

This article reports on the theory-driven evaluation of a drop-in center for youth that incorporated a literature search, concept mapping with staff, and focus groups with youth. Findings revealed strong agreement among the three sources of data around specific elements identified as critical components of a program theory of global prevention in after-school-hours initiatives, such as drop-in centers. These results are used to illustrate how a theory-driven approach was relevant for the context and objectives of this evaluation, as well as how it was used to develop knowledge useful for action, social intervention theory, and further research.

AN APPLICATION OF THEORY-DRIVEN EVALUATION TO A DROP-IN YOUTH CENTER

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Despite the multitude of literature on youth prevention programs, after-school and community programs have been largely understudied. According to a study titled *A Matter of Time. Risk and Opportunity in the Non-School Hours* (Carnegie Corporation of New York 1992), the role of the family and school is overemphasized and not enough importance is given to the community, its organizations, and youth programs. In fact, in comparison to other prevention programs, few evaluations have been undertaken in this area of prevention. This may in part be attributed to the very nature of these programs: In an effort to provide a global perspective to prevention, youth centers, drop-in centers, and youth organizations typically offer a variety of different activities that are loosely structured and under the guise of an open approach. Consequently, formal evaluation of these programs is difficult and somewhat problematic because youth participation varies according to

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convenience and exposure to the program is inconsistent. In light of this, a theory-driven evaluation may be an appropriate method to document the preventive dimensions of these centers as well as their underlying mechanisms.

This article reports the study of a YMCA Youth Center, inspired by theory-driven evaluation. The approach and methodology used for this evaluation are described, then the results emanating from the evaluation are presented. The findings reported demonstrate how this type of evaluation may help to clarify the basic principles underlying this form of preventive intervention and contribute to the development of the knowledge on prevention toward youth.

THE YMCA YOUTH CENTER

Since its inception in 1988, the YMCA Youth Center offers youth ages 10 to 17 an informal setting in which unstructured and structured activities are provided during after-school hours, 6 days a week. The drop-in is similar to an arcade, with two pool tables, a baby foot, and video games. It is from this setting that the Youth Center—staffed by a director, two full-time animators, part-time staff, students, and volunteers—provides three distinct types of activities: (a) sports and recreational programs, (b) educational and sensitization programs, and (c) informal counseling and referral services. On a typical evening, the Youth Center serves between 75 to 150 young people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The primary objective of the YMCA Youth Center is prevention. Given its overall orientation of promoting a global approach to prevention, activities are aimed at involving local youth as a whole, as opposed to targeting a specific problem or population group at risk. Organizers of the Youth Center anticipate that offering youth an alternative setting such as the drop-in center will reduce the incidence of school dropouts, intergenerational and inter-ethnic conflicts, teen pregnancy, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as a reduction in drug- and alcohol-related problems. Implicit to this approach is that crime and delinquency will significantly be reduced, if not prevented.

EVALUATION APPROACH AND OBJECTIVES

The evaluation was initiated by the YMCA. Staff and board members identified their need to better understand the preventive nature of the Youth

Center. They also required additional information for planning purposes because the Youth Center was scheduled to move into a new building under construction at the time of this evaluation. It is important to note that throughout a 6-year period, the Youth Center operated out of three different locations: a basement on a commercial street, the former Y building, and a corner-style grocery flat. Despite these frequent relocalizations, the Youth Center's popularity remained unchanged as youth continued to participate wherever the center was located. Having demonstrated its appeal to youth in the various locations, the purpose of the evaluation was twofold: (a) to identify and describe those components or factors that have a significant impact on the preventive nature of the Youth Center and (b) to generate pertinent information to be used in planning the new Youth Center.

The transitional nature of the Youth Center had to be taken into consideration in selecting the specific approach for this evaluation. In essence, this evaluation involved a program that would no longer exist in its present format when the results would be available. However, based on the Youth Center's capacity to successfully adapt to different environments, this evaluation focused on revealing its most significant elements in terms of prevention. These, in turn, could be used in the planning and organizing of the new Youth Center. It also could contribute to developing a theory of global prevention in community settings as proposed by Bickman (1987, 1990), Chen (1990b, 1994), and Chen and Rossi (1983, 1987).

