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## STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Youth-led community arts hubs: Self-determined learning in an out-of-school time (OST) program

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**Abstract:** This article reports findings from qualitative case studies of three youth-led community arts hubs, a program that is rooted in, and utilizes a self-determined learning approach. Qualitative case studies of three program sites sought to generate meaningful data that could lead to rapid ongoing program development and inform the development and delivery of new program sites. Multiple lines of inquiry were utilized, including observations, and focus groups at all three program sites were designed to gather outcomes and demographic data from participating youth, as well as interviews with program staff. Findings indicate that the program is more successful engaging youth when using primarily self-directed and youth-led approaches to learning and program delivery when compared to adult-driven and more structured activities. The findings of these qualitative case studies also hint at the program having a positive impact on participating youth, helping them build confidence, and strengthening their artistic abilities. Recommendations include promoting informal peer learning and mentoring to further self-directed learning opportunities, as well as operating the hubs during the summer months.

**Subjects:** Art; Dance; Education; Educational Research; Music; Secondary Education

**Keywords:** self-directed learning; developmental evaluation; out-of-school time program; program evaluation; youth-led; self-determined learning; youth-adult partnerships

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Out-of-school time (OST) programs are becoming increasingly common in schools and school districts across North America. There is a growing literature base exploring the elements associated with effective programming, such as hiring quality staff and cultivating a positive climate for learning. However, little is known about how youth-led programs that utilize self-directed approaches to learning can maximize academic and non-academic outcomes for participating students.

The primary aim of this article was to describe and compare findings from qualitative case studies of three OST program sites utilizing different levels of structure. Findings indicate that the program is more successful engaging youth and produces more positive outcomes for students when using primarily self-directed and youth-led approaches to learning and program delivery. Recommendations include promoting informal peer learning and mentoring to further self-directed learning opportunities, as well as operating the hubs during the summer months.

## 1. Introduction

Evidence hints at positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes for youth exposed to out-of-school time (OST) programs and self-directed learning environments (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Pilling-Cormick & Garrison, 2007; Schwartz, 2007). For example, “students who direct all or part of their learning tend to do better academically, are more creative, and have better social skills and positive attitudes about school” (Schwartz, 2007, p. 29). For the purposes of this research, self-directed learning refers to a situation, setting, or environment where “the conceptualization, design, conduct and evaluation of a learning project are directed by the learner (and) all decisions about how and what to learn, and how or whether to consult external resources, rest with the learner” (Brookfield, 2009, p. 2615). This article reports findings from qualitative case studies of three program sites exploring youth-led community arts hubs (the Hubs) developed and delivered by UNITY Charity. Multiple data sources contributed to this research, including interviews with program staff, observations of weekly youth-led hub sessions, and focus groups with participating youth.

UNITY Charity develops and delivers programming and learning opportunities to engage and empower disconnected Canadian youth aged 10–18 in an effort to help build safer schools, healthier communities, and productive citizens. (Hauseman, 2013). The purpose of this research was to build internal evaluation capacity at UNITY, generate meaningful data that could lead to rapid program refinement, and to offer lessons learned to inform the development and delivery of new Hubs. The Hubs function as drop-in centers focused on peer-to-peer mentorship, where youth-led artistic self-expression is used as a vehicle for expressing stress and developing leadership capacity. Designed to allow participating youth opportunities to hone their abilities in all four of the hip-hop-based arts disciplines (graffiti, breakdancing, spoken word, and beatboxing), the hub sessions are led by youth, who have the opportunity to learn from other artists. The youth-led nature of the Hubs, which are rooted in promoting self-directed learning, is an underutilized strategy among OST programs (Granger, 2008, 2010; Larson & Walker, 2010; Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002; Smeijsters, Kil, Kurstjens, Welten, & Willemars, 2011; Wright, John, Alaggia, & Sheel, 2006), which despite their honorable aims, typically resemble “school after school.” UNITY Charity currently operates three community arts hub locations in Canada. Two of the Hubs are located in Toronto, Ontario, with an additional Hub operating in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Two additional Canadian locations throughout Canada are currently in development and should be operational in the near future.

## 2. Research questions

The following five research questions were used to guide qualitative case studies of the three Hubs program sites:

- How do we best ensure youth leader participation after program breaks in the summer?
- When and how do we help youth leaders transition into new roles?
- What characteristics should the program coordinator have?
- What is the optimal balance between enforcing a set program structure, and providing flexibility and independence to ensure the program is truly youth-led?

