

February 2011

YOUTHTOWN

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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YOUTHTOWN RESEARCH

SUMMARY

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Introduction

Youthtown is a non-profit organisation set up to help young New Zealanders succeed and flourish by providing them with opportunities for fulfilling physical, social and creative experiences.

In October 2010, Youthtown contracted Point Research Ltd to develop a National Youth Programme which is responsive to the needs of young people and which incorporates the principles of positive youth development. In order to ensure that the programme was informed by youth needs, the research:

- articulated the current needs of young people,
- communicated current domestic and international issues in youth development,
- included a stock take of the deliverables and known impact of existing national youth organisations, and lastly,
- proposed a framework for the development of a National Youth Programme.

A multi-method methodology was used, which included a literature review and stock take, interviews with key stakeholders including Youthtown coordinators, consultation with young people, including interactive conversation groups and an online survey and surveys of stakeholder groups, including parents and supporters.

In the spirit of collaboration, Youthtown would like to share some of the research findings, including parts of the literature review and survey results, with the wider youth development sector. In doing so, they would especially like to thank the stakeholders who generously gave their time by participating in an interview or answering an online survey.

Summary of the Literature

Benefits of Youth Programmes

Youth programmes are generally regarded as environments where young people can engage in informal recreational, educational and social opportunities (Smith 2001). Youth programmes offer young people an opportunity to capitalise on their personal interests and abilities in a manner which is supportive, developmentally appropriate, and strengths-based¹ (Ministry of Youth Development 2010). This may be done through a variety of social, educational, cultural, employment and identity-related services (Martin 2006; Fouche, et al. 2010) .

Well designed programmes aimed specifically at young people can have a significant positive effect on their lives. Overseas studies have found that participation in good quality programmes produces a range of short- and long-term positive effects. These include: an increase in self confidence and self esteem, lowered rates of criminal and anti-social behaviour and aggression, lowered rates of alcohol and other drug use, lowered rates of teen pregnancy, and reduced levels of negative emotions such as depression and anxiety (Hirsch, 2007; Mahoney et al., 2004). Moreover, these positive effects are not restricted to the young person and can also be seen in their whānau and communities (Fouche et al., 2010).

In many instances extra-curricular programmes, as opposed to the conventional school environment, may be more developmentally appropriate for young people (Seligson & MacPhee, 2004). An emphasis on activities, rather than academic abilities, helps to create a space in which young people can experience and demonstrate different skills (ibid.). Mahoney et al. (2004) believe that developing these competencies may promote engagement in school and the wider community and encourage resilience². Rather than being secondary to the learning process which takes place in schools, this form of learning can complement classroom experience by helping young people develop confidence in learning. This can then lead to them becoming more active learners and viewing learning as a partnership, rather than something which is imposed upon them (Wikeley et al, 2007; Hirsch, 2007).

¹ A strengths based perspective to youth development recognises that youth, their whānau/families and communities have specific and unique strengths and resources. It is a focus on what works, not on what doesn't work. Strengths-based practice is relationship-based and involves partnering with youth to identify and understand their strengths and resources and how these may be used to guide change (Hammond, 2005).

² Resilience refers to the development of competencies that enable children and young people do deal with challenges in their lives (Masten and Coatsworth, 1998 cited in Edwards 2007).

Summary of the Literature

Research recently conducted in Scotland show that parents, particularly parents of younger teens, believe that supervised activities of the type offered by youth programmes not only allow for skill and social development, but also reduce the likelihood of their children coming into contact with risks (Murphey 2000; Seaman, et al. 2006). Indeed, a 2007 survey commissioned by the Children's Society found that nearly half of adults think children should not be allowed to go out with their friends unsupervised until they are 14 years old (GfK NOP 2007). As a result, children are more likely to stay home, often indoors (United Kingdom Department for Health 2004). Gill (2008) argues that this loss of outdoor activity is a major contributing factor to the growth in childhood obesity in the United Kingdom. Further, he argues that controlled studies in the US have shown that regular contact with the outdoors or outdoor space can reduce the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Taylor and others, 2001 cited in Gill 2008). Youth programmes, therefore, allow young people to experience constructive (and often extremely physical) activities in a supervised space. Finally, involving young people in 'constructive' tasks and helping them to overcome challenges can contribute to their positive development by increasing their self-efficacy and self confidence (Rutter, 1987).

Principles of Positive Youth Development

While there is no single definition of positive youth development in the literature, it is generally agreed that positive youth development is a consistent, strengths-based approach which seeks to build and develop resiliency in the lives of young people through positive intervention (Bruce, 2008; Farruggia, et al. 2010; Winthrop, 2009). Activities and programmes undertaken within a positive youth development framework therefore seek to focus on the strengths and assets of young people and their families/whānau and communities (Murphey 2000).

Blyth (2006) identifies six tenets of youth development. These tenets are:

1. Youth development is a complex accumulation of everyday experiences, and happens whether planned or accidental
2. Development is cumulative and can be increasingly positive or negative depending on the nature of the experiences and how they are processed by the young people
3. Some proportion of this cumulative experience can be managed and intentionally designed to have a positive effect on the young person's development (e.g. youth programmes)
4. The contexts in which this experience occurs change significantly as youth age. This change is especially noticeable in youth aged nine to fifteen.
5. Young people have an increasingly significant say in their choice of experiences as they get older.