According to Weiss (1997), "theory-based evaluation examines conditions of program implementation and mechanisms that mediate between processes and outcomes as a means to understand when and how programs work" (p. 41). This was in line with what was expected from this evaluation. Promoters of the Youth Center wanted to demonstrate to their sponsors that their center was relevant in terms of prevention for youth in the neighborhood. They also wanted to know which critical components of their program had an influence on its effects and thus should be preserved in the new setting. In initial discussions with them, it appeared that they already had hypotheses regarding the active ingredients of their program but lacked a clear or consensual vision of them. It then became apparent that before looking at implementation conditions or at the process itself, the program theory needed to be elucidated.

Chen (1990a) defines program theory as a group of interrelated assumptions, principles, or propositions that enable us to explain or guide social action. Program theory identifies the necessary actions that should be taken and the conditions required to achieve their planned impact. The basic assumptions are then centered around the assumed linkages between the means (resources, activities, and process) and the results to be obtained.

These assumptions between means and effects may emanate from a well-known theory. They also may be based on beliefs in certain values or ways of doing things, that is, beliefs supported by experience. This was the case with the promoters and staff at the Youth Center. However, these assumptions had never been clearly articulated or tested out in terms of what was concretely accomplished. The role of the evaluation would then be to make known these assumptions, synthesize them into a consistent theoretical format, and examine their congruence with the program as implemented. It was also of interest to verify if this theory from the field had its own counterpart in the specialized literature on prevention. Finally, this theory-driven evaluation would be useful for a future outcome evaluation, as demonstrated by Smith (1989), Wholey (1987), and Weiss (1997).

Within this framework of a theory-driven evaluation, the operational objectives of the evaluation were aimed at (a) describing the theory at the basis of the global preventive approach practiced at the Youth Center, (b) verifying to what extent this theory from the field was reflected in the specialized literature, and (c) confirming to what degree youth participating in the Youth Center shared the same vision of the center as its promoters.

METHODOLOGY

The study was designed as a mixed-method evaluation and specific procedures were undertaken in regard to the above three objectives (Caracelli and Greene 1997; Chen 1997; Wiener et al. 1994). First, to elicit the promoter's theory, concept mapping (Trochim 1989) was used. Second, a computerized literature search was completed to identify theories and previous studies. Finally, the youth's perceptions were documented through focus groups.

CONCEPT MAPPING

Concept mapping is a technique that combines qualitative data with quantitative analysis. It is a structured process in which participants are asked to contribute their ideas around a specific theme, in this case the preventative nature of the YMCA Youth Center. The end result is the production of a concept map, a graphic representation of the participants' ideas in relation to the given theme and the interrelationship between the different concepts.

Participants involved in developing the concept map included the four staff members involved in Youth Center at the time of the evaluation: the

director, two animators, and a student sponsored by a governmental employment program. The overall question drafted for the concept mapping process was, "In what way can/does the Youth Center contribute to prevention?" This question was thought to be general enough to encompass the Youth Center's overall global approach to prevention.

At the initial meeting, respondents were asked to brainstorm and express their thoughts and ideas on the theme question in the form of short statements. The four participants generated a total of 88 statements. They added another 29 statements after reviewing the written list for a total of 127 statements. Duplicate statements were eliminated, resulting in 118 statements. Finally, using a random number selection, a total of 98 statements were kept for the analysis (due to the limits of the software).

At a subsequent meeting, participants were given the 98 statements written on separate sheets of paper. They were then asked to individually rate the degree of importance of each of the 98 statements on a 7-point scale ranging from 7 (*most important*) to 1 (*least important*). Following this, participants were asked to individually sort the 98 statements into thematic groupings. These ratings and groupings of individual participants were analyzed with the computer software Concept System developed by Trochim (1989). Following a hierarchical cluster analysis and multidimensional scaling, a 10-cluster solution was retained.