In order to provide an appropriate background for exploring these questions, the next section includes literature regarding best practices in OST programs and self-directed learning.

## 3. Best practices in out-of-school time programs

The literature base implies that participation in OSTs can lead to a number of positive student outcomes, including increased student achievement and the development of leadership skills, as well as increased self-efficacy, self-esteem, and stress management (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Durlak et al., 2010; Scott-Little et al., 2002; Wright, John, Livingstone, Shepherd, & Duku, 2007). In order for OST programs to provide students with those positive outcomes, programs must be designed and operationalized in a way that best supports student learning and non-academic growth. The six best

practices mostly relate to program quality and are associated with positive outcomes. The first best practice involves OST programs having a clear mission (Mazza, 2012; Wright et al., 2007; Zhang & Byrd, 2005). Effective OST programs also ensure that they develop a safe, positive, and healthy climate for student learning (Anderson, Sabatelli, & Trachtenberg, 2007; Davies & Peltz, 2012; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004). This can include involving parents and guardians into the OST to learn with their children (Rosenberg, Wilkes, & Harris, 2014). The third best practice identified in evidence surrounding OST programs is to recruit a diverse mix of youth to participate, as this ensures that student discipline issues do not jeopardize program effectiveness (Cho, Hallfors, & Sánchez, 2005; Lauver & Little, 2005; Wright et al., 2007). Addressing barriers to participation is the fourth best practice associated with OSTs in the literature (Rapp-Paglicci, Ersing, & Rowe, 2006; Wright et al., 2007). The fifth best practice identified in effective OSTs involves hiring, training, and retaining high-quality staff (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Hauseman, 2016; Scott-Little et al., 2002; Vandell, Simzar, O'Cadiz, & Hall, 2016; Wright et al., 2007). Finally, effective OSTs are able to engage participating youth through a flexible curriculum, allowing for different levels of program structure and allowing students to pursue self-directed and learner-centered learning opportunities. While there is not a “silver bullet” for developing and delivering high-quality OSTs, programs that follow these evidence-based best practices are more likely to produce positive outcomes in participating youth.

#### 4. Self-directed learning

Self-directed learning has been associated with positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes in youth (Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005; Gibbons, 2002; Teal, Vess, & Ambrose, 2015). Conversely, “directly controlling teacher behaviors have negative effects on the emotions, motivational orientations, and engagement styles of both girls and boys” (Assor et al., 2005, p. 408). Self-directed learning has also been associated with improved student wellness (Teal et al., 2015) as well as increased creativity, self-efficacy, and motivation (Deci et al., 1991; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, Ryan and Deci (2000) found that, “choice and the opportunity for self-direction appear to enhance intrinsic motivation as they afford a greater sense of autonomy” (p. 59). Self-directed learning is also important because it sets the stage for future learning as, “it enables students to customize their approach to learning tasks, combines the development of skill with the development of character, and prepares them for learning the rest of their lives” (p. 2–3). These positive findings are in stark contrast to the unflattering portrayals of unschooling, self-directed learning, and other alternative learning opportunities found in popular culture (Hauseman, 2011). Though these positive findings are based on only a few studies which utilized small samples sizes, they do hint at the potential beneficial nature of youth-led, self-directed learning environments.

The UNITY Hubs can be considered a self-directed learning opportunity that is the result of a youth–adult partnership. Youth–adult partnerships provide opportunities for youth to take on leadership roles and become involved with planning and programmatic decision-making (Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014; Camino, 2005; Lekies, Baker, & Baldini, 2009). Youth–adult partnerships also force participants to reconsider the roles and responsibilities of youth and adults involved in the program (Camino, 2005; Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Camino (2005) mentions that youth–adult partnerships “are characterized by mutuality in teaching and learning between youth and adults, as well as mutuality and decision-making” (p. 75). In order for youth–adult partnerships to be successful, they must be configured in a way that has adults cede control to youth and let go of traditional student–teacher roles and norms (Mitra, 2005; Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014). Youth–adult partnerships have also been cited as an effective way to build supportive relationships between youth and high-resource adults (Krauss et al., 2014; Sullivan & Larson, 2010).

#### 5. Methods

Data collection methods involved in the qualitative case studies at the three Hubs program sites included observations of sessions, and focus groups with participating youth as well as interviews with program staff. Observations and focus groups with youth occurred at all three program sites. The following section provides a detailed description of the data collection methods utilized for this study.