Summary of the Literature

6. Lastly, physical, cognitive and social development changes (particularly those centred on impulse control) that occur during the teenage years can fundamentally alter both the nature of an experience, and how that experience is processed.

Similarly, Delgado (2002) defined several overarching themes of youth development. He finds that youth development: is an inherent belief in youth self-worth; a recognition that youth must exercise control over their own lives; takes a holistic or ecological perspective on youth strengths and needs; understands that youth development is embedded within communities; is a commitment for the long-term and lastly, stresses the importance of cultural heritage. Winthrop (2009) found that positive youth development occurs when young people have opportunities to: experience supportive adult relationships; develop positive social values and norms; develop personal efficacy; participate in activities which contribute towards skill building; develop positive peer relationships; feel valued and have a sense of belonging and contribute to their community.

These overarching themes and concepts are recognised in the strengths-based positive youth development approach formally promoted in the 2002 Ministry of Youth Affairs Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa (YDSA). The strategy describes youth development as being

“*...about young people growing up and developing the skills and attitudes they need, both now and in the future, to feel positive and comfortable with their own identity, and believe they have choices about their future. It is also about young people developing ways for increasing control over what happens to them and around them. They need to feel they are contributing something of value to society and to their family friends and community. They also need to feel connected to society as a whole*

(YDSA p.4)

Six key principles underpin the YDSA. These principles indicate that youth development is shaped by the big picture; is about young people being connected; is based on a consistent strengths-based approach; happens through quality relationships; is triggered when young people fully participate; and needs good information (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002).³

³ The idea put forward in the YDSA that successful youth development “needs good information” requires that youth development needs to make use of best practice and an evidence base. In their recent study of mentoring programmes in Aotearoa/New Zealand,

Programme Principles

In 2009 a comprehensive evidence review of structured youth development programmes was undertaken for the Ministry of Youth Affairs (Winthrop, 2009). The key messages from this review are that:

- Youth programmes must be strength-based
- There are no types of activities which work best – the best types of activities are the ones which appeal to the young people who attend the programme
- Activities should be provide multiple learning opportunities and be focussed around future growth and development
- *How* activities are delivered is the most important element of effective practice
- Practitioners and programme coordinators should have some understanding of how to facilitate engagement, learning and growth
- Thought should be given to “what happens next?” e.g. how will learning and development be sustained after the young person has finished participating in the programme

These key messages centre on the idea that youth programmes must provide a range of opportunities, rather than seeking to find a “magic programme” which will work miracles (Blyth, 2006). Moving away from a simplistic programme-centred approach to a more complex youth-centred approach therefore signals an awareness of the complexities and dynamics of youth development (ibid; (Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2002).

Engagement

Engagement is the extent to which young people are involved, interested, and enthusiastic about what they are doing (Walker, 2006). Engagement is high when there is synergy between the needs of young people and the activities and opportunities they are involved in (ibid.), and where programmes or activities are flexible, autonomous and empowering (Fouche, et al. 2010). Moreover, young people are more likely to be attracted to and engaged in an organisation which has a culture of adults who support young people and their whānau and families and who advocate, share power, provide training and support and remove barriers to participation (ibid.).

Farrugia, et al. (2010) note that programmes based on international principles of best practice are more likely to be effective. It is generally agreed that the best strategies and characteristics that underlie successful youth programmes are intensive (rather than brief or superficial), comprehensive i.e. the focus is on the “whole”, rather than the parts and are flexible in that they don’t assume the same approach will work for everyone (Murphey 2000). Programmes which are sensitive to the needs and attributes of communities and community members are far more likely to succeed than programmes which assume that ‘one size fits all’ (ibid.).

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Healthy engagement is related to the choices and control young people have over which activities they undertake, as well as their participation and engagement in the activity itself (Blyth, 2006). Full participation from young people comes through their caring about, being invested in, and having a stake in the success of a program, which also reinforces their commitment and ownership (Saito 2006). This can be encouraged through sharing decision-making processes and including young people's viewpoints in activity choices and problem solving (Fouche, et al. 2010) as well as providing opportunities for young people to take on increased responsibilities and to make important choices (Blyth, 2006).

Including young people in decision-making around activities may improve more than just their own participation, as young people themselves are in the best position to understand how to engage non-participants. They know where to find and how to talk to them, what messages to use and the best way to deliver the messages (Saito, 2006). Indeed, a 2008 Ministry of Youth Development study for Youthline found that the best advertising for programmes and services is word of mouth spread by young people (Ministry of Youth Development, 2008). Parents, too, are an important factor to consider as research shows that most parents play a critical role in promoting or discouraging participation (Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza, & Beyer, 2006).

Disengagement occurs when young people perceive that their learning environment does not cater to their interests, potential or abilities (Dalziel 2010), when programmes are overly structured (Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza, & Beyer, 2006), or when they feel unwelcome or uncomfortable (Saito, 2006). Other barriers to participation include cost, transport or poorly run programmes (ibid.)

Whilst challenging young people to take part in new experiences and build new skills is a key part of positive youth development, care should be taken that these opportunities are provided in a manner which is strengths-based and supportive. Ten to 15 year olds, in particular, are less likely to want to participate in activities at which they may not excel through fear of peer criticism or exposing a lack of talent (Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza, & Beyer, 2006).

