Impacts of a Peer Support Program for Street-Involved Youth[1]

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Abstract

Homelessness is a growing problem in urban centres. The well-documented overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples among the homeless in Canada makes it a particularly relevant issue for this population. Some of the most vulnerable homeless are youth who are at special risk for gang recruitment, prostitution, and exploitation. The Links program began in 2005 as a three-year project bringing street-involved youth and university students together to increase understanding, foster supportive relationships, and enhance the knowledge and skills of each group. Emphasis was placed on recruiting Aboriginal youth to the program. As a result 50% of street-involved youth who took part identified as Aboriginal. Qualitative evaluation data were collected via surveys, written assignments, and in-person interviews. Findings suggest the program created intense bonds between students and youth. Stereotypes were identified and broken down and youth were empowered to broaden their perspectives on what they could achieve. Both groups gained knowledge they can use to build a better future for themselves and their communities.

Key words: Street-involved youth, university students, Aboriginal, qualitative program evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a growing problem in urban centres. An overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples among the homeless in Canada is well documented, making it a particularly relevant issue for this population (Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force, 1999; Quebec, 2008; Wente, 2000). For example, approximately 5% of Edmonton's population identifies as Aboriginal; yet 38% of the homeless in 2010 were Aboriginal (Sorensen, 2010).

Some of the most vulnerable among the homeless are youth, who are at special risk for gang recruitment, prostitution, and exploitation. Street-involved youth are often victims of violence and abuse before leaving home, and such victimization continues on the street (Boivin et al., 2009; Evenson and Barr, 2009). Alcohol and drugs are often used to cope with these experiences (Crerar, 2006; Roy et al., 2007). While street-involved youth may be aware of more adaptive coping methods, the absence of healthy role models can be an obstacle in adopting them (Crerar, 2006; Evenson and Barr, 2009). Research suggests street involved youth benefit from interventions designed to improve adaptive coping skills (Unger et al., 1998).The goal of the Links program was to provide peer support and healthy role models to street-involved youth, with a special focus on Aboriginal youth.

THE LINKS PROGRAM

The Links program brought together university students and youth transitioning out of homelessness to share information and life experiences in a safe and encouraging environment. Emphasis was placed on recruiting Aboriginal street-involved youth since this population is overrepresented among the homeless.

Group meetings took place at a youth housing facility in Edmonton. Each of six groups completed 12 two-hour sessions over a three month period. Group size was limited to 10 participants (5 students, 5 youth) for optimal levels of group discussion and bonding. All sessions began and ended with a sharing circle. The first four sessions were dedicated to orientation and group work at the transition centre. During these sessions facilitators worked to build rapport between participants. Beginning in week five, sessions began with an opening circle, followed by activities that frequently took place outside the centre as selected by participants. For example, a walkabout on the streets of Edmonton, volunteering in a soup kitchen, and attendance at a crystal meth anonymous meeting educated students about the realities of street life; while a tour of the university, a yoga class and a

pottery class educated homeless youth about the educational choices avail-able to them and some potentially new and healthy ways to handle stress and have fun. A full description of the program is available in published form (see Sather et al., 2009).

Evaluation objectives

The objectives of the present evaluation were identified by individuals who developed and evaluated the Links program including Patti LaBoucane-Benson who served as co-investigator on the project and Cheryl Currie who was recruited as an independent program evaluator once data collection was complete. The first program objective was to increase understanding, acceptance, and advocacy between students and youth. The second was to foster supportive relationships. The final objective was to enhance know-ledge and skills in ways deemed useful by participants.