### **5.1. Observations of program sessions**

Observations were conducted at all three program sites. The first observation occurred in December 2014, while the other two observations were conducted in March 2015. One session was observed at each of the three program sites. Observations were conducted at five-minute intervals during the Hub sessions at each of the three program sites to accurately document the number of participants who were engaged in the sessions and determine the most engaging aspects of the Hubs programming. Engagement was measured by recording the number of participants who were engaged in the program through active participation, active listening, and asking questions. Lack of engagement was measured by recording the number of participants who were talking with others, using their cellphone, or otherwise not involved in the session. Observations were selected as a data collection method to aid in developing a comprehensive understanding of how the Hubs operate at each program site. Further, the observations allowed for data collection to focus on determining participant engagement during the hub sessions, monitoring the level of self-directed learning and youth-led programming, as well as exploration of outcomes at each location.

### **5.2. Focus groups with youth**

Focus group with youth participating in the Hubs were conducted as part of the site visits, so one focus group occurred at each of the three locations. Focus groups were conducted in an effort to obtain youth perspectives on the following aspects of the Hubs:

- Program structure;
- Youth participation;
- Qualities of effective youth leaders and program coordinators.

A total of 27 youth participated in the 3 focus group sessions. The largest focus group contained 15 youth, while the one with the lowest attendance had only 4 youth participate.

### **5.3. Interviews with program staff**

Five program supervisors, as well as UNITY's Executive Director and Managing Director of Operations participated in a short 15-minute interview focused on perceptions of the Hubs and attitudes regarding their perceived effectiveness with youth. Telephone interviews were conducted with a total of seven program staff members between April and July 2015. Qualitative data analysis involved using the constant comparative method to identify recurrent and emergent themes within the qualitative data (Merriam, 2009; Springer, 2010). Categories and sub-categories in the data related to the self-directed and youth-led nature of the program, youth outcomes, and challenges as well as aspects of the Hubs that are working well.

## **6. Findings**

Findings derived from data collected using each of the methods involved in this project are reported throughout this section. This section begins with a discussion of perceptions related to whether the program should break in the summer months. This is followed by ways UNITY can help engaged youth transition into new roles within the hubs, and a description of the characteristics associated with effective program coordinators. The findings conclude with the perceptions of both youth and staff, regarding whether the program should continue to be a youth-led initiative rooted in self-directed learning, or if a set program structure would be desirable. As previously stated, the findings are organized according to the research questions.

### **6.1. How do we best ensure youth leader participation after program breaks in the summer?**

Two different strategies UNITY could employ to address concerns around ensuring youth participation after the program breaks during the summer months emerged from the data. The first strategy involves engaging in higher levels of effective promotion and organization of the Hubs. For example, one program coordinator bluntly stated, that the program "needs to be more organized." In an ideal

situation, the program coordinators and other staff should have all details about their site, including the venue, organized at least two or three months before program launch. Engaging in highly organized administrative practices will allow UNITY and their staff more time to focus on promoting the Hub among the youth in the local artistic communities.

The second strategy to emerge from the data involves operating the Hubs during the summer. Youth at all three program sites were quite engaged in the programming and expressed their desire to attend sessions throughout the summer months. For example, one youth stated, “I would definitely come during the summer when my schedule is more free.” Similarly, another youth at the same focus group echoed that sentiment by stating “most of the people in this area who have graduated are in university or working, so we have no free time, and even those in high school are off in the summer, so I feel like more people could come out.” By operating in the summer months, the Hubs could capitalize on being viewed as a gathering place for youth who would otherwise not be able to connect during the summer. For example, one youth talked about how the Hub “is a good place to plan things.” Youth also indicated that it may be easier to attend the sessions in the summer because of more amenable transportation options. As one youth mentioned, “the summer months also give you different options for transportation instead of huddling in a cold bus shelter.” Furthermore, if youth who attend programming during the summer have a positive experience, they may be more likely to continue attending during the school year, when their schedules become more difficult to manage.

## **6.2. What outcomes are associated with participation in the youth-led community arts hubs?**

Data gathered from the interviews, observations, and focus groups indicate that participation in the Hubs is associated with positive outcomes for participating youth in terms of decreased stress, developing skills in their chosen art form, building confidence, and developing leadership skills. The sample population displayed extensive coping mechanisms to manage stress and high levels of leadership ability at the time of data collection, which came at least partially be attributed to participation in the Hubs. Data related to each of the findings mentioned above will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

### **6.2.1. Confidence and developing skills in chosen art form**

All program coordinators agreed that they have seen youth grow and develop confidence and skills in their chosen art form while operating the Hubs. For example, when discussing youth outcomes, one of the program coordinators stated, “confidence is a big thing. The largest thing that has changed—other than actual skill development—is confidence.” All focus group participants at one of the sessions agreed that they had gained more confidence since attending the Hubs. Another youth described the impact of the Hub on her life by simply saying,

I’m one of the youngest here. I haven’t been going to UNITY that long, but I came here last year as a bboy (breakdancer), and now I’m a spoken word artist, so you evolve in what you are in the hip-hop community as a person, which I find really cool, which I find isn’t as available at open mics or out in poetry groups in school.