Intentionality

One of the more relatively recent developments in the field of youth development is the theory of developmental intentionality. This theory holds that developing and engaging young people in an intentional programme requires ways of working with young people that recognise and intentionally apply youth development practices and principles within a formal model (e.g. a youth programme). Intentionality is premised on "goodness of fit", whereby programme coordinators or leaders constantly adapt and adjust various aspects of the programme to in order to achieve the desired outcomes. It also recognises that youth are central to the "goodness of fit," in that they bring their

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own ideas and experiences which also need to be incorporated into what is offered (Walker, 2006).

Activities

Much of the literature focussed on youth activity types appears to suggest that it ain't what you do; it's the way that you do it. In other words, there is a growing body of evidence which suggests effective outcomes are related to the nature and characteristics of activities, rather than the activities themselves (Winthrop, 2009). Research conducted in the US with 57 young people and their parents suggests that, overall, young teens and their parents want activities which offer flexibility, less structure, and more leisure with small groups of good friends who share a specific interest (Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza, & Beyer, 2006).

Other research shows that the key characteristics of activities are that they:

- are youth-led or initiated (Seligson and MacPhee 2004; Marczak, et al. 2006; Saito, 2006)
- appeal to young people (Marczak, et al. 2006; Winthrop 2009)
- enable young people to feel as though they are in control of their learning and learning outcomes (Hirsh, 2007)
- are relatively unstructured, but have enough structure to facilitate developmental outcomes (Marczak, et al. 2006)
- are flexible and responsive to changing developmental needs (Seligson and MacPhee 2004)
- create multiple opportunities for meaningful participation (e.g. one activity could have opportunities for group decision-making, mentoring and socialising, as well as the activity itself) (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995)
- have plenty of opportunities for socialising (Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza, & Beyer, 2006)
- provide opportunities for parents, siblings and the wider social networks to take part and share successes (Evans and Plumridge 2007).
- Allow young people to develop positive relationships with supportive adults, including programme coordinators, but also adults from within the wider community who share common interests (Hirsh, 2007; Marczak, et al. 2006)

Evidence from both New Zealand and overseas would suggest that the primary principle of youth activities is that they are youth-led or initiated and are reflective of youth interests. Research recently conducted in the US with young people and parents to discover what they want from youth development programmes summarises:

“ One of the ironies of youth development programs (that by their nature are supposed to help youth

Summary of the Literature

make smart choices and be better leaders in their community) is that, for the most part, adults decide what programs to create. One of the strategies that were suggested in almost every focus group was to start with young people's interests and then develop programs based on what they like to do.

(Saito 2006:67)

Allowing young people to lead decision making on activity choice goes some way towards ensuring that activities will be appealing to their skills and interests and will enable them to feel some control over their learning and learning outcomes.

Overseas evidence would suggest that there is some tension between offering structured programmes, and on the other hand allowing programmes to be "organic" and flexible. In their examination of a number of youth activities, Mahoney, Eccles and Larson (2004:136) note that activities lacking in structure appear to attract youth with "existing social adjustment problems" which may lead to the development of anti-social behaviours among other participants and attendees. Similarly, Seligson and MacPhee (2004) believe that there is ongoing tension in some youth activities between over-structuring activities and allowing activities to become too chaotic.

Structure, however, does not necessarily need to be formalised or oppressive. Viewing programme structure as a set of principles or objectives which may be applied through youth initiated activities, and which allow opportunities for skills building and learning and support and guidance from adult programme coordinators and the like. This, in effect, is "unstructured structure". In moving away from formal, programmatic structures, youth programs can work towards a "more organic process that is inclusive of a broader range of diverse needs and interests of youth and families" (Marczak, et al. 2006:55).

Staff attributes

Adults, such as programme coordinators and project leaders, play a primary role in the success (or otherwise) of youth development initiatives. Indeed, research on adult youth workers in the US has shown that the leadership of just a single adult is what makes the difference between the success, or otherwise, of youth programmes. This research found that adults impacted positively not so much on what they *did* with the young people, but in *how* they did it (Seligson & MacPhee, 2004).

Much has been said about building connections between young people and supportive adults who surround the programme, and this is a key part to successful adult leadership. Also crucial are adults who can see and respond to the potential of the young people, are trustworthy and caring and, most

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importantly, who see themselves as part of a community of learning with the young people and who learn alongside them (ibid.). It is particularly important to have effective adult leaders in programmes that are flexible and responsive to different needs, as these leaders can ensure that the activity stays on track whilst allowing the youth to experience ownership and leadership over the activity (Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004).

In addition to leadership skills, organisations should give consideration to identifying adults in their communities with special interests or hobbies who can connect with youth. Marczak et al. refer to these people as “wizards”, who they define as people who “know themselves well, are deliberate in how they relate to others, and have certain assumptions about the worth of all people that filters their thoughts and feelings about others” (2006:53).

Survey Results

Online Survey - Youth

Demographics

By 17 December, 521 young people aged 13-18 had completed the survey. Of these, 342 were female (65.6%), and 179 were male (34.3%).

Nearly half (47.7%) of respondents were aged 16 or 17 years old. Six out of 10 respondents identified as NZ European, with 15 percent who identified as Māori, 8.9% as Asian and 8.6% Pasifika. Just over 13% of respondents identified as "other", the largest categories of which were Indian (including Fijian Indian) and African (including South African).