At a follow-up meeting, participants were presented with a first draft of the concept map. Participants were then asked to identify the underlying common denominator or generic term within each cluster group. The concept map was then finalized. A final meeting was held to identify the postulated causal links between the elements of the concept map. Staff members were asked to draw unidirectional arrows between the concepts to link means with goals. This exercise was completed individually by every participant. After computing the frequencies of arrows between two elements, a figure illustrating the causal linkages was produced.

LITERATURE SEARCH

A computerized literature search was undertaken to identify existing documents on general preventive approaches (vs. specific approaches such as peer programs), broad-aimed programs (vs. targeted on a specific problem such as substance abuse), nonpopulation-specific interventions (vs. programs directed at a specific group such as inner-city youth), and nonschool, after-school-hours services or community programs.

FOCUS GROUPS

The objective of the focus groups with youth was twofold: (a) to compare youth and staff perceptions of the Youth Center and (b) to create an inventory of youth's needs and expectations regarding a Youth Center. In all, five focus groups were held. Forty participants were selected on a convenience basis from the list of youth registered at the Youth Center. The focus groups were organized homogeneously according to age, gender, and language. Two groups, one in English and the other in French, were held with girls ages 14 to 19, and two other groups (English and French) were held with boys ages 13 to 19. One mixed group was held with younger participants (ages 12 to 15). The groups lasted between 2½ to 3 hours.

The interview guide consisted of five different exercises designed to elicit youth's ideas and priorities for a Youth Center. These included asking youth (a) to describe the Youth Center for a new visitor, (b) to comment on sources of pleasures and worries of a group of smiling teenagers portrayed on a large photo, (c) to develop a scenario about the circumstances explaining why a young person became a street beggar after having been an ordinary student, (d) to brainstorm on whether a special youth event should take place in an informal community center versus a modern sports complex, and (e) to make recommendations for an ideal youth center. Each interview was coded following the completion of these five exercises. Those comments pertaining to the same topic were summarized in short statements. These were then regrouped according to larger topics and transferred onto a comparative table so that it was possible to compare each theme with each exercise from one group to another.

FINDINGS

STAFF-DEFINED PROGRAM THEORY: THE CONCEPT MAP

Figure 1 presents the concept map resulting from the various steps outlined above. According to this map, the preventative nature of the Youth Center is based on 10 basic components. The center provides an accessible and welcoming setting, support and flexible follow-up, freedom to experiment in a supervised environment, as well as increased self-worth and personal recognition without judgment. The Youth Center also offers opportunities for personal and social development, leadership development, and participation in the learning process. Flexibility and special events are also

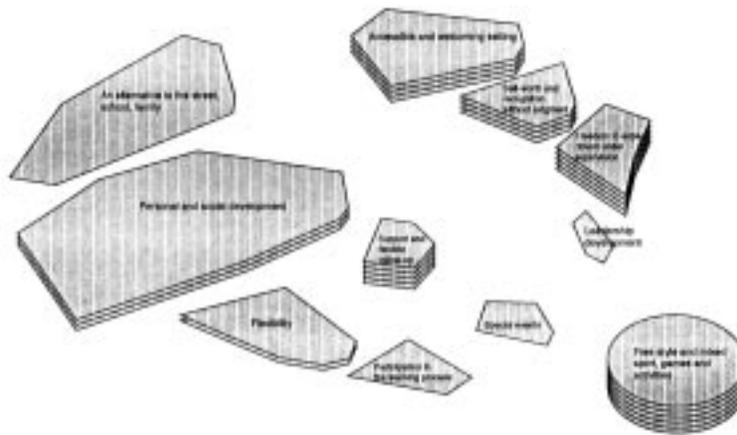


Figure 1: Concept Map of the Youth Center

distinctive features of the center. Finally, the center is described as an alternative to the street, school, and family. Table 1 provides the detail for this concept map and identifies for each grouping the number of statements, the mean rating of importance, the rank, and some examples of statements.