METHODS

Participants

Youth aged 18–30 transitioning out of homelessness were invited to partici-pate in the Links project via posters and word of mouth at a transitional housing facility for street-involved youth. To recruit university students, a course was created and advertised through mass emails, posters and pre-sentations. Youth received a $20 honorarium for completing the program; students were rewarded with a course credit. As shown in Table 1, 28 post-secondary students and 27 youth participated in the program across six separate groups. Students ranged in age from 19–29 years; the mean age was 23 (SD=2.8 years). More than two thirds (67.9%) of students were fe-male, Youth transitioning out of homeless ranged in age from 18–26 years, the mean age was 21 (SD=2.6 years). Almost two thirds (63.0%) were male. Approximately half (48%) of the youth who participated in the project identified as Aboriginal.

Table 1. Breakdown of Links Participants by Group

Group	Youth (n = 27)	Students (n = 28)
1	4	4
2	2	5
3	6	4
4	5	5
5	5	5
6	5	5

Data collection

Qualitative data were collected across all six groups. At the first meeting, program facilitators administered a 15 minute survey to participants that included open-ended questions about what they hoped to achieve in the program and words they would use to describe the group they would be paired with (i.e., youth were asked to describe university students and vice versa). An exit survey distributed at the last group meeting asked participants what they had gained from the program. Completion rates for youth and students for both intake and exit surveys were 88.9% and 89.2% respectively. Students also completed 12 weekly journal entries and a final term paper for course credit (100% response rate). Students shared conversations they had with youth in their journals. Although filtered through the eyes of students, this information was used as a secondary source of data for youth given the limited amount of information collected from them. At the end of the program youth were also invited to answer questions about program impacts in a 30 minute audio-recorded interview with Links facilitators. Five youth agreed (response rate: 18.5%; 60% female). The study received approval from the University of Alberta's Human Research Ethics Board; written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Analysis strategy

Rather than using more common problem-based evaluation approaches that focus on program goals and weaknesses in meeting those goals, the present learning-based evaluation examined program strengths and ways to nurture those strengths with the overall purpose of improving the social value of Links and future programs like it. This approach, outlined by Rossman and Rallis (2000) involved repeated cycles of data immersion and reflection by the authors to identify themes. Regular discussions were held to achieve consensus on emerging themes and assess the degree to which they fit with program goals. Analyses were conducted using NVivo 7.0. Quotes have been used to illustrate identified themes, grouped by program objectives. Quotes were identified by participant status and ID (S: student, Y: youth), and group membership (G1: group 1).

RESULTS

As shown in Table 2, nine themes were identified and matched to stated program objectives. A final theme did not fit into the *a priori* objectives identified and was grouped separately.

Increasing understanding and acceptance

The first objective was to increase understanding and acceptance among participants. As shown in Table 2, four themes identified in the data suggest this objective was met. First, data suggest the program increased understanding among participants by challenging initial preconceptions. Canadian society is often segregated by socioeconomic rank. Groups of people who seldom interact often develop negative preconceptions about groups they consider "other" (Rodenborg and Huynh, 2006). This phenomenon was apparent on intake surveys. Students described youth as tough, apathetic, challenging, and difficult. Youth described students as rich, smart, hard-working, serious, and judgmental. These preconceptions were immediately challenged in group interactions:

> I was also really surprised by how timid and shy the homeless youth were when we first arrived.... 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. (S3G6)

> 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. (S5G6)

> 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. (Y3G2)

> 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. (Y2G1)

Table 2. Objectives of the Program and Themes Identified

Program Objectives	Number	Themes and Supporting Quotation
1. Increased Understanding and Acceptance	Theme 1	Challenging preconceptions
	Theme 2	Recognizing similarities
	Theme 3	Challenging stereotypes
	Theme 4	Assuming roles
2. Building Supportive Relationships	Theme 5	Forming strong bonds
	Theme 6	Changes in motivations to participate
3. Developing Knowledge and Skills	Theme 7	Gaining knowledge
	Theme 8	Gaining communication/interpersonal skills
	Theme 9	Gaining personal skills
	Theme 10	Personal impacts

A second theme was the similarities students and youth saw between themselves, particularly in relation to substance abuse and addiction. These similarities enabled participants to understand and accept one another more readily:

> During our sharing of culture I noticed that drugs/alcohol played roles in all of our lives. It seemed to be all negatively. (S4G1)

> 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. (S1G1)

Some groups decided to bring in speakers to share facts about addiction and the help available. Other groups chose to hear from addicts themselves or experience addiction treatment as a group activity (e.g., attend a 12 step meeting, visit an Aboriginal addiction treatment facility).