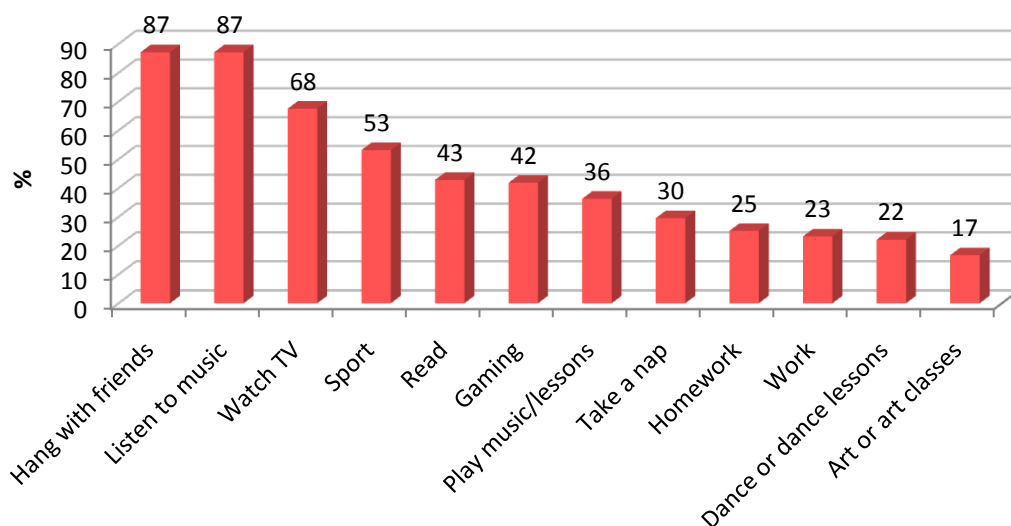
The highest number of responses came from youth in Auckland Central (22.4%), South Auckland (9.4%), Taupo (8.6%) and Christchurch (8.4%).

The majority of "other" responses came from Bay of Plenty, Waikato and Manawatu regions.

Spare Time

Respondents were most likely to say hanging with friends (87.1%) as well as listening to music (87.1%) was what they liked to do with their spare time.

Figure 1: What sort of things do you like to do in your spare time?



n=521

Other ways of spending spare time not included in the list above include outdoor activities (n=84), social networking such as facebook, texting, twitter (n=82) and

Survey Results

cooking (n=44), being with friends and family (n=37), shopping (n=29) and caring for or working with animals (n=21).

While just over half of respondents (51.8%) enjoy what spare time they have, a relatively large number (212 people or 40.6%) stated "I would like it if there were more things to do". A further 7.5% were "bored" with the amount of spare time they have.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents have four hours or more spare time on the weekends (Saturday and Sunday). The days of the week in which respondents have two hours or more spare time, in order of most to least popular, are: Sunday, Saturday, Friday, Monday, Thursday, Wednesday and Tuesday.

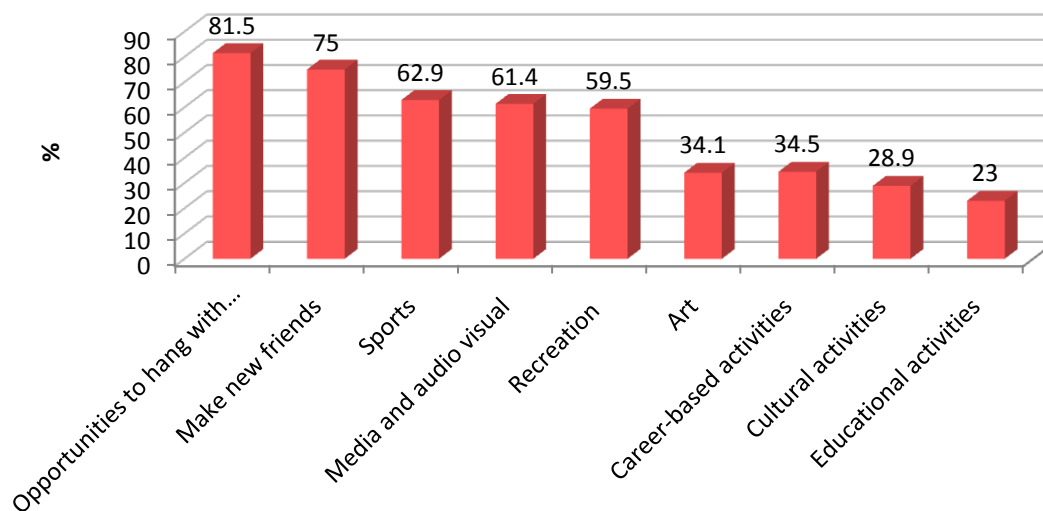
Youth-designed programme

Focus and activities

Respondents were asked to design their own youth programme. First, they were asked to choose areas of general focus for their programme. The majority chose a social focus for their programme, with eight out of 10 (81.5%) nominating their focus as "opportunities to hang with friends", whilst 75% also wanted opportunities to make new friends.

The most commonly chosen activity-focused areas were sport (62.9%), media and audio-visual (61.4%) and recreation (59.5%).

Figure 2: What would your programme include?



N=521

Respondents were then asked what particular activity areas they would choose. Answers were spread out over 23 unprompted categories, with the majority (94) favouring sports related activities. The next most suggested activities were activities around music, drama and dance (79), and relaxing and hanging out (25).

