportunity to learn

about one another's culture in ways that were meaningful for participants. For example, a walkabout on the streets of Edmonton, volunteering in a soup kitchen and attendance at a crystal meth anonymous meeting took place to educate University Students about the realities of street life; while a tour of the university, a yoga class and a pottery class were organized to educate homeless youth about the educational choices available to them and healthy ways to handle stress and have fun.

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

Background

Principals of action research were particularly relevant to this evaluation. An important consideration was the inclusion of all key stakeholders in the development of the evaluation framework, including those typically alienated from the process. Perspectives about what information should be collected and what methods should be used were solicited from service providers, staff from local funding agencies, University Students and homeless youth themselves. Three specific evaluative guidelines emerged from this consultation process: *First*, stakeholders asked that the evaluative framework encompass the entire breadth of the program. Thus, pretest information was collected from all groups before they began the program, at regular intervals throughout the program, and after they completed the program. *Second*, a mixed method data collection strategy was suggested as a way to triangulate information and overcome the bias present in different types of collected data. The use of several data collection strategies was also promoted as a means to ensure all participants had the opportunity to provide feedback regardless of literacy skills, confidence speaking in groups and comfort sharing personal information in groups. *Last*, stakeholders argued that the most accurate information about program outcomes would be collected from the novel, first-hand experiences of participants themselves.

Evaluation Goals

In the spirit of action research, developers of the Links program, University Students and homeless youth all informed the goals that framed this evaluation. *Program developers* worked with the evaluator to identify questions to guide the analysis. These included: (1) Did each group demonstrate an increased understanding, acceptance, and advocacy for the other, (2) were supportive relationship formed between University Students and Youth Participants, and (3) did each group enhance or develop knowledge and skills.

Once this process was complete, pretest measures were reviewed to determine what participants hoped to achieve in the program. Generally, these goals focused on knowledge and skills development. *Youth Participants* expressed interest in: a) learning about university from trustworthy same-age peers, b) improving interpersonal and communication skills with an emphasis on getting over fears of rejection and becoming more open and outgoing, and c) improving personal skills with an emphasis on learning healthier ways to live, deal with stress, and have fun. *University students* expressed interest in: a) learning about homelessness from same-age peers who had experienced it, and b) improving their interpersonal skills.

Data Analysis

Identified evaluation goals are typically used in an evaluation to conduct deductive analyses and produce findings in specific, prearranged topic areas. In the present analyses, the evaluator used stakeholder goals as a focus for a deeper inductive exploration of the data, which produced new insights and ways of looking at program outcomes that would not have otherwise been exposed. Rather than quantify elements of Links, qualitative analyses were used to discover and explicate the qualities of the program in light of these stated goals, based on a belief that detailed descriptions of the program's qualities would provide a basis for making informed decisions about its worth and foster dialogue about what it is and what it could be (Rossman & Rallis, 2000).

Thus, rather than using more common problem-based approaches that focus on program goals, and weaknesses in meeting those goals, the present *learning-based approach* examined program strengths and ways to nurture those strengths with an overall purpose of improving the programs' social value. This approach, first outlined by Rossman and Rallis (2000), involved repeated cycles of data immersion, reflection, pattern forming and writing by the evaluator, who was external to the development of the program, its execution, and the collection of evaluation data. Yet, rather than marginalize the evaluation from its creators, program developers partnered in the evaluation process, acting as sound boards and providing the evaluator enhanced opportunities for reflection and deeper questioning as the evaluation unfolded. Together, the evaluator and program developers moved from what Rossman and Rallis term false stability (understanding), through disequilibrium, to a final more grounded state (knowledge) about the program's impacts.

DATA COLLECTION

Study Participants

In total, 28 University Students and 27 Youth Participants participated in the program across six separate groups. The average age of University Students was 23 years (*Range* = 19-29 years, *SD* = 2.8 years). The average age of the homeless youth was slightly younger at 21 years (*Range* = 18-26 years, *SD* = 2.6 years). Almost 65% of the University Students who participated in the program were female, while conversely, approximately 60% of homeless youth were male.

Measures Used

There was a demonstrated commitment to collecting evaluation data throughout the Links program. Data collection methods included pre and post test measures, weekly journals, papers, interviews, and focus groups (Table 1). Not unexpectedly, a larger amount of data was collected from students, all of whom had to write weekly journals and papers for grades. Journal writing was of particular value to the evaluation as the process required students to reflect on the program as they progressed through it, providing information on incremental program impacts.

While homeless youth did not take part in journal writing, University Students shared personal reflections on the incremental impacts of Links on youth in their own journals. As well, students shared oral conversations they had with youth in their writing. This information, though filtered through the eyes of University Students, still provides a secondary window through which to view the impact Links had on homeless youth beyond the information they provided. Thus, the observations of University Students were used to supplement evaluative data available for youth in this study.

Table 1. Measures used in Links Program Evaluation

Data Sources	Available For	
	Homeless Youth	University Students
Pretest surveys	Yes	Yes
Posttest surveys	Yes	Yes
Weekly Journals	No	Yes
Final papers	No	Yes
Focus groups, interviews	Yes	Yes

EVALUATION FINDINGS

1. Breaking down Preconceptions

In pretest measures, homeless youth shared preconceived notions they had about University Students, characterizing them as *rich, smart, hard-working* and *serious*. Many were curious about the lives of University Students. To illustrate, one youth said he wanted to find out if everyone shared in hard times or if life for the University Students was just “*happy go lucky*.” Homeless youth also shared reservations about participating in the program due to concerns that University Students would be critical and judge them. Still, many youth were open and interested in prospect of engaging with students:

See, they've got book smarts, we've got street smarts. Let's put them together and see what comes out (Youth Participant, Group 1).

