Chapter 17
Youth Learning in Afterschool Programs:
Exploring Learning Outcomes for Rural Youth

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the learning outcomes of an after-school program (ASP) known as Fusion Youth and Technology Centre (Fusion) situated in Ingersoll, Ontario. The chapter begins by making the case that ASPs are part of the lifelong learning infrastructure and they should be given more consideration by researchers and policy-makers. This is followed by examining the changes in education and its implications for youth followed by a discussion of ASPs and positive youth development. A description of Fusion is presented and then the findings of four studies conducted at Fusion are reviewed. The discussion focuses on learning outcomes and reports back in terms of external and internal assets necessary for positive youth development to occur and their relationship to technical skill development. A conclusion is then drawn that ASPs with a focus on technology programs can have significant learning outcomes in terms of capacities and technical skills developed. Furthermore, it is argued that the benefts are often derived by rural youth who are not successful educationally, come from lower socio-economic homes, and are the youth who are most likely to be at-risk.

INTRODUCTION

…we need a literate, skilled, educated, healthy people to be a world-leading economy. But this in turn requires a truly inclusive society. - The Honrouable Jean Chretien, former Prime Minister of Canada

Castellls (1996) has argued poignantly that we are living through the transformation of the industrial economy to an information eonomy. In order for countries to thrive economically in this emerging economy means recognizing the importance of ICTs and ICT skill development. The changing economy means reflecting on the skills youth will require in order to be successful in their future. Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) highlight this by noting that between 1969 and 1999 the decline in demand for routine cognitive, routine manual and non-routine manual skills with an increased demand for complex communication and expert thinking. They go on to note that there is also a unique set of learning skills required:

- **Information, Media and Technology Skills:** Information literacy, media literacy and ICT literarcy;
- **Learning and Innovation Skills:** Creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration;
- **Life and Career Skills:** Flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility (p.207).

In the Canadian context, this is recognized in initiatives and government publications (Looker and Thiessen, 2003). But as Looker and Thiessen suggest, "the so-called digital-divide compromises the goal of equity in access to ICT and ICT related skills (p. 1)." They further note that the World Economic Forum Task Force emphasized the need for ICT policies that dealt with the inequities based on rurality, ethnicity, disability and gender. While there have been 4 digital divides identified, the concern of this chapter is addressing the rural digital-divide. This rural digital-divide is characterized by three divides: physical access, access to ICT skill development and access to social networks (Lauzon, 2015). This chapter explores how a rural afterschool program—Fusion Youth and Technology Centre (Fusion)—with a focus on technology programs fosters the development of youth and their skill development. But first, we begin with Michael's story, a former participant and member of Fusion.

Michael's Story

Michael first arrived at Fusion at the age of 14. He seemed to be an angry young man and was constantly getting into verbal and physical altercations with other youth members of Fusion. He eventually got into trouble with the law and was arrested, although he never shared what trouble he had gotten into. He also ended up dropping out of high school. Despite the challenges in Michael's life he persisted in coming to Fusion. Staff realized that music was important to Michael and encouraged him to engage with the music program. Michael thrived in the music program and developed a very special relationship with the staff member who ran the music program. He learned to play various instruments and began to learn music production. By the time Michael was 17 he had written and recorded his first original song and made a Youtube video. Michael has benefitted immensely from his time at Fusion. He has learned how to play a variety of musical instruments, how to compose music, how to produce music and how to produce a video. Michael believes in himself, and has developed the necessary qualities of resilience and thriving while acquiring various technical skills, all of which has allowed Michael to begin to figure out who he is through his creative productions.

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