Survey Results

The categories of activities, in order of preference, are:⁴⁵

1. Sport (teams/lessons), physical activity and fitness, adventure sports (n=94)
2. Music, drama and dance (e.g. performing, listening, learning) (n=79)
3. Relaxing and hanging out (n=25)
4. Arts and crafts (e.g. painting, drawing, sewing, photography) (n=22)
5. Games and competitions (n=20)
6. Cooking and food related activities (n=18)
7. Skill and career development/life skills (n=16)
8. Computers (gaming and socialising) (n=13)
9. Confidence/team building/self discovery (n=10)
10. Animals (n=8)
11. Meeting new people (n=8)
12. Movies (n=7)
13. Fashion (shopping/design) (n=5)
14. Other/unknown (n=5)
15. Film making (n=4)
16. Lots of different things (n=3)
17. Religion / Spirituality (n=3)
18. Community, helping others (n=2)
19. Support and counselling (n=2)
20. Family activities (n=2)
21. Drinking/partying (n=2)
22. Cultural activities (n=1)

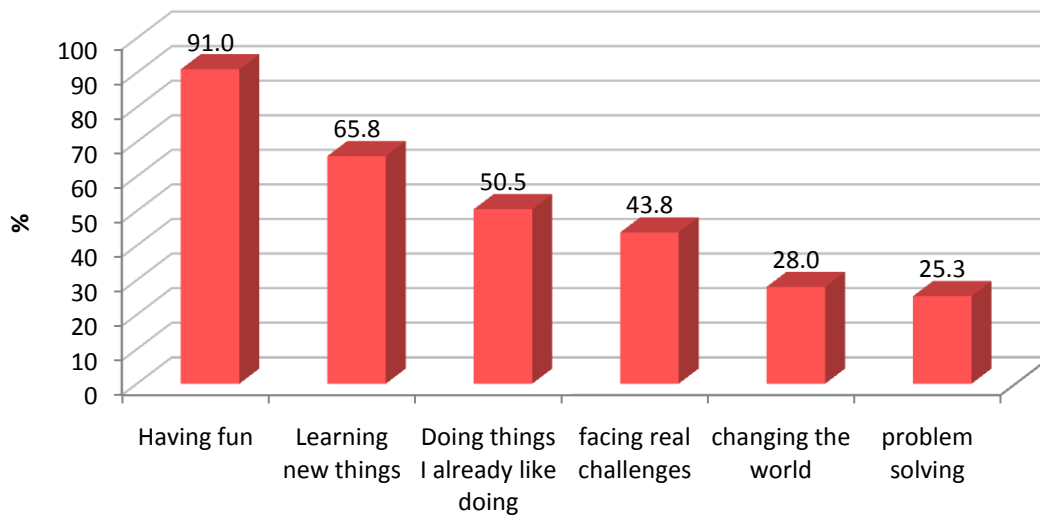
⁴ Please see Appendix One for a full list of suggested activities

⁵ Respondents may have suggested activities in more than one category

Survey Results

When asked what their programme would *mainly* be about, most respondents chose "having fun". A majority (65.8%) indicated that they wanted to learn new skills. The least preferred options were "changing the world" (although this was still favoured by over one-quarter of participants, or 28%), and problem solving (25.3%).

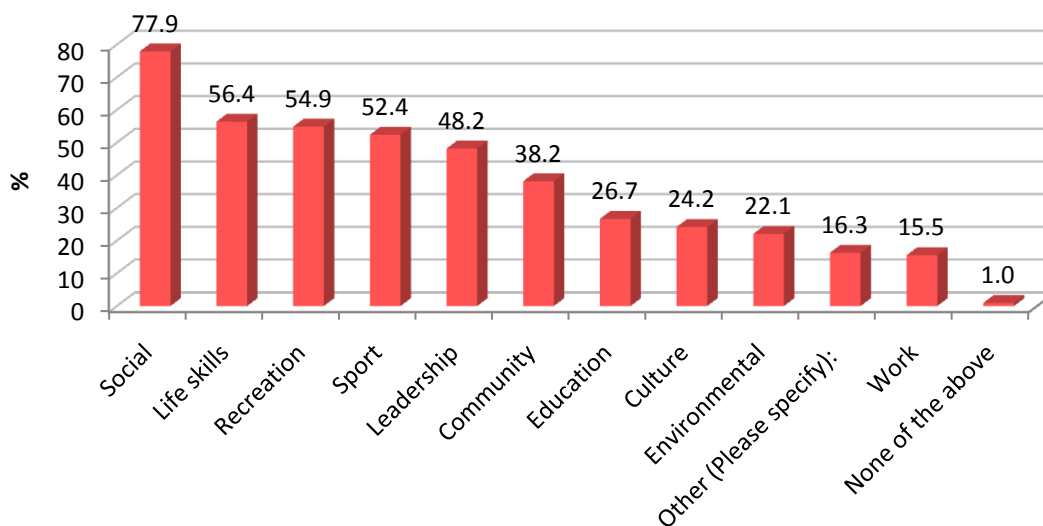
Figure 3: What would your programme mainly be about?



n=521

Respondents were asked to choose a more specific focus for their programme. Again, more than three-quarters (77.9%) chose a specific social focus, with more than half also choosing to focus on life skills (56.4%), recreation (54.9%) and sport (52.4%).

Figure 4: What would you like your programme to specifically focus on?