It should be noted that the thematic grouping of free style and mixed sports, games, and activities, represented by an oval shape in Figure 1, was added after the concept map was produced. It was only after presenting the 10 thematic groupings that participants noted that the fundamental feature inherent to the drop-in center, that is, its recreational component (games such as billiards, table tennis, Nintendo, and television), was missing from the concept map. This omission is paradoxical, particularly because all the meetings took place at the Youth Center alongside the material related to these games and activities. Given that this element was added after the formal process occurred, it has no rating of importance on the concept map. Nonetheless, participants considered this element very important to the Youth Center.

The most important concept describing the Youth Center is support and flexible follow-up, with a rating of 6.10. Statements within this grouping relate to the personnel and their role in the Youth Center. The second area of importance is the concept of freedom to experiment under supervision, with a rating of 5.86. Statements within this grouping refer to provision of a

TABLE 1: Concept Map Groupings, Mean, and Rank

<i>Grouping</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Grouping 7: Support and flexible follow-up It is a place where youth are listened to It is a place where youth can go to when they have problems It has a stable staff	6.1	1
Grouping 2: Freedom to experiment under supervision It is a place to try out new experiences Here, there is no alcohol or drugs It is a place where violence is not allowed	5.86	2
Grouping 1: Accessible and welcoming setting It attracts youth It is not just for the rich or the poor—the two can play together They feel at home	5.79	3
Grouping 4: Self-worth and recognition without judgment It is a place that helps them to adapt to difficulties It is a place where one can express one's emotions It is a place where you are accepted for who you are, your character	5.61	4
Grouping 6: Personal and social development It is a place where youth are not alone It is a place where youth can have a conflict and still come back It is a place where youth can be confronted in a positive way It develops self-esteem—you are recognized for who you are	5.15	5
Grouping 3: Leadership development It is a place to take on responsibilities It is a place to develop initiatives The youth are the motors of their own activities	5.05	6
Grouping 8: Flexibility It is not too structured, but youth also can become involved in structured projects It is a place to take risks, but if one fails it is not serious It is often a platform to do other things—youth come because of one activity and discover another	4.88	7
Grouping 9: Participation in the learning process It is a place where one can participate in structured programs It is youth who have the opportunity to participate in media events, such as Music Plus, R.C.	4.75	8
Grouping 5: An alternative to street, school, and family It is a place with stable hours It is a shelter It is a place that when it is closed youth miss it It is a place where one does not have to be the best	4.7	9
Grouping 10: Special events It is a place where youth can participate in workshops, a garden It is a place where one can make barbecues, Christmas trees It is a place to make parties	4.5	10

structured and supervised setting, one that is flexible and open, thus offering new experiences, respect, and freedom for youth. The concept of an accessible and welcoming setting rated 5.79 and includes those statements referring to the specific characteristics of the Youth Center (open, adaptable, accessible, free, welcoming, and youth) as well as to the youth who use the Youth Center (young, rich, poor, ethnic groups, and friends). The idea of personal growth and expression emerges as the fourth thematic concept, self-worth and recognition without judgment, with a rating of 5.61.

Some thematic clusters were more difficult to name than others. For example, the thematic cluster labeled personal and social development required several formulations before participants were satisfied. Statements in this thematic grouping refer to those social conditions that encourage the development of youth, including a mixture of ages, openness, and a group presence. The next thematic cluster, in order of importance, is leadership development. It rated 5.05 and includes those statements that relate to personal responsibility and initiative. Four other thematic clusters rated between 4 and 5. The concept of flexibility, which rated at 4.88, promotes the idea of an easygoing setting well suited to create and support initiatives. The final three thematic groupings include descriptive elements about the Youth Center, and its activities. Participation in the learning process rated 4.75 and refers to the structured activities. The concept of an alternative to the street, school, and family, which rated 4.70, refers to the different aspects of the Youth Center, including the schedule, peak times, no charge, multiculturalism, and statements describing the atmosphere in the Youth Center such as a refuge, tolerance, and acceptance. The lowest rated thematic grouping (4.50) covers statements related to special events at the Youth Center: barbecues, Christmas trees, camping, group outings, parties, or monthly activities.