University Students also had preconceived notions about street youth, describing them as *tough, apathetic, challenging* and *difficult* in pretest measures. Given the number of preconceived ideas each group held about the other, it is not surprising that both were nervous as they prepared to meet for the first time. The process of reshaping these surface-level preconceptions began as soon as the groups began to interact in sessions:

I thought University Students were very snobby - and now I don't. They're normal (Youth Participant, Group 2).

The program totally changed my perspectives. I remember at the beginning we all wrote a list about what we thought University Students were like, we thought they all had cell phones and they had lots of money (Youth Participant, Group 1).

I don't know why but I always have this preconceived notion of that sort of “bad ass” kid who is really closed off and angry at the world. So whenever I come across [homeless] youth like the ones who came to class today, I am really taken aback by their honesty and truthfulness and willingness to share their experiences and feelings (Student, Group 6).

I was also really surprised by how timid and shy the [homeless youth] were when we first arrived. You could tell they were nervous by the way they were laughing at every little thing. That too caught me off guard as I thought they would have more of an ‘I don't care what these preppy university people think about me’ attitude, but I think they cared a great deal (Student, Group 6).

There is a [homeless youth] who I thought was a little standoffish. But after talking to her on the walk, my opinion has completely changed. That experience in talking to her informally really made me realize that my impressions are definitely not always right and that I should hold off on making any until I really know in the future how a person is (Student, Group 1).

When the youth from the inner-city school arrived I immediately felt a wall between them and me. I watched as us U of A students worked to make the inner-city youth feel welcome but hesitated with awkward / uncomfortable feelings...I could not believe how short it was before we were all laughing and really enjoying each others company. You could almost see the opinions and assumptions changing right in front of your eyes (Student, Group 6).

Throughout this process, the LINKS program emphasized mutual respect and learning. While in pretest measures Youth Participants expressed concern that University Students would judge them, the data suggest students were accepting, empathetic, and accepted youth as relevant and credible peers:

Sharing my life with others, especially University Students, thinking they'd treat me differently after sharing with them about my boyfriend being in jail... and telling them my knowledge of the streets I guess. I thought I'd be judged – but I wasn't (Youth Participant, Group 1).

[One of the Youth Participants] told me that he had just found out about the Links program the day before, and he wasn't sure if he was going to stick with it. Hearing that we were University Students, he was apprehensive about joining...But during the closing circle, he shared that he'd definitely be there the next week (Student, Group 2).

...it was mentioned that she had wanted to plan a session. So I talked to her after class about helping out with planning her nature walk and I gave her my contact info... I felt like it would be reinforcing feelings of isolation and neglect for her if I didn't extend the offer to plan the next session with her (Student, Group 6).

I am learning from them every time I talk with any of them - just like I would hope that they are learning something new from me. For me, this is a peer relationship and not a role model relationship (Student, Group 1).

At the beginning of this program it was emphasize that this was not a 'mentoring' program, but at this point I have to disagree. This is indeed a mentoring program, where the role of the tutor and tutored changes weekly. I have learned more from other group members than I ever could have imagined (Student, Group 5).

We may have struggled a bit with our planning in that we were constantly questioning whether one of the two dynamics (students and youths) of the program would be bored or offended by what we chose (Student, Group 1).

2. Participant Roles

Evaluation data suggest students and homeless youth evolved to play slightly different roles in the program. Students played the role of *informed advocate*: sharing information in a number of areas, offering an ear to listen as well as encouragement, motivation and positive reinforcement. Youth Participants, on the other hand, demonstrated *resilience in action*, educating students about street life and culture and modeling personal self-determination. Youth

Participants communicated information through stories about family of origin issues, struggles with addiction and crime, and their struggles to overcome barriers with strength, hope and courage. Youth also chose activities, such as walkabouts in socially disadvantaged areas of town that further educated University Students about the realities of life on the street. University Students were extremely inspired by the resilience of Youth Participants, and through their eyes, Youth Participants also gained a greater awareness of their own inner fortitude:

Going for the walk in the community - it was a good experience to see students' reactions to things I see every day (Youth Participant, Group 1).

It blows my mind what they have been through and survived. I would like to think I'm that strong but I don't know (Student, Group 4).

Listening to all the [homeless youth] speak it is evident that they are all fighting tooth and nail to better themselves and that is really inspiring. It is too easy as a university student to define one's self growth simply in terms of academic success... to see the courage in some of the others in the room makes me feel as though if they can overcome the things they have than surely I can muster up more strength to face the things I have been ignoring (Student, Group 3).

3. Developing Supportive Relationships

Evaluation data indicate strong attachments developed quickly between group members, thanks in large part to group facilitators who were effective in creating an atmosphere of support in the program and in getting participants to reach out to one another.

I was surprised how honest and open both the facilitators are, which internally made me more open (Youth Participant, Group 2).

What it all comes down to is support. Support from teammates, support from friends, support from facilitators, support from near perfect strangers are all important in demonstrating that everyone in the group is special and deserves the attention and care of someone else.

Everyone was totally accepting of everyone and it is quite an open group. Everyone shares personal experiences that wouldn't have been shared had we just met for coffee or something. Like we got pretty deep sharing our personal lives. It shows a great amount of trust among all of us (Youth Participant, Group 1).

We all got along really, really well. The participants and facilitators, we just all clicked right away which was really awesome (Youth Participant, Group 1).

I can't believe how quickly we have all become friends. This environment that was provided for us is incredibly supportive... I tried to describe our relationships to a friend the other day, who then asked how long we had known each other. I felt that I had to reassure her that I was telling the truth after I said 'um... three weeks?' I know that I will have (and might already have) closer relationships with some of these people in Links, than I have with a lot of people at school (Student, Group 1).