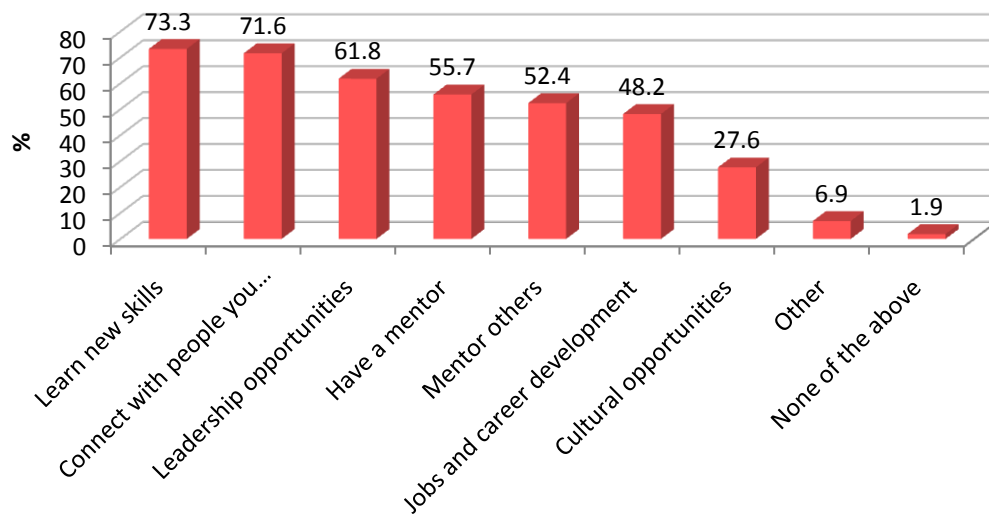
n=521

Survey Results

Besides a specific focus, respondents were asked to nominate general programme principles, such as skill-building, mentoring, leadership etc. Seven out of 10 wanted to learn new skills (73.3%) and connect with people they wouldn't ordinarily meet up with (71.6%). Leadership opportunities were selected by 61.8% of respondents.

Other areas of specific focus (under the "other" category) nominated by respondents included performing arts (n=31 respondents), teamwork (n=7), and gaining confidence (n=6).

Figure 5: Would your programme specifically focus on any of these things?



n=520

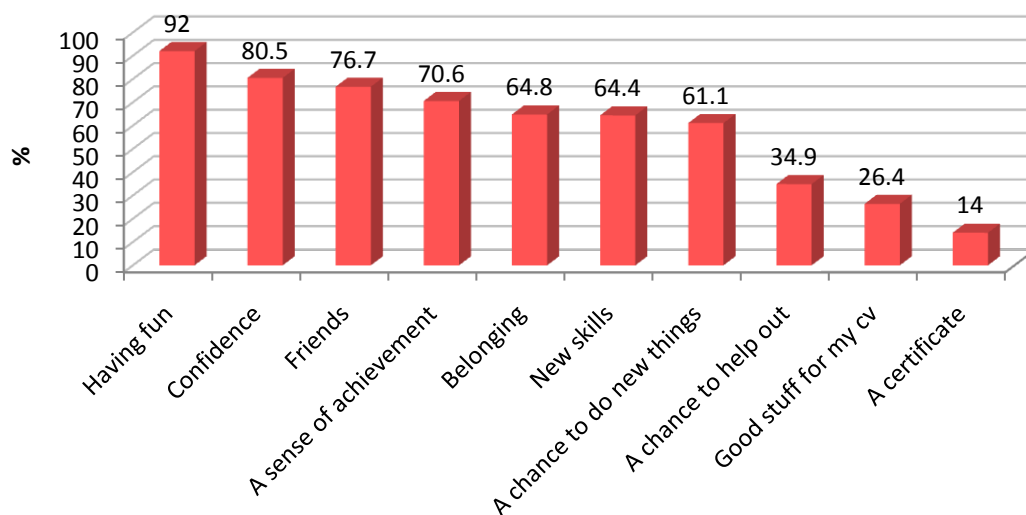
Programme outcomes

Social and personal development were among the most important outcomes for respondents, with 92% reiterating that "having fun" was one of their programme goals, along with developing confidence (80.5%), making friends (76.7%) and a sense of achievement (70.6%).

Material for their CV and a certificate were among the least important outcomes (26.4% and 14% respectively).

Figure 6: How important is it that people get these things from your programme?

Survey Results



N=521

Online Survey - Parents

Demographics

By 17 December, 138 parents had completed the survey. Approximately three-quarters had children aged between 12-15 years, with one quarter with children aged 16-18 years.

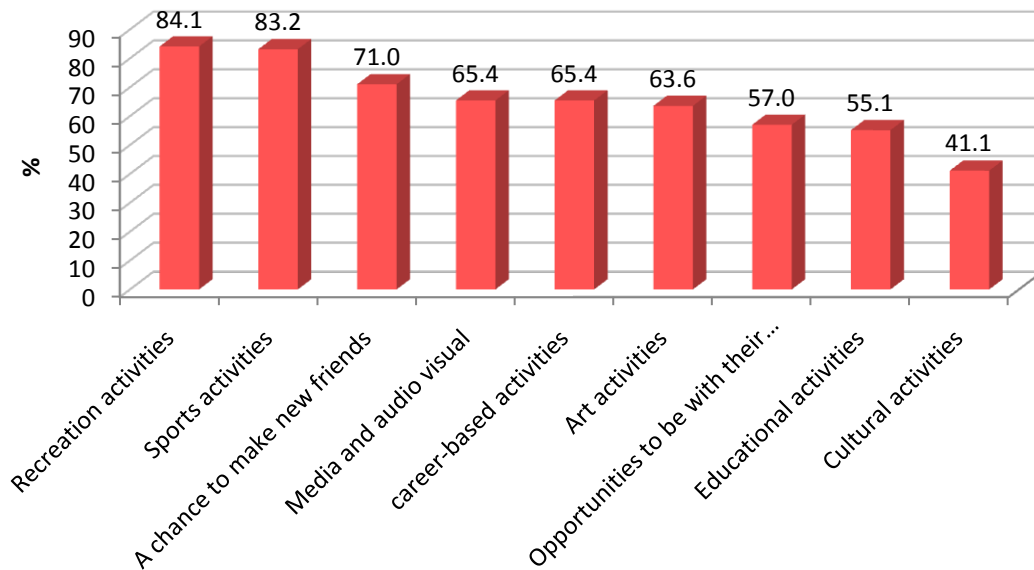
Most parents (72.1%) identified the ethnicity of their children as NZ European, with 25.2% Māori, 8.1% Pasifika and 5.4% Asian.