When discussing increased confidence developed through attendance and participation in all aspects of the Hubs, another youth stated “I get happiness.” This evidence indicates that the Hubs are having a positive impact on the confidence of participating youth.

One of the program coordinators said, “you especially see (the youth) growing in the art form, and the confidence level of those youth went up during the duration of the few weeks.” Similarly, a program coordinator at a different site stated:

Dancers who came at the beginning of the program and stayed until the end were more comfortable and confident in their art form. They all look up to (the program coordinators) as well, so when they do realize that (they) are open and down to earth and encouraging, that helps their confidence.

This was a recurrent theme as another program coordinator indicated that participating youth have developed:

Definitely more confidence in the arts. They loosened up more and were able to be silly in front of each other over the course of the program. Because of the personal development stuff we did do, they were more loving of each other and showed more appreciation towards each other by the end of the program.

Youth also mentioned that the Hubs have a positive impact on their growth and development as artists. One youth mentioned, “For me it is a great space to create. There are so many great vibes and so much energy that as a writer I can just write with all of the good energy and good vibes.” Youth also spoke highly of the self-directed nature of the program. For example, one youth stated, “I can dabble in the other arts, and if you are completely new there are people who can teach you, which would be comforting and I think that is a very important aspect of what the community is and what it stands for.” Similarly, a participant at another focus group said,

Seeing how different people venture across (the city) to come here and practice—that is very inspirational for me. Just witnessing how other elements operate and how other (artistic) elements work to create their art, not just breaking (breakdancing). It opens up my views to see those things.

Based on these findings, the youth-led community arts hubs have been effective at helping students grow and develop skills in their chosen art form.

### **6.3. What characteristics should the program coordinator have?**

There was general agreement that the program coordinators who operate the Hubs should display an interesting mix of skills to succeed in the role, and assist youth in creating a positive climate and engaging atmosphere suited to self-directed learning. Participants in the focus groups and interviews identified five key characteristics associated with an ideal program coordinator. These characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

All participants agreed that the program coordinator should both be an artist and have connections within the local artistic community. Artistic experience gives the program coordinator credibility with the participating youth. For example, in the focus groups, one of the youth expressed this sentiment by stating, “if somebody wasn’t an artist and tried doing this, it is just kind of not the same ... they can put themselves in our shoes almost and know how to create the entire environment.” The ideal program coordinator also has the ability to “facilitate the programming without making it a forced activity” and to “create an atmosphere where everyone feels safe and is able to express themselves (more) freely than other places.” In this way, they must be a willing and engaging teacher, even if their role is to encourage youth to take risks in directing their own learning. Strong

**Table 1. Characteristics of an ideal program coordinator**

#### **Characteristics of an ideal program coordinator**

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Experience as an artist

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Connections to the local artistic community

---

Willing and engaging teacher

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Strong administrator

---

Engaged in the role

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administrative skills are also qualities associated with an ideal program coordinator. Finally, as one current program coordinator mentioned, “(UNITY) should definitely have a coordinator who is extremely excited about the program and who has the time to invest and go the extra mile to promote the program.” In order to be successful and effective, program coordinators must be fully engaged in all aspects of the role.

#### **6.4. What is the right balance between enforcing a set program structure and providing flexibility and independence to ensure the program is truly youth-led?**

While all three sites were youth-led, they employed different levels of structure in their program implementation. Information related to the level of structure at each of the community arts hubs was derived from observations of the how the program operates at each site. For example, Site Three was completely youth-led, with the program coordinator serving as more of a facilitator who was there to maintain the site and answer any questions youth have about the program. Site One was more structured and featured program coordinators directed the sessions based on flexible plans. Site Two was somewhat youth-led, using a combination of flexible lessons and input from youth to drive programming. These varying levels of structure were unintentional as the program naturally evolved that way at the three different sites based on the nature of the participants, the community, and the different program coordinators.