I felt a real sense of connection and bonding happening within the group. The laid back nature of the environment we were able to create facilitated a great sense of equality among all group members and facilitators. It was as if we were just a big group of friends hanging out not a group of people participating in a 'program' (Group 1).

In fact, the strength of the relationships forming between students, homeless youth and facilitators often surprised participants:

I am shocked at how emotionally invested everyone, including myself, seem to be already (Student, Group 1).

I just find it so amazing how literally within a week's time a group of strangers can go from 'surface' conversations... to really sharing our guts, our struggles and experiences that have impacted us to the core of who we see ourselves as today (Student, Group 6).

Many participants expressed how the activity reminded them of times spent with their parents or other family members, where they are from and how it felt as though we were a big family throughout the experience we shared together (Student, Group 1).

In addition to the development of close one-on-one relationships, something special also occurred in terms of the *group*. A mentality slowly developed in which participants became very attached to the group itself. For example, participants became very upset when members of the group were missing, noting both individual and group level impacts:

I really missed [one of the homeless youth] this week. It's too bad he couldn't make it. I hope he is doing well and I know everyone felt his absence yesterday. It really is strange how the group dynamic changes when someone isn't there. And sometimes you don't even realize who it is that isn't there, you just know someone is gone and you feel the void of the person. I think that shows just how important each and every one of us is to the group. And even though maybe some people might feel like their presence isn't felt, but you really come to realize how much of an affect we all have on each other (Student, Group 3).

Another reason why I thought this week was awesome was because one the members of our group who was missing decided to come back. I loved that she was there. We had had a feeling that she wasn't going to return and so to see her made us feel more positive about the make-up of our group... I really hope that she sticks the program out - I want her to be there until the end. Otherwise I think I may feel like I failed to make our group work (Student, Group 1).

4. Motivation to Participate

People can be proactive and engaged or passive and alienated, largely based on the social conditions around them (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the beginning stages of the program, participants were motivated to attend sessions for extrinsic (obligatory) reasons through their enrollment in a course (students) or the promise of a monetary reward (youth). However, as

supportive relationships developed, individuals became more and more intrinsically motivated to attend by their enjoyment of socializing with others they felt bonded to:

My expectations for the program were not met. I expected we were going to be lab rats in there and it turned out to be different...what I liked most was the bonding (Youth Participant, Group 2).

I think that part of our society nowadays includes a sort of superficiality in making connections with people... So I think it is so great that Links creates these connections that are deep and long lasting. And although at first, like most connections in life, there is an underlying selfish purpose to it (getting 20 bucks or getting credits so you can graduate) what comes out of it is so much more than you even could anticipate – and I really value the uniqueness that Links provides (Student, Group 2).

Still, this shift did not occur for all homeless youth. The most commonly cited limitation of the program by students was that some homeless youth did not show up reliably for sessions. As noted by students:

...thus far in the program, the only non-attendance we have had has been from the [homeless youth] group (Student, Group 1).

One of my group members did not attend which was disappointing as it is so very clear when we are missing one of our participants. To keep our 'Links' group cohesive, I feel it is very important that all members attend all sessions, otherwise the group is lacking the individuals energy, which I feel definitely affects the group dynamic (Student, Group 1).

I was very sad that a girl did not show up and left her group hanging. I think that her group members very hurt and confused as to why she did not show up. I think in some it brought out anger. It made me sad because I think that situations like that can reinforce negative stereotypes of being undependable (Student, Group 2).

These absences were mostly due to the difficulties some homeless youth had feeling accepted by the group. Group facilitators recognized this and worked to resolve it. Homeless youth were informed that they could participate in the program even if they moved out of transitional housing at Cunningham Place, facilitators made themselves more available to youth if they had questions outside program hours, and facilitators spoke to participants about helping others feel included. Evaluative data suggest these changes had positive impacts on relationship building and the resulting intrinsic motivation of youth to participate:

I can really tell a difference in the group since we had the turning point discussion about feeling included. Each member is trying harder to include everyone and I can tell that each Links member is trying to go outside of their comfort zones to get to know other members better (Student, Group 1).

Both facilitators made themselves available all hours of the day, which helped me with any question I had - I was able to have it answered (Youth Participant, Group 2).

5. Reaching Personal Goals

Homeless Youth

Youth Goal 1: Knowledge about university. In pretest measures, many Youth Participants expressed an interest in learning what it was like to attend university. In response to this interest, students were happy to share their experiences in university with youth and group activities were selected that brought youth to the University of Alberta campus;

We decided that we wanted to go to U of A on a tour... I did not want to seem patronizing to those who have not attended university. However, we were reassured by the youth that it would not be something that would not offend her, but rather inspire her (Student, Group 1).

Evaluation data indicate homeless youth were both empowered and inspired to attend university through their experiences interacting with University Students:

Links affected my choices. At first I just thought I'd take a course and be a secretary or whatever, because most of my friends talk about university and they make it seem really hard. They're just always complaining and they make it seem like the worst thing in the world, so I was kind of thinking I didn't want to go. But being in the Links program and meeting the Human Ecology students and hearing them talk about it. They made it seem like it was totally worth it (Youth Participant, Group 1).

I wanted to understand how University Students were brought up and the decisions that were put in front of them, how it made them go to university, and why we were different in that area. And [I learned] its just a few small decisions in our life that separates us both. It gave me a better understanding on that and I realized I can be there as well if I choose to (Youth Participant, Group 2).

Youth Goal 2: Interpersonal skills. In pretest measures, homeless youth indicated they wanted to create friendships, develop communication skills, get over fears of rejection and become more outgoing. Given their personal histories, learning to communicate openly with others and trust others were huge hurdles for this group. The Links program was structured to tackle these issues and evaluation data suggest youth made great strides in the program:

One of my personal goals was that I wanted to be able to talk to strangers. I used to be very, very judgmental. The program helped me get to know people before judging them... Also, my ability to speak more openly broadened, not be so fearful in front of strangers, and just my communication skills (Youth Participant, Group 2).