Programme Activities

Programmes which were most likely to appeal to parents were those that contained recreation and sports activities with opportunities to make new friends.

Survey Results

Figure 7: If a programme were to appeal to you - as the parent of a child in this age group - what would your programme include?



n=107

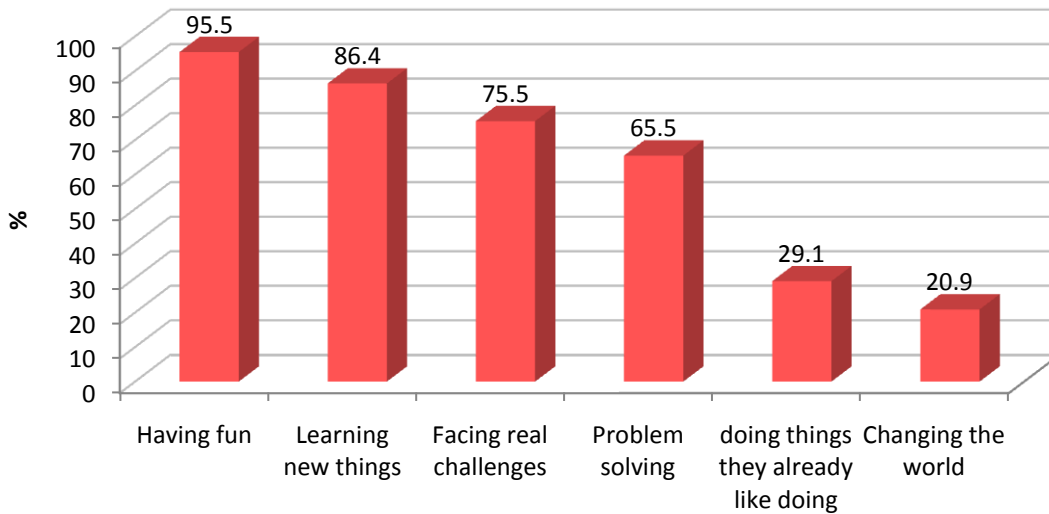
When asked to identify what types of activities the parents would include on a youth programme, most (93 of 138) chose sport and recreation activities. The types of sports and recreations activities that parents particularly want to see included in a youth programme are team sports and activities, such as basketball, hockey, softball, netball, soccer and volleyball (n=41), outdoor activities such as camping and hiking (n=16), water sports and swimming (n=14), individual sports such as athletics and gymnastics (n=12) and indoor sports and games such as boxing, indoor cricket and indoor football (n=10).

Besides these activities, parents also wanted a focus on arts, music, dance and performing arts (n=14), life skills and confidence building (n=12), a chance for their children to "try something new" (n=9) or cooking and nutrition-based activities (n=7).

Within these activities, parents thought it was most important that their children had fun (95.5%), learned new things (86.4%) or faced real challenges (75.5%).

Survey Results

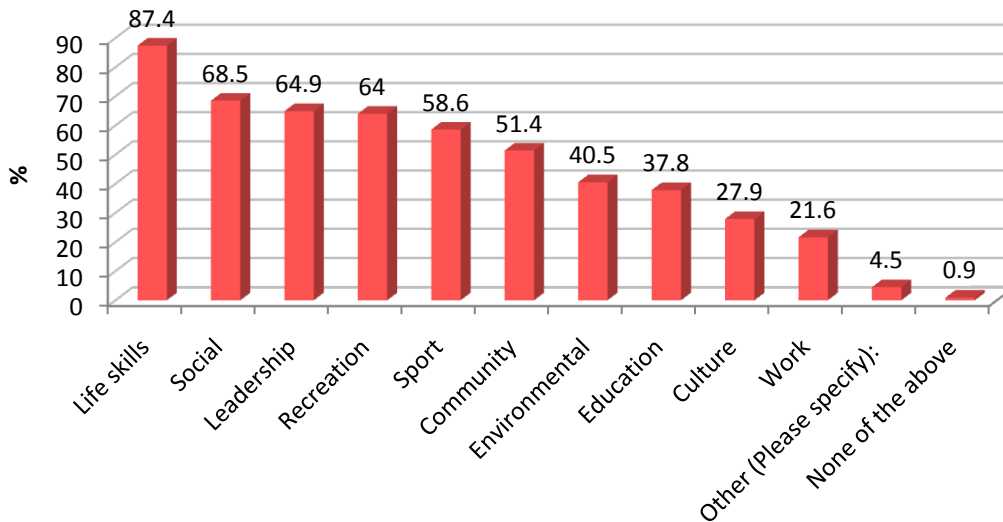
Figure 8: What do you think a good, well designed programme would be about?



n=110

Interestingly, despite their insistence on sport and recreation, most parents (87.4%) stated that they would like to see a youth programme focus on life skills and social (68.5%) and leadership (64.9) opportunities.