Figure 2 identifies the staff members' causal linkages between the concepts. According to the direction of the arrows, these linkages are oriented in such a manner that groupings on the left are perceived as having effects on those groupings in the center or on the far right. Although the groupings on the far right represent the end points or anticipated results, those situated in the center and far left represent the means. Straight lines indicate that the relationship between the two groupings was expressed unanimously among staff. Dotted lines indicate that three out of four staff members expressed this relationship. Finally, the absence of arrows between the groupings indicates that less than two staff members linked these groupings.

This visual representation reveals the action theory underlying the preventive nature of the Youth Center in terms of overall links between the means used and the anticipated results or outcomes. Youth Center staff distinguish the following three outcomes for the Youth Center: (a) to offer youth an

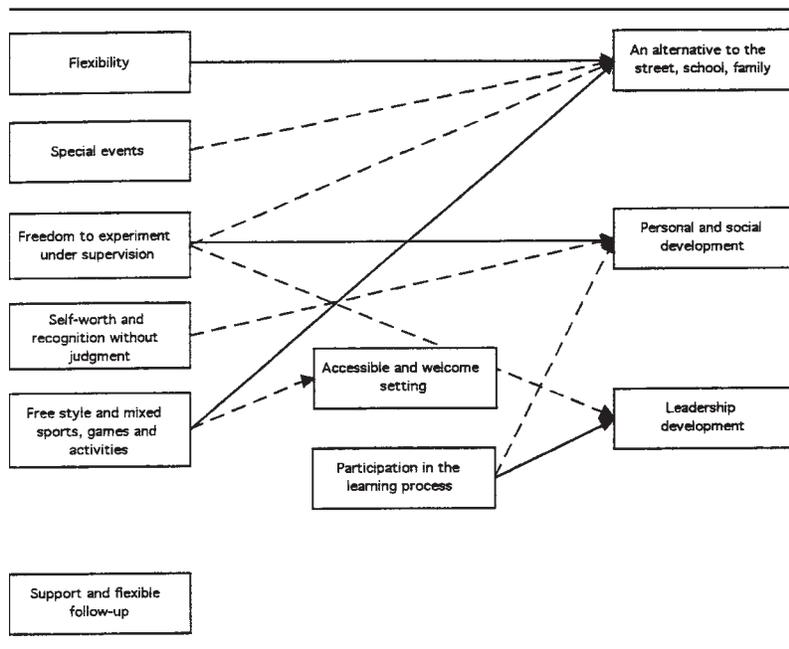


Figure 2: Drop-In Center's Program Theory

alternative to the street, school, and the family; (b) to promote personal and social development; and (c) to sustain leadership development. The other groupings represent the means to achieve these outcomes. Free style and mixed sports, games, and activities (in an accessible and welcoming setting), as well as flexibility, provide youth with an alternative to the street, school, and the family. Special events and the freedom to experiment under supervision also contribute to creating this alternative milieu.

It is this supervised freedom that mainly promotes personal and social development. Self-worth and recognition without judgment is also a factor, as is participation in the learning process.

This participation, combined with freedom to experiment in a supervised setting, enables leadership development. In essence, there is a reciprocal relationship between these three elements: personal and social development, leadership development, and participation in the learning process. The importance given to providing an accessible and welcoming setting (third rank in importance) and free style, mixed sports, games, and activities may be explained by the fact that these two clusters in the conceptual map may

represent the underlying principles of this youth center, that is, an alternative to the street, school, and family. Similarly, the importance placed on freedom to experiment under supervision (second rank) may be due to the fact that this characteristic of the Youth Center must support both an alternative milieu and leadership development.