I've learned communication and trust skills. We did an activity where we had to close our eyes and mould Playdo. I'm sort of uncomfortable touching other people's hands but it was like I had to trust. Being able more open with people, being able to talk to someone even though you don't know them very well. I think that was trust too. Just being able to trust that they're not going to go home with all this information and go home and talk about it and put it on the internet and stuff like that (Youth Participant, Group 1).

As homeless youth continued to move farther out of their comfort zones and improve their interpersonal skills, University Students noted this progress in their journals:

I have been noticing the progression of some participants within our group and the transition from initially being quite closed and standoffish to feeling safe enough to allow some of those barriers to come down and open up to the group (Student, Group 1).

When [one of the Youth Participants] started crying I was really surprised because she said that the last time she cried was when she was a small girl! She must have really put her trust in all of us to be able to share what she did, and it obviously affected her greatly. I hope she felt better though about being able to share her story with us all (Student, Group 6).

Many of the resident youth expressed a lack of positive and supportive individuals in their lives as many had limited or no contact with family and were attempting to stay away from old peer groups in hopes of living a healthier lifestyle. 'Links' facilitated a safe environment in which we had the opportunity for relationship building and the development of support and trust (Student, Group 1).

Youth Goal 3: Personal skills. Youth also sought to learn healthier ways to live, deal with stress, and have fun. Evaluation data suggest the program helped youth gain skills in all stated areas:

Some of the foods that we tried are a lot healthier than I was eating before. Most of the University Students are healthy eaters, so I learned from their example (Youth Participant, Group 2).

One of the [homeless youth] mentioned that this process was teaching them how to, and that it was ok to, have fun again... It is hard to imagine how down a person would have to feel to lose the ability to know how to have fun, it is truly inspiring to see that while we're all just out there running around enjoying ourselves something so important is going on behind the scenes (Student, Group 2).

...also another thing that helped me from this program was suicide prevention, because I've had people around me try to commit suicide (Youth Participant, Group 1).

One of the [homeless youth] reported that she didn't think that she would have fun at all at Crankpots, and was shocked to realize how amazing it really was... I am sure some of these Links members do not believe activities like crafting would interest them, yet they probably have not had the chance to try these activities. For some of the [homeless youth] recovering from addictions, I would think that it would sometimes seem that drugs and alcohol were one of their best outlets, and things like crafting were boring or ineffective. I can see that Links can help to show these [youth] that there are a lot of different ways to enjoy yourself and de-stress. This is also useful for some of the U of A students who need a way to deal with the stress from school (Student, Group 6).

I am now realizing the importance of sharing our lives and experiences with the [homeless youth]. This helps them to see how to model (for the most part) healthy

experiences and activities. When they hear us sharing about how much fun we had hiking this weekend... they might remember that this is an activity that is healthy and fun (Student, Group 6).

Additional Benefit: Leadership skills development. While homeless youth did not include leadership skills as one of their stated goals, the program was structured to foster this development among youth as well. All participants were required to work together to plan and implement weekly activities, and Youth Participants were particularly encouraged to take leadership roles in these endeavors. This process fostered leadership skills and self-efficacy among participating youth:

[I have gained skills] in public speaking, organizing and facilitating events...and I'm doing public speaking sort of now – I've been asked to do some more public speaking in the community (Youth Participant, Group 1).

I learned a lot more about myself – about some of my fears and weaknesses and what I need to work on, especially while trying to do a [group] facilitation. I learned a lot about what I am capable of doing (Youth Participant, Group 2).

One of my favorite things about the evening is hearing one of the ladies from [the homeless shelter] say that feeding Youth Participants was one of her lifelong dreams and she was so glad that one of her dreams came true that night. She told me she felt she wanted to give back the community she was a part of for so long and she wanted to help kids who are where she has been before. I was glad to be a part of that with her (Student, Group 1).

University Students

Student Goal 1: Knowledge about homelessness. In pretest measures, students expressed a desire to gain a better understanding of poverty and homelessness through the stories and experiences of youth. Data suggest students learned a great deal about these issues through their interactions with youth in the program

The two young men who led my group were currently living under a bridge, which was so hard for me to comprehend, and I would say was my first real face-to-face experience with poverty in Canada (Student, Group 2).

Later in the conversation, he also shared with me that his brother, whom he had been close with, had been killed last year on their reserve. This conversation gave a face to the issue of poverty and at-risk youth, and really personalized this issue (Student, Group 6).

Most of us live in our little bubbles, unaware and uninformed of the reality of life for the homeless within our city. We stay out of the “bad” areas of town, we turn away from the panhandler on Whyte Avenue asking for a bit of change, and ignore the needs of so many people living within the same city. The city of Edmonton we know is a lot different than the city of Edmonton the homeless know (Student, Group 2).

As Criminology major I am constantly being bombarded in my classes with the “at risk” label that seems to be so easily put on youth who appear deviant in some way or don’t conform to the standard that society dictates. I really appreciate what [one of the Youth Participants] said, that essentially we are all “at risk” in some way.... I am equally at risk for many things... labels are the first thing people see and they often don’t take the time to look past the label at the real substance of the person. That is actually a big reason why I decided to take this class – because I wanted to see what “at risk” really meant and whether it was something tangible in a way, or something a bit more obscure (Student, Group 6).

Students noted these experiences imparted knowledge they would have not otherwise gained in ordinary life, nor through other university classes:

This is the most practical, relevant and useful experience that I have encountered in my university career in the past four years (Student, Group 1).