Participants, the program coordinators, and UNITY staff all agree that the primarily youth-led aspects of the hubs are what draw youth out to participate. For instance, one program coordinator said, “I really like the youth-led approach because it takes away the ‘school’ feeling. The people who come to the hub, they want to create on their own and be in their own spaces.” Similarly, one of the other program coordinators indicated that the Hubs “should have as much structure as is needed to advertise what is happening ahead of time, but not so much that it feels like you are forcing a curriculum on people who don’t want the training.” Perhaps another program coordinator best voiced this sentiment when stating, “it’s a mix. You have to do mix. We always had some type of structure planned out, but it was always flexible and we went with the flow. It works best that way.”

Evidence from the observations indicates that participants at all three Hubs are highly engaged. As one interviewee pointed out, the level of program structure at the Hub sites, “really dependent on the community and the facilitator rather than one approach being better than the other. Both can be effective. As displayed in Table 2, Site Three is more unstructured, but is so successful and has good outcomes.” All of this means that the UNITY Hubs programming can, and seems to, be applicable to Hubs with programming which is very structured, as well as those which use less-structured, somewhat youth-led, and completely youth-led approaches.

Most of this youth engagement was active participation in the programming, with some youth asking their peers and the facilitator’s questions about their art form. As mentioned earlier, engagement was measured by recording the number of participants who were engaged in the program through active participation, active listening, and asking questions. Lack of engagement was measured by recording the number of participants who were talking with others, using their cellphone, or otherwise not involved in the session. Observation data also support the notion that the youth-led community arts hubs are more engaging when embracing the youth-led aspects of the program, which were inspired by self-directed learning. The observations sought to determine youth engagement during the Hub sessions. As displayed in Table 3, youth engagement was very high at all three Hubs, though youth did perceive the less-structured settings to be more engaging.

**Table 2. Level of structure at each program site**

Site	Level of structure
Site one	More structured
Site two	Somewhat youth-led
Site three	Completely youth-led

**Table 3. Level of youth engagement in the programming at each site**

Site	Percentage of participants engaged (%)
Site one	85.42
Site two	87.17
Site three	94.44
Total	89.01

For example, the highest level of engagement during the observations was at the least structured site, which was the most youth-led and created the most opportunity for self-directed learning. At this site, participants were engaged for 94.44% of the observed session. Youth were engaged for 87.17% of the time the less-structured site during the observations. The site with the lowest level of participant engagement was at the more structured location, where youth were engaged 85.42% of the time. Across the three sites, participants were engaged for 89.01% of the time they attended the Hub, and were not engaged in the programming only 10.99% of the time. This confirms one of the interviewees' assertions that the question should no longer be about whether the Hubs as a whole should be structured or more youth-led. As they pointed out,

We continue to talk about youth-led and structured approaches to the hubs, while now we have examples of both. We could do a manual to say this is how you run a less structured hub, and also 18 week lessons plans for the structured hubs.

It is also worth mentioning that youth indicated that embracing a more structured and less youth-led approach to program structure would discourage attendance. Youth attend the hubs because they feel them to be places where they not only have voices but also are encouraged to express them. They appreciate the youth-led nature of the program, which is rooted in, and encourages self-directed learning. When asked about the possibility of delivering a more structured program with defined lesson plans for each week, one youth said, "I feel like that is a valid effort, but that it wouldn't go over well. It would fall apart. I feel like the structured stuff would fall apart because there is such a wide variety of people in the community ... you're going to have a smaller community joining up." Similarly, one of the program coordinators voiced a similar opinion when saying that, "you can set up a beatboxing workshop for a specific day, but you don't know if beatboxers will come, so you don't know if the people who do come will want the beatboxing workshops." Some participants did argue that a structured program is beneficial for younger youth, or for those who are just beginning to learn the art forms. As one of the youth stated,

Structure is good for those who are starting their art form who just need the guidance. For beginning bboys (breakdancers) or anything like that, if you see somebody practicing a foundation (can) help them out with that and take time to show them something.

Though youth at the Hubs were very engaged at all program sites, the site that was the least structured and fully embraced the youth-led nature of the program had the highest level of participant engagement. These findings lend evidence to support implementation of a less-structured and more youth-led approach at all hubs.

## 7. Discussion

The findings of this study provide further evidence that youth-led and self-directed learning opportunities can be an effective venue for both learning new art forms and building skills, such as confidence and self-efficacy (Assor et al., 2005; Gibbons, 2002; Teal et al., 2015). The Hubs are an engaging self-directed learning opportunity, which can help youth develop confidence and skills in their chosen art form. However, a number of recommendations for program policy and practice also emerged from the findings. For example, a decision needs to be made regarding whether the hubs should

operate during the summer break. Further, if the Hubs are operating during the summer, efforts need to be made to have all details and aspects of the program, including the venue, sorted out two to three months in advance of the program launch date.