However, support and adapted follow-up, the most important component according to ranking, has no causal links with the other groupings. According to staff, this dimension is less related to Youth Center activities than others are. On one hand, these activities are individualized and removed from ongoing services offered at the Youth Center. On the other hand, the lack of adequate resources required for support and follow-up results in staff responding primarily to crisis situations and subsequently referring the individual elsewhere. Thus, even though support and follow-up activities are judged to be very important, they are not viewed as sufficiently integrated or intense enough to be considered as an objective or a means to achieve a desired outcome.

GLOBAL PREVENTION AND AFTER-SCHOOL-HOURS PROGRAMS IN THE SPECIALIZED LITERATURE

The results of the specialized literature review revealed that information relevant to a global preventive approach could be grouped into three major areas: (a) studies dealing with the relationship between recreational activities and drug and alcohol abuse, (b) community psychology literature, and (c) studies on after-school-hours programs and youth organizations.

Recreational activities is an important issue addressed in the literature on the prevention of drug and alcohol abuse among adolescents. Aguilar and Munson (1992) argued that recreational activities should be an integral part of any intervention model. Others have established the link between the type and quantity of recreational activities and the consumption of drugs and alcohol (Dembo 1978; West 1987), aggressive behavior, delinquency, and participation in gangs (Lutz 1981; Robert 1966). Cohen (1976) was one of the few to successfully demonstrate how delinquency and aggressiveness can be reduced through the involvement of adolescents in meaningful recreational activities. The link between adolescent participation in organized recreational activities and the reduction of high-risk behaviors is explained by the fact that by participating in these activities, the amount of time available for involvement in other high-risk activities is reduced. In a study on an after-school substance abuse prevention program directed at latchkey children attending a primary school in a low-income community, Ross et al. (1992)

postulated that removal from an environment “in which alcohol and other drugs are readily available . . . reduces environmental risk” (p. 25). This program proved to be effective in improving academic performance, then reducing the likelihood of appearance of risk factors such as school failure and low self-esteem.

The second major area of relevant literature deals with community psychology. Although more globally oriented, this literature provides theoretical support for the model used by the Youth Center. According to community psychology theories, prevention is often associated with the various strategies aimed at increasing a sense of belonging, either to a particular group or community, increasing social responsibility, or building on existing strengths. The theories put forth by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Risley (1977) on ecological developmental psychology and behavioral psychology offer a theoretical model linking involvement in significant recreational activities to adolescent functioning.

The report by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1992) is one of the few available documents on after-school-hours programs. After reviewing existing programs and community organizations serving youth, the report concludes that after-school-hours programs should offer youth opportunities to (a) socialize with peers and adults through free activities and structured programs in safe places; (b) develop skills that are relevant now and in the future, such as decision making, problem solving, and communication; (c) contribute to the community through involvement in the decision-making process and volunteer work; (d) belong to valued groups, formal and informal, of different sizes and composition; and (e) feel competent from practicing these new skills, public performances, and personal and group achievements.

PERCEPTION OF THE CENTER

The focus groups validated the premise that the point of entry for youth is a location that offers indoor games such as video, table tennis, and pool tables. In essence, the drop-in format creates a structure within a nonstructure. Initially, the nonstructured activities attract youth to the Youth Center, whereas the more structured ones subsequently retain their participation. Thus, versatility and flexibility of the structured activities appear to be a determinant factor for youth involvement because too much structure discourages participation.

Youth clearly expressed the need to have a space that they consider to be their own. They do not object to the idea of sharing certain areas such as a

gymnasium and equipment, provided that they have a separate space of their own to retreat among friends and listen to their music. This space is viewed as a viable alternative to the street or their home or is seen as place to meet others rather than being left alone after school (thus the importance of having a quiet location in which to relax and do homework).

The geographic location of the Youth Center is important. It should be located on a well-lit, busy thoroughfare that is safe and accessible to public transportation. The physical location should reflect an open and welcoming image for all youth. The physical layout should include several different rooms from which one can circulate easily to and from. This type of open design enables new participants to circulate freely without feeling too restrained or under observation as they might feel being restricted to one room.