Figure 9: What would you like to see a programme focus on?

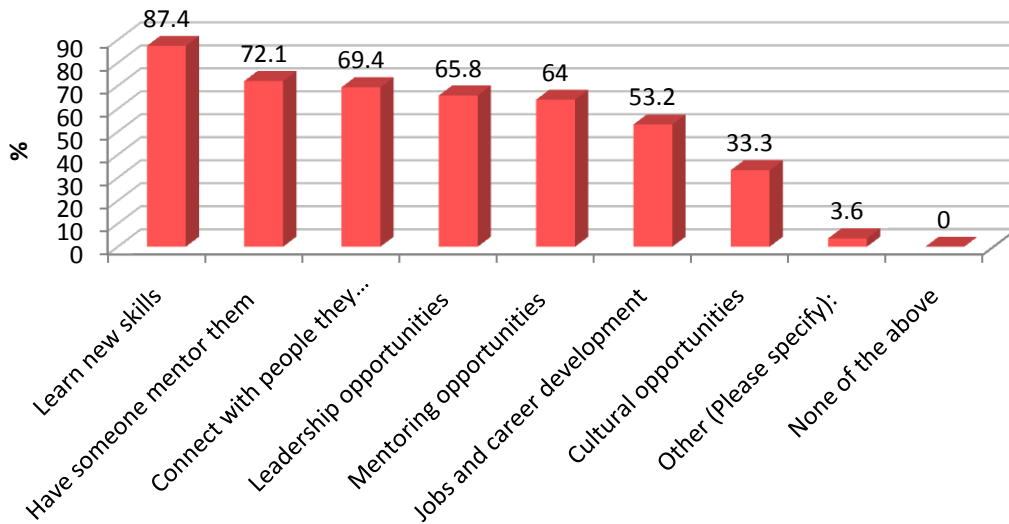


n=111

Within this, most parents (87.4%) wanted to see the programme cover opportunities to learn new skills, a chance to have someone mentor their child (72.1%), and opportunities to connect with people they wouldn't normally meet up with (69.4%).

Survey Results

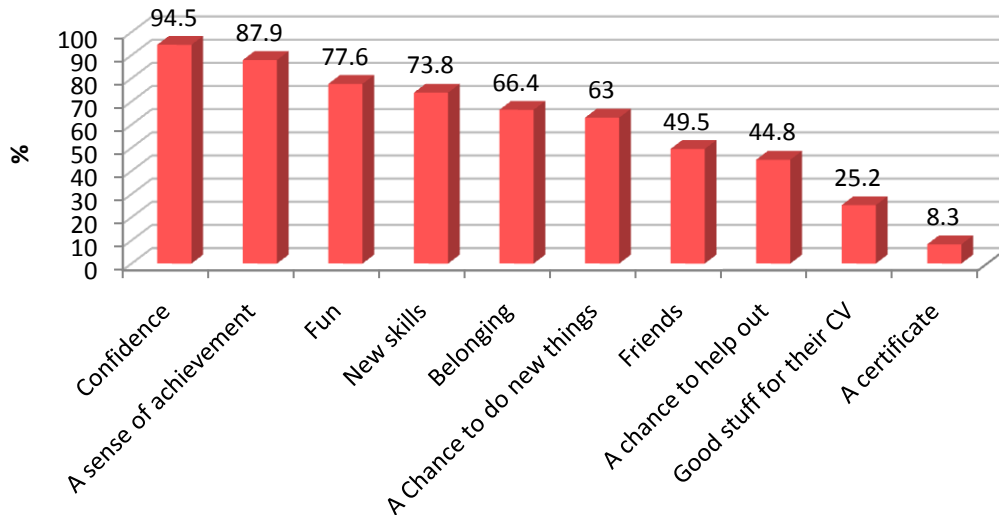
Figure 10: What would you like to see the programme cover...



n=111

For parents, a youth programme which gave their children confidence (94.5%), a sense of achievement (87.9%) and fun (77.6%) was important. Interestingly, parents rated “a chance to hang with their friends” as the seventh most important attribute, however for young people it was third most important.

Figure 11: How important is it that young people would get these kinds of things from your programme?



N=111

Price (n=19) was the main concern for parents when asked of “anything” that they could think that would make a youth programme attractive enough that they would want their child or children to attend. This was followed by qualified, reputable and interested staff (16), and a fun environment (14).

Survey Results

Other unprompted answers included:

- Safe (n=10)
- Challenging/Stimulating (n=10)
- Other (n=10)
- To learn life skills (n=9)
- New opportunities (n=8)
- Inclusive (n=8)
- Location (n=6)
- Popularity among other children/friends (n=5)

More than 8 out of 10 parents (87.5%) indicated that they would be likely to send their child or children to a programme which had the activities and attributes they had suggested in their survey answers. The remaining 12.5% indicated they were not sure, with most believing that the decision would be based on cost, location and whether their child wanted to attend.

The most frequently given reasons for wanting to send their child to a youth programme was a chance for their child/children to learn new opportunities, skills and experiences as well as an opportunity to keep them busy and involved in something positive.

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