Bringing together both university students and ‘youth at risk’ is a step towards creating understanding and awareness among both groups and within the community. Bridging the existing gaps among those in the same peer group yet find themselves in very different positions in this life is a rare occurrence as many of us may not have had the chance to meet or interact with those that we consider ‘different’ from ourselves (Student, Group 1).

This program has been very beneficial and has really helped to open my eyes to a whole different world that I otherwise might not have been exposed to. The neat thing is that in that whole other world we discovered that it is full of people just like us (Student, Group 1).

Some University Students even began to consider professions in community development and health promotion:

I think that this experience has reintegrated for me that I truly want to work in the preventative side of community development. I have come to realize over the past few months that I would much rather work with families and children before they get to the point of homelessness and addiction (Student, Group 1).

Student Goal 2: Interpersonal skills. Students also sought to build friendships and improve their communication skills. Evaluative data suggest these goals were met, and additionally, students learned to open up and share with others:

The safe and comfortable environment, in which we were able to create as a group, facilitated the development of relationships and support systems (Student, Group 1).

I did not expect myself to become as close as I did to the youth (Student, Group 6).

It never crossed my mind that tonight’s class would have such an emotional impact on me... I have never attended a class that has been filled with so much emotion, and care

and willingness to be there... I felt comfortable in this situation to cry...usually I would hold my tears back and try to be all tough (Student, Group 5).

6. Recognizing Similarities

By highlighting similarities rather than differences, Links programming helped participants move toward a deeper understanding and acceptance of one another.

A major misconception that I think both the groups have is that we are all so different. Even in my own mind until this day I never believed that I could be in the same situation...I was very wrong (Student, Group 1).

One of the most common and serious problem shared between groups was substance abuse and addiction. Sessions provided participants a forum to discuss the issue of substance abuse, share personal stories and work toward a better understanding of a problem:

Indeed, in our group the majority of participants, 'the at risk youth', facilitators, and students have dealt with or continue to deal with addictions in some capacity throughout their lives. What has been the most striking is the way in which they have all been able to overcome their addictions and while each story is somewhat different, they all share the common themes of courage, strength, resilience and triumph (Student, Group 2).

Many of my fellow LINKS members discussed particular events in their lives that led them to substance abuse, whether it was physical abuse, the separation of parents or some other personal pain, it was in all cases more complicated than some pre-conditioned susceptibility to addictions (Student, Group 5).

During our sharing of culture I noticed that drugs/alcohol played roles in all of our lives. It seemed to be all negatively (Student, Group 1).

Everyone at the table identified an ambivalent relationships towards substances, citing them as something that they did with friends, to be social to have fun etc, but also there was even more discussion about how it is so damaging, how it ruined lives, broke up families, strained relationships, landed them in places they did not want to be (Student, Group 1).

Some groups decided to bring in speakers to share facts about addiction and the help available. Other groups chose to hear from addicts themselves and/or experience addiction treatment as one of their activities (e.g., sit in on a 12 step meeting, visit an addiction treatment facility). Participants noted that passively listening to someone talk about the facts of addiction was not a useful exercise. However, listening to or taking part in the *lived experiences* of former addicts in recovery conveyed powerful and instructive lessons for participants:

We attended Poundmaker's Lodge as a group on our third last session and it was a truly inspirational experience; just by seeing the faces of the group members who are 'graduates' and hearing them talk about what the place means to them drove home the

impact that this place has had and continues to have on the lives of many current and former addicts (Student, Group 5).

As a result of what they learned from these experiences, several University Students and Youth Participants realized they had a problem and sought help for addictive behaviour. In fact, one university student admitted he had a problem to the group and revealed with remorse that he had secretly used drugs in sessions. Many students commented on the power and emotionality of this experience in their journals:

When talking to him afterwards he stated that admitting to [using drugs in sessions] was one of the most difficult things he has ever done. Thus if he were to have merely removed himself or been removed from the program he never would have had to face the other group members. In so doing however he was able to address his own feelings and guilt as well as be understood and forgiven by the rest of the group. In this way he personally, along with the rest of the group, was able to begin to heal (Student, Group 5).

In addition to substance abuse, participants found they shared other problems in common, including nonconstructive methods of coping with stress. Sharing these problems opened a door to allow participants to brain storm and find more effective ways to cope with problems:

One of the things [a homeless youth] brought up was cutting wrists... I asked her why she chose to do this and she explained to me that physical pain is a lot easier to deal with sometimes than emotional pain... I could relate to that in my life with my eating disorder from when I was younger. The feeling of having total control of my body in some sense was a high for me. It made me feel better and took the focus of my dad's illness. I could see how she felt that this gave her control over her pain and her body, and therefore the immediate repression of her feelings... We then talked about other ways we can calm ourselves down when we are feeling out of control with hurt or pain. It was neat because I have a few techniques which really help me calm down and she shared some of hers (Student, Group 6).

The similarities University Students discovered between themselves and a group they had previously considered "other" impelled students to empathize with youth on a deeper level as well as recognize their own good fortune:

We talked for a long time and I discovered that we had a lot in common but the major difference is that I had a few breaks in my youth that I have taken for granted that he did not (Student, Group 6)

The more I listen to everyone in this class the more I realize that I have been dealt an amazing hand in life (Student, Group 5).

...afterwards I couldn't help but think how my life could be or would be different if I had chosen even the smallest thing and done it differently. It really hits home when you can put a face to that 'what if' question, when you can hear about actual experiences and can see them first hand (Student, Group 6).

If you were to have asked me yesterday are you or have you been spoiled in your life and would have laughed at you and not have bothered answering the question, but know as I write this I know that in someone else's eyes I can be that person (Student, Group 6).