Youth clearly differentiated between organized team sports and those sporting activities offered at the Youth Center. The former represent more structured and competitive activities offered elsewhere, whereas those offered at the Youth Center are just for fun. In fact, youth greatly appreciate these fun, mixed, sporting-type activities offered at the Youth Center. Although several youth expressed their personal satisfaction in doing competitive sports, they do so elsewhere.

Supervised freedom seemed to suit participants, particularly with regard to the existence of the Youth Center rules. Youth stressed the positive aspects of rules in terms of the ambiance, the safekeeping of equipment, and their personal safety. According to them, Youth Center rules are adhered to. The respect for rules is directly related to the individual's and collective well-being, supported by a sense of belonging to the Youth Center.

Youth acknowledged that the Youth Center is a place for socialization with other youth as well as with adults. They identified adults working in the Youth Center as playing a distinct role of confidant. Even though youth tend to confide more easily with their peers, they also seek support from adults. Relationships may develop among youth as well as youth and staff persons. Thus, the Youth Center staff must be able to bring youth together. Staff should be both male and female as well as reflect the linguistic and ethnic composition of the community. Each staff member must be a good listener, good counselor, good observer, and be able to recognize when someone has problems. The numerous personal qualities expected from staff members include openness, availability, understanding, dynamism, and a knowledge of sports. Staff also must reflect through their attitudes and behaviors the philosophy and orientation of the Youth Center. They are responsible to express this vision. Whether it be the aspect of pleasure and relaxation or that of

respect and leadership, staff members represent the community and should create links between youth and the community.

DISCUSSION

THE PROGRAM THEORY CORE COMPONENTS

Several key elements of the Youth Center program theory are identified unanimously as being essential (see Table 2). Both the Youth Center staff and the specialized literature emphasized the importance of recreational activities (free style sports and mixed activities) in preventive strategies for youth. Youth also recognized these as a fundamental feature of the center, something that attracts them and that they consider as very pleasant. Other elements agreed on by all three sources include an accessible and welcoming setting; an alternative to the street, school, and family; support and flexible follow-up; and freedom to experiment under supervision. Those recreational just-for-fun activities could constitute the basic components of global prevention, that is, the ability to attract and maintain youth through recreational activities in a safe and pleasant milieu. Within this context, the freedom to experiment, coupled with support and informal counseling, represent more prevention-targeted elements.

THE PROGRAM THEORY AND YOUTH PERCEPTION OF THE CENTER

Through the focus groups, the youth referred spontaneously and in a positive way to the components outlined in the concept mapping and in the literature. Staff and youth also share the same interest for flexibility and special events. However, youth placed greater importance on special events than did Youth Center staff. Youth perceived these events as important moments where they could develop a sense of belonging and solidarity and get closer to staff. The latter viewed these activities as peripheral to the overall mission of the Youth Center.

Youth did not identify certain issues that both the specialized literature and the Youth Center staff considered as crucial elements in a global preventive approach. These include the importance of personal and social development, leadership development, self-worth and recognition without judgment, and participation in the learning process.

TABLE 2: Components of Program Theory of an After-School Prevention Program and Sources of Confirmation

<i>Staff's Concept Mapping</i>	<i>Importance Rating</i>	<i>Sources of Confirmation</i>	
		<i>Literature</i>	<i>Youth</i>
Support and flexible follow-up	6.1	Socialization with adults, support, counseling	Role of model, confidant, and counselor
Freedom to experiment under supervision	5.86	Free and structured activities, safe places	Positive aspects of rules—safety and safeguard of material
Accessible and welcoming setting	5.79	Socialization with peers, sense of belonging	Attracts, place to meet with others, accessibility
Self-worth and personal recognition without judgment	5.61	Building on strength, feeling of competency, personal and group achievements	
Personal and social development	5.15	Skills development	
Leadership development	5.05	Participation in decision	
Flexibility	4.88		Much appreciated
Participation in the learning process	4.75	Social responsibilities	
An alternative to the street, school, and family	4.7	Alternative to the street, basic principle in prevention	Space of their own
Special events	4.5		Very much enjoyed, sense of belonging
Freestyle and mixed sports, games, and activities	—	Recreational, free activities for prevention	Very popular, association with fun
	—	Contribution to the community, volunteer work	