> We attended Poundmaker's Lodge [Treatment Centre] 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. (S5G5)

As a result of these interactions several participants realized they had a substance use problem and sought help, including one university student who admitted he had been secretly using drugs in sessions. As group members bonded, they shared other experiences they had in common and worked together to find more effective ways to cope with the problems they shared:

> One of the things a 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 off 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. (S4G6)

A third theme identified in the data was the challenging of deep-seated stereotypes. Among students, the recognition of similarities between them-

selves and a group they considered "other" created a state of internal dis-equilibrium that helped many become more accepting of the youth in the program:

> 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. (S1G1)

> I am really glad that [the Youth Participant] 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. (S4G6)

> 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 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. (S3G1)

Youth also began to recognize and challenge stereotypes they held about university students and themselves. Most notably, youth realized they had been talking down to themselves and roping off their life by making unconscious decisions about what they could achieve:

> 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 it's just a few small decisions in life that separate us. It gave me a better understanding on that and I realized I can be there as well if I choose to. (Y1G2)

> 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. (Y2G2)

A final theme related to the roles assumed by students and youth in the program. As Links progressed, students often began to assume the role of informed advocate for youth by sharing information, listening, and providing encouragement. In contrast, youth demonstrated resilience in action; frequently educating students about street life and culture and modeling personal self-determination. For example, youth often chose activities, such as walkabouts in socially disadvantaged areas of town, that educated students about the realities of life on the street. Students were inspired by these

stories, and through their eyes, street-involved youth evidenced 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. (Y2G1)

> Listening to the 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. (S6G3)

Building supportive relationships

The second program objective was to foster supportive relationships. Qualitative data indicate strong bonds were formed between participants. This appears to be a particular strength of the program:

> 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. (S1G6)

> 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. (Y5G2)

> 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. (S3G1)

Data suggest that as these bonds developed individuals became increasingly motivated to attend meetings. However, this shift did not occur for all group members. The most commonly cited limitation of the program was that some youth did not show up reliably for sessions. To address this problem facilitators made themselves available to youth if they had questions outside program hours, spoke to the group about helping others feel included, and made it possible for youth to continue to participate if they moved out of the transitional housing facility that meetings were taking place in. These changes had positive impacts on group bonds:

> 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. (S1G1)

Developing knowledge and skills

A final program objective was to enhance knowledge and skills in ways deemed useful by participants. On intake surveys youth expressed a keen interest in learning what it was like to be a university student. For example, one youth wanted to find out if life for students was "happy go lucky" or "if everyone shared in hard times." Findings suggest students were motivated to share this information and were sensitive to youth perspectives:

> 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 Participant] that it would not be something that would offend her, but rather inspire her. (S2G1)

Through their interactions with students, youth commented on becoming inspired to consider university as an option:

> 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. (Y2G1)

Other important goals for youth transitioning out of homelessness were to develop better communication and interpersonal skills, to overcome fears of rejection and to become more outgoing. Given their personal histories, learning to communicate openly and trust others were difficult hurdles to overcome. The Links program was structured to tackle these issues and evaluation data suggest many youth made important strides toward these goals 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 to be so fearful in front of strangers, and just my communication skills. (Y2G2)

> 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. (Y3G1)

Students also commented on the progress youth were making in their weekly journals:

> When [one of the youth] 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. (S3G6)

> 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. (S2G1)

Final goals for youth were to learn healthier ways to live, to deal with stress, and to have fun. Evaluation data suggest the program helped youth gain skills in these 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. (Y1G2)

> One of the [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. (S5G2)