7. Challenging Deep-Seated Stereotypes

As previously mentioned, initial interactions between Youth Participants and University Students challenged their surface-level preconceptions about one another (e.g., Youth Participants are tough and apathetic; University Students are snobby and rich). As participants recognized the similarities between themselves and a group they had considered “other”, it created a state of internal disequilibrium that challenged deeper-seated, and sometimes unconscious, stereotypes held. For students, unconscious stereotypes were often about the poor and the homeless.

I had always believed the ideas that were shown on the news and in papers that homeless people slept on the street and robbed people and other such worst case scenarios. This is not the case. What I have seen by meeting these girls is that anyone from any background can become homeless. I wonder why the media makes it seem like only a certain part of society falls victim to homelessness. I also wonder why I always believed it to be true. Until beginning this program I had no idea that homeless youth came from such a diverse background. I felt a sort of an epiphany during this class. I had never realized that I could be in the same position (Student, Group 1).

I am really glad that X shared his story because it just served as a reminder to me to realize that I still hold stereotypes, that I have been socialized as a university student to see the group I am in as “normal” and everyone else as different (Student, Group 6).

I am almost ashamed at myself for having made so many assumptions and predictions about someone I barely knew... I would like to view myself as open-minded. [The Youth Participants I am partnered with] has proven me wrong on more than one occasion and has made me open my eyes more to start exploring where and why I develop the labels that I do, and under what circumstances (Student, Group 1).

...it is disturbing to find that you retain stereotypes and biases that you are unaware of until they surface (Student, Group 1).

...he asked me why I wanted to become a police officer. I thought that he had had many negative interactions with police... He then told me that he knew both good and bad cops. I don't know why I have this preconceived notion that he would judge me for becoming something I assumed he hated and I later found out that more cops have helped him than hurt and he had great respect for police (Student, Group 6).

For youth, the stereotypes they held were about both University Students and themselves. Some youth realized they may have been subconsciously talking down to themselves and roping off their life by making unconscious decisions about what was possible for them.

I wanted to understand how University Students were brought up and the decisions that were put in front of them, how it made them go to university, and why we were different in that area. And [I learned] its just a few small decisions in our life that separates us both. It gave me a better understanding on that and I realized I can be there as well if I choose to (Youth Participant, Group 2).

I was always a little hesitant, before I had judgments [about University Students]. I thought we were worlds apart. But I've come to realize that the knowledge we have is just different and yeah, we are equal (Youth Participant, Group 2).

8. Personal Transformations

Group members realized that participating in this program was a unique opportunity in their lives, and that brought another dimension to their learning. Some participants expressed their participation in the program as a peak experience, and emotional and spiritual transformation:

The program has helped me to see more of myself. To volunteer more. I'm going to be starting up dinner for the Native Elders – for women. Once a week, volunteering my time to them. So it's helped me spiritually to give more, because I know I can (Youth Participant, Group 1).

It is amazing how in only 2 brief weeks this program has invaded my being, I honestly just keep thinking about it and talking about it... it has really caught me off guard (Student, Group 3).

Somewhere along the way Links became one of the most powerful influences in my life (Student, Group 5).

Links for me has been my treatment, treatment for both my mind and my soul and for that I will be forever grateful (Student, Group 4).

These relationships are very unique and very special. Although we may not treat them as such during the sessions (because we see everyone as a buddy and just want to have fun) the bonds that we are building are not very common, which is unfortunate. I really believe that support is what makes or breaks a person and having this weekly support group allows every one of us to see that people do care and do have the time to make a difference. Seeing everyone have fun is good for the soul and building new friendships is refreshing and funnily enough - hardly challenging at all with the group of people that we have so fortunately been acquainted with (Student, Group 5).

I sat in a roomful of strangers last night, we talked, we laughed, we cried. Each individual had something unique to share and everyone is amazing in their own right. What I saw was people coming together, kindling the human spirit (Student, Group 5).

I find this class good for my soul (Student, Group 2).

There is absolute beauty in the connection shared among women and the weaving combination of energies. This experience brought powerful and positive energy into my heart, which was exactly what I needed. I am so happy that I chose to attend and did not allow a 'bad day' to interfere or prohibit me from new positive and powerful experiences (Student, Group 1).

Aboriginal spirituality doesn't focus primarily on one transcendent being, instead it focuses on the collectivity and interrelatedness of individuals, groups and all things in nature. This has in many ways become the perfect way of describing and characterizing our Links group, for indeed we have become far greater than the sum of our parts (Student, Group 5).

The Power of the Circle

As participants gathered in a circle each week to share how they were feeling, they came to respect the power of the circle and its impact:

I discovered that the circle is truly a very special and safe place (Student, Group 3).

For me, I think I liked the actual group dynamics the most. It was fun being in a group and hanging out with people I never thought I'd be able to have a friendship with (Youth Participant, Group 2).

From the very first session the message was clear that the circle would be a place where all external norms would be irrelevant, and that all that matter was honesty (Student, Group 5).

Another thing that really came clear for me this week is the power of the circles, just coming in and being able to talk to group of objective people who are willing to just listen really helps put things in context (I think that if I could implement an opening and closing circle in all aspects of my life I would have much stronger and open relationships with people). Its amazing the things that just taking a little different perspective can open up for you (Student, Group 2).

In fact, for many participants, the circle came to symbolize the Links program and what they had gained from it:

We are all past the point of giving each other the initial look over and have overcome the stereotypes that we would have otherwise giving each other had we ever come across one another in a different situation. Having the chance to get past the stereotypes is so important and that is what is lacking in society in general. It is not very often that we have the chance to experience and appreciate someone "different" because they are not part of our "circle". However in Links everyone is part of the circle and everyone has the same opportunity to speak and to participate. I don't want to emphasize the word different because we have all realized more similarities than differences in this experience (Student, Group 4).