THE PROGRAM THEORY AND SPECIALIZED LITERATURE

Although community participation through volunteer work is identified in the literature (Carnegie Corporation of New York 1992) as one of the five opportunities that should be offered to youth, this element is not present in the staff's theory or the youth's discourse. Instead, the Youth Center staff and youth placed greater importance on relationships between the genders, as

well as relationships between different age, linguistic, and ethnic groups. This may be explained in part by the fact that these issues reflect local conditions and specific concerns in this particular milieu.

TOWARD A PROGRAM THEORY OF GLOBAL PREVENTION WITH YOUTH

In reference to Figures 1 and 2, it appears that, according to staff, the more critical components of the program are the freestyle activities and the accessible, welcoming setting, which in turn create an alternative milieu to the street, school, and family. These three basic elements are confirmed by the two other sources of data. Freedom to experiment under supervision, coupled with competent staff who act as role models, confidants, and resources (support and referral) for helping with crises and chronic problems, are other critical ingredients unanimously identified. Both youth and staff identified flexibility in the organization and programming as an important element to creating an alternative setting. Finally, the role of special events should not be underestimated, given their importance and significance for youth.

Those components unveiled exclusively by staff members and in the literature relate more to values and skills and focus on two interrelated goals: (a) social and personal development and (b) leadership development. To attain these objectives there must be participation in the learning process, self-worth and recognition without judgment, and freedom to experiment under supervision.

Contribution to the community, a dimension proposed in the specialized literature, does not appear in this model. Concerns regarding the community are, however, expressed in terms of prevention objectives (prevention of intergenerational and interethnic conflicts).

CONCLUSION

Many agencies offering drop-in programs in nonschool hours refer to a global model of prevention where recreational activities in an open, accessible, and welcoming setting are used as a means to attract youth and reduce time that otherwise would be available for high-risk activities in at-risk environments. Although in recent years more sophisticated approaches targeted at specific groups or problems have been favored over this generic approach, drop-in centers can play multiple roles by offering youth (a) an alternative setting to their milieu, whether it be disadvantaged or problematic families,

and (b) a viable option and counterbalance to inactivity, boredom, and isolation or to frequenting the public arcades, bars, or merely hanging out in the streets, parks, or vacant lots.

In this study, the convergence of data between the concept mapping with staff of a youth center, the knowledge from the specialized literature, and the focus groups with youth was strikingly high. This points to a high level of credibility regarding the critical components of global prevention programs that have been identified and offers some indication on how they work. In this sense, theory-driven evaluation was quite effective in organizing knowledge to serve action and in allowing the development of knowledge from the action.

However, this is only a first step. Theory-driven evaluation allowed us to unveil the program theory explaining the links between the objectives and the means undertaken to achieve the anticipated results. This approach can still be useful in demonstrating mechanisms between these assumptions and the observed effects. This is in line with Chen (1994), who recommends first relying on a qualitative approach to construct program theory using a few cases and then applying quantitative methods to test this theory with a large sample. Furthermore, this theory-driven evaluation provided essential information for a future outcome evaluation. It allowed us to clarify the program objectives and to identify indicators to verify to what extent the intended program is actually implemented.

Regarding the direct impact of this study, it should be noted that after presenting these findings to the Board of Directors, many of the critical components emanating from this study, such as support and flexible follow-up, an accessible and welcoming setting, and freedom to experiment under supervision, were implemented into the design of the new YMCA Youth Center. The Youth Center is currently operating in its new location at the Park Avenue YMCA in Montreal.

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