> ... also another thing that helped me from this program was suicide prevention, because I've had people around me try to commit suicide. (Y3G1)

> I am now realizing the importance of sharing our lives and experiences with the [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. (S1G6)

In addition, findings suggest some youth gained leadership skills in Links. The program was structured to encourage youth to take leadership

roles in the planning and implementing of weekly activities. These experiences appear to have improved self efficacy and motivated some to assume more leadership roles in their community:

> [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. (Y3G1)

> One of my favorite things about the evening is hearing one of the ladies from [the homeless shelter] say that feeding the homeless 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 to 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. (S4G1)

The main goal for students entering the program was to gain a better understanding of poverty and homelessness. Data suggest the program met this goal for students:

> 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. (S3G2)

> As a 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] 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. (S4G6)

> 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. (S4G1)

PERSONAL IMPACTS

A final theme in the evaluative data was the impact of the program on participants spiritually and emotionally. The power of sharing in a circle during group sessions appears to have played an important role in these changes:

> 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. (Y4G1)

Students also discussed spiritual impacts in the context of what they had learned about Aboriginal culture in the program:

> 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. (S3G5)

Discussion

The Links program broke down societal barriers by bringing young people together who would not otherwise meet. A particular strength of the program was its ability to foster relationships between students and youth by creating a supportive and encouraging environment, and by emphasizing the strengths that both university students and street-involved youth brought to the group. Highlighting shared experiences, like substance abuse and addiction, brought down walls and promoted increased understanding and acceptance among members. For students, the recognition of similarities between themselves and a group they had considered "other" increased awareness about their own deep-seated stereotypes about vulnerable populations. Over the course of the program students became supportive advocates for street-involved youth and some began considering careers related to homelessness prevention.

Youth began the program with fears that postsecondary students would be judgmental. As the program progressed youth became more comfortable interacting with students, and many began to sense the ways they were judging and placing limitations on their own future. Many were motivated and inspired to further their own education. This is an important strength of this program given completing secondary and postsecondary training would have striking impacts on the employment prospects, economic well-being, and health of these youth.

Long-term follow up of youth who participated in Links was not feasible and is a recognized limitation of this evaluation. Anecdotal data suggest the program did have long-term impacts. For example, in 2008 a former youth participant testified in Edmonton's Drug Treatment Court that interacting with university students in the Links program had a powerful and positive effect on his life and played a key role in his decision to go back to school. It is recommended that the collection of long-term evaluative data be built into

the funding proposals of future programs. While intermittent homelessness may make this difficult, research suggests the use of electronic debit cards combined with efforts at maintaining positive relationships with street-involved youth may result in high rates of follow-up (Des Jarlais et al., 2004).

Data collected for this evaluation had several additional limitations. First, attendance rates at weekly sessions were not recorded. Second, street-involved youth were not asked to complete weekly journals. Third, while intake surveys did include an ethnicity question, exit surveys and in-person exit interviews did not, and were not linked by ID codes to initial intake questions. Thus, program outcomes could not be grouped by Aboriginal status to highlight specific findings for this population. That said, half the youth participants were Aboriginal, and the results as a whole are applicable to and have implications for programs aimed at working with and mentoring Aboriginal street-involved youth in Canada. Finally, while the use of qualitative methods was key to providing thorough descriptions of program impacts, the collection of quantitative data (e.g., pre/post self efficacy scores) would have been useful to triangulate findings.

Conclusions

The Links program was created to increase understanding and acceptance among street-involved youth and university students, foster supportive relationships, and enhance knowledge and skills. Findings suggest the program created intense bonds between students and youth. These bonds formed the foundation on which the other stated objectives were achieved. Street-involved youth were empowered to challenge stereotypes they held about university students and themselves. Many realized they had been talking down to themselves and roping off their life by making unconscious decisions about what they could achieve. The program also broke down stereotypes and broadened student perspectives about street-involved youth. Overall, both groups gained knowledge through this unique experience that they can use to build a better future for themselves and their communities.

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