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Evaluation data suggest that as the program unfolded, participants moved through a general pattern of stages, with each level serving as a foundation for the next. This can be depicted as a pyramid consisting of eight successive layers (Figure 1).

In the *first* stage, the program challenged surface-level preconceptions. Canadian society is one that is often segregated. When groups of people seldom interact in their daily lives prejudice and discrimination are often the result (Rodenborg & Huynh, 2006). This was certainly the case in Links, with both students and youth noting they had a number of preconceptions about the other in pretest surveys. In their first few interactions together, these preconceptions began to dismantle. Youth realized students in the program were not snobby and rich, and students realized youth participants were not tough and empathetic.

As preconceptions were challenged and walls between students and youth began to come down, it provided a basis for a *second* stage in which each group sought to share information with the other. In these discussions, students evolved to play the role of informed advocates, actively sharing information about university and encouraging youth in the program. Youth modeled resilience in action by sharing personal stories of struggle and triumph. These interactions provided a basis for the *third* stage, relationship building. Group facilitators were effective in creating an atmosphere of support in the program and in getting participants to reach out to one another and bond. As supportive relationships developed, individuals moved to the *fourth* stage and became more intrinsically motivated to attend and engage in sessions by their enjoyment of socializing with others they felt bonded to.

Intrinsic motivation leads individuals to become more proactive and engaged in their environment (Ryan & Deci). Thus, as intrinsic motivation increased, participants were empowered to move to a *fifth* stage and become engaged in achieving their own personal goals in Links. Youth gained first-hand knowledge about university from students. For some youth, this information was life changing and prompted them to attend university themselves. At an interpersonal level, youth gained public speaking experience and learned to trust others in the group enough to open up, a huge hurdle given their personal histories. At a personal level, youth learned healthy ways to live, deal with stress and have fun. Many youth also gained leadership experience and some felt propelled to continue to pursue other work in the community. University Students learned about homelessness through vivid, first-hand accounts by youth who had lived it. Students were moved by these accounts, and some noted a decision to pursue careers in community development and health promotion.

As they shared their struggles with common problems such as substance abuse, participants began to recognize the similarities between themselves and moved toward *sixth* stage of deeper understanding and acceptance of one another. The recognition of the similarities between themselves and a group they had considered “other” created a state of internal disequilibrium among participants that challenged deeper-seated, and sometimes unconscious, stereotypes held. At this *seventh* level, students unconscious stereotypes about the poor and homeless were challenged. For youth, stereotypes they held were about both University Students and themselves were challenged, and some youth realized they may have been subconsciously

talking down to themselves and roping off their life by making unconscious decisions about what was possible for them. Participants who got the very most out of the program describe their participation in Links as an *eighth level* – an experience of spiritual and emotional transformation in which the power of the circle played an important role.

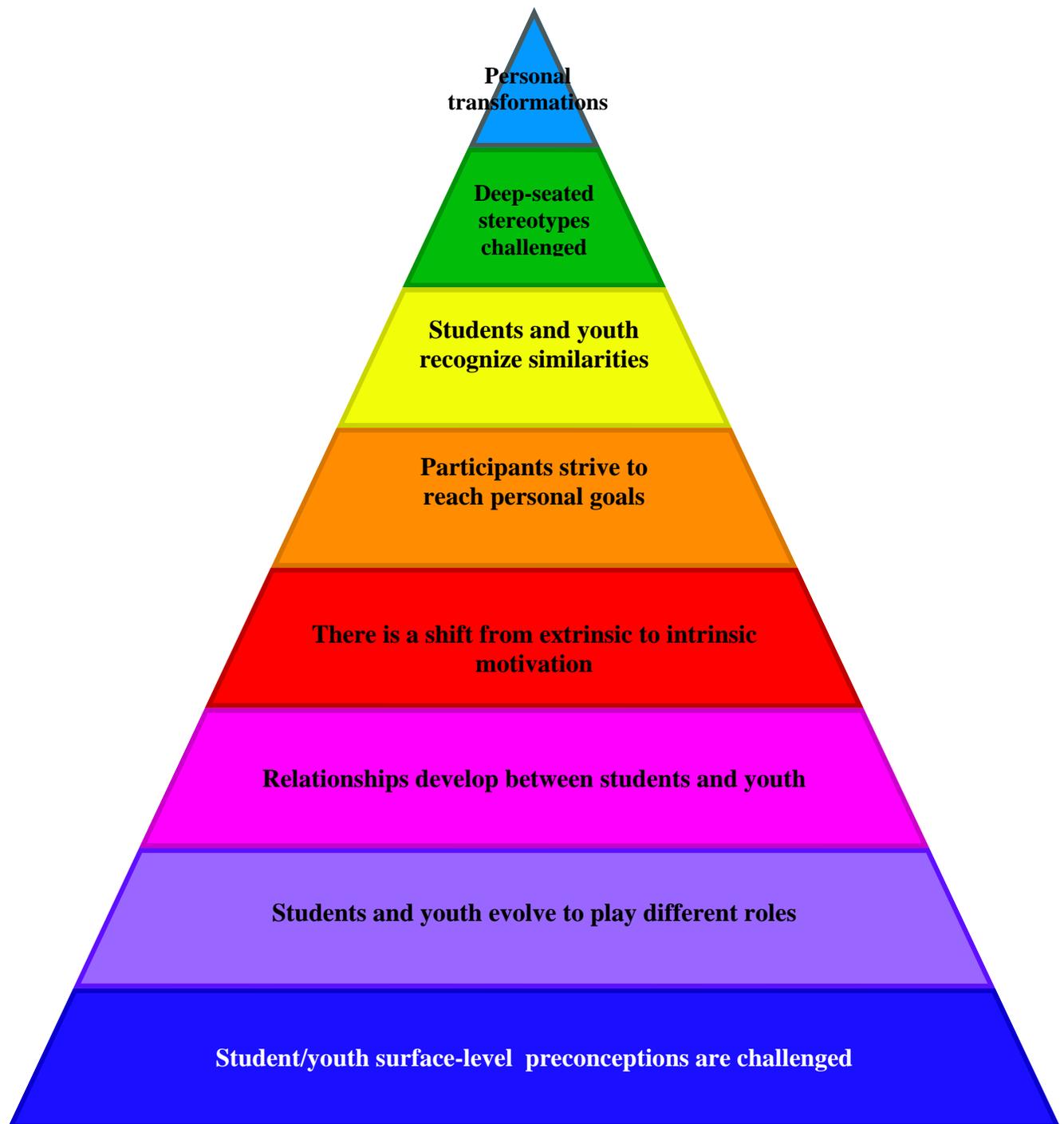
Structuring these findings in the form of a pyramid does not imply that all participants moved through each of these stages or moved through each stage at the same rate. This outline is meant to depict a general process observed in evaluative data as participants moved through the Links program. The data also show that participants who stumbled at one stage found it more difficult to move to the next. For example, some Youth Participants had difficulty bonding with others in the group. Thus intrinsic motivation to continue in the program did not develop and these youth missed a number of sessions.