Youth attending the program reported increased confidence, but there is less evidence indicating participants develop leadership qualities, high levels of empathy, and demonstrate that they are able to effectively manage their stress. UNITY should look to expand the audience for this type of programming beyond those who have already strengthened these skills and recruit youth who are disconnected or disengaged from their school and larger community (Cho et al., 2005; Lauver & Little, 2005; Wright et al., 2007). This focus would also enhance the opportunities for peer-to-peer learning available as older youth who have developed their skills and capacities through regular participation in the Hubs could informally mentor peers who beginning their involvement in the programming. This is also consistent with the self-directed learning-based aims that guide this youth-adult partnership (Assor et al., 2005; Gibbons, 2002; Teal et al., 2015). Perhaps it may also be beneficial for the program coordinator(s) to identify and recruit youth who have done well in the Hubs and inquire about whether they would be willing and available to take on responsibilities, such as participant recruitment, assisting with the venue and promotion activities (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Hauseman, 2016; Scott-Little et al., 2002; Wright et al., 2007). If successful, these participants could be offered incentives for their time, such as receiving an invitation to an artist training retreat or tickets to a local concert. It also seems that the Hubs attract artists at different stages of their careers. Some participants are just beginning to become involved in the elemental arts of hip-hop (graffiti, breakdancing, spoken word, and beatboxing), while others have performed their art for international audiences. Promoting informal peer learning and mentoring at each of the program sites can further the youth-led and self-directed learning opportunities available for participants.

Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from this study is that participants were most engaged at the Hub site that fully embraced a completely youth-led and self-directed learning approach to programming. As reported elsewhere, this flexible approach seems most appropriate for the development of non-academic skills in youth, including confidence and self-efficacy (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Hauseman, 2016; Scott-Little et al., 2002; Vandell et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2007). Based on these findings, it is recommended that the self-directed learning approach be extended to all program sites so it can be utilized with all learners, regardless of age. If participating youth are highly engaged with the programming, they are more likely to attend on a regular basis and develop skills in their chosen art form, and become more confident as architects of their own learning.

The findings of this study are encouraging, especially in terms of the increased student engagement observed during the completely youth-led and self-directed aspects of the Hubs. For this reason, it seems fitting to call for more rigorous research, monitoring and evaluation of self-directed learning opportunities. However, additional evidence is needed to further validate self-directed learning as an avenue that can effectively help youth develop skills and capacities. Further research and evaluation will not only help determine the true impact of self-directed learning opportunities, but spur scholars to ask more nuanced and information-rich questions than simply “are self-directed learning opportunities effective for youth?” It would be useful to develop a more comprehensive understanding of self-directed learning opportunities, including the types of students who thrive when working in self-directed learning environments, what aspects of self-directed learning approaches are most engaging, and under what conditions self-directed learning is most effective for youth.

## 8. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to build internal research capacity, generate meaningful data that can lead to rapid program refinement, as well as offer lessons learned to inform the development and delivery of new Hubs. Multiple lines of inquiry were utilized over the course of this research, including observations at all three program sites, focus groups with youth at all three program sites, and key informant interviews with program staff. Findings indicate that the Hubs are more successful in

engaging youth when using primarily self-directed approaches to learning and program delivery compared to adult-driven and more structured activities. The findings also hint at the program having a positive impact on participating youth. These findings are encouraging, but recurring themes from the data led to different recommendations for refining the Hubs. These recommendations were also designed to serve as lessons learned for any additional program sites launched in the near future. For example, youth perceptions that the Hubs would be more successful attracting youth to the program during the summer months should encourage UNITY to strongly consider the benefits and challenges associated with implementing and delivering the Hubs for an additional two months every year. Though this article does add to an emergent literature base pointing to the effectiveness of self-directed learning environments, it does suffer from many of the same issues identified earlier, such as small sample sizes. For this reason, engagement in further evaluation and monitoring efforts surrounding the Hubs and other programming that embraces a self-directed approach to learning is necessary. Collecting, analyzing, and using rigorous research and evaluation data is the only way to determine the ongoing and sustained impact of the Hubs.

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#### Correction

This article was originally published with errors. This version has been corrected as follows: A sentence in the abstract is missing a word. For clarity, the word 'to' has been added as a correction to the second sentence of the abstract.

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