In summary, the Links program has helped to break down barriers in our society by bringing young people together who would not otherwise meet. Yet, it is not enough to bring such groups together. Friendships must develop in order to enable one group to effectively relate to the other so that long standing prejudices can be dissolved. The Links program was able to accomplish these tasks by offering an entertaining, supportive and encouraging environment. While participants had fun taking part in the various activities, there is evidence that deeper processes were taking place including structural changes in the way these two groups thought about one another and themselves. For many, entrenched stereotypes were challenged and lives were transformed. This report will conclude with two participant statements that effectively sum up the overall impacts of the Links program on its participants:

I really wish that more people had the opportunity to have this kind of experience because I can see that we are all becoming better and stronger people for it. The world needs stronger people because it is fear that gets in the way of people moving forward and it is fear that causes us to stereotype and judge people. Without that fear and in a perfect world we would all have more support and more opportunity to realize our potential (Student, Group 1).

...beneath our lives, our social statues, the way we live, our occupation, our clothes, we are all people. We each have struggles, hopes, relationships, fears, memories, dreams – it comes down to the fact that when all the external stuff is stripped away, we are all equal. So now I leave this class with a wealth of new knowledge. I leave with an understanding of what it means to live life in the different situations we've been thrown into. I leave with a greater respect for those who are different from me, and a new appreciation for those differences. I leave with the sincere hope that I will be able to carry on the relationships that have begun through our Links class. Something has come to an end, yet something new is just beginning – eleven lives continuing on, changed by one another over the past twelve weeks (Student, Group 2).

Figure 1. Links program: Key outcomes



RECOMMENDATIONS

The process of evaluation in Links was ongoing and truly embedded into the structure of the program. Thus, recommendations to strengthen the program are naturally linked with recommendations to strengthen its evaluation; these will be presented together.

1. Youth journals

The present Links evaluation design collects a large amount of evaluative data from University Students, all of whom have to write weekly journals and papers for grades. Journal writings were of particular value to this outcome evaluation as the process required students to reflect regularly on the program as they progressed through it. Among Youth Participants, regular reflection through journal writing would benefit both the evaluation and the experiences of youth in Links. It is recognized that it is more difficult to collect such data from youth. Making time near the end of each session for journal writing might be an effective way to collect this information. Youth who are uncomfortable writing could engage in other exercises that promote self-reflection including art activities or short face-to-face interviews with Links staff.

2. Long term evaluative data

It is likely Links participants experience positive impacts from the program on a long-term basis. For example, in 2007 a participant in Edmonton's Drug Treatment Court testified that partaking in the Links program as a homeless youth and more specifically, interacting with University Students, had a powerful and positive effect on his life and played a key role in his decision to go back to school.

To further improve Links, it would be useful to collect systematic long-term data from youth participants. The obvious problem is that homelessness makes it difficult to obtain longitudinal data from youth. A study by Des Jarlais, Perlis and Settembrino (2004) found the use of electronic debit cards, combined with other efforts to develop positive relationships with young, homeless drug users led to follow-up interview rates of 81% at 6-months and 71% at 12-months.

Using the protocol outlined by Des Jarlais and colleagues, debit cards usable at ATMs across Canada would be issued to Links youth at the end of the program that with an honorarium for participation credited to the account. A brief interview would be scheduled in the next few weeks to accustom them to the follow-up process. Participants would then be asked to continue in the evaluation study by telephoning or presenting in person for short 15-min monthly interviews, with more comprehensive (40 min) interviews approximately every 6 months. After each follow-up interview, the appropriate honorarium would be credited to the participant's account the same day. Based on their experiences, Des Jarlais and colleagues stressed the importance of honoraria that are not so large as to be coercive, but enough to sufficiently convey appreciation for the participants' time and effort. They compensated participants \$20 and \$40 for the 15- and 40-min interviews, respectively, with an annual \$20 bonus for completing all interviews required within the year. If desired, this process could be used to follow-up with a small number of student participants as well. If there is future need to improve youth participation in the Links program itself, the ATM card method could also be used, with small incentives credited to youth accounts at the end of each session attended.

3. Lived experiences of substance abuse and treatment

As a final point, it is clear that Links leaders recognized how common and serious substance issues were for this age cohort. While addiction issues were repeatedly dealt with in Links, participants gained the most from activities that presented the lived experiences of addiction and its treatment (e.g., listening to the stories of recovering addicts, visiting treatment centres) as compared to listening to more facts-based presentations by professionals. The program could be fine-tuned to promote learning about substance abuse issues through these more active methods exclusively.

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