



THE REMIX PROJECT

PROMOTES POSITIVE
MENTAL HEALTH

A RESEARCH PAPER BY FIONA SCOTT

2012

INTRODUCTION

Mental health problems are affecting a growing number of young people. For youth from marginalized neighbourhoods, the stress of poverty, discrimination, and lack of positive role models contributes to a sense of despair, decreased sense of belonging and lack of hope for the future; all factors that can affect mental health. The Mental Health Commission of Canada's mental health strategy suggests that we need to "do whatever we can to reduce the gap between those who are thriving and those whose mental health is most at risk." (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 21).

Mental health is important not only for wellbeing, but it also impacts other areas of young people's lives, including school and work. "Positive mental health reduces the likelihood of leaving school early and raises attainment levels. It also leads to higher income potential and increases resilience." (Jané-Llopis & Braddick, 2008). It is therefore crucial that we address the challenges that young people from marginalized communities face, in order to improve their mental health.

Promoting Positive Mental Health

The Public Health Agency of Canada had adapted a definition of positive mental health from Keyes (2007) and defines it as "having a purpose in life, positive relations with others, experiencing personal growth, social acceptance, social coherence and making contributions to society (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011)". Young people need environments where they can talk about their struggles, develop relationships with peers and other positive role models, where they feel like they belong, and where they find hope for their future by gaining the skills and experience required to secure a job they are passionate about.

The Remix Project is a free 6-month alternative education program and arts incubator for youth in the fields of creative arts, recording arts, photography, the art of film, and the art of business, where youth are mentored in practicing skills, gaining experience, establishing networks and accessing resources that will support them in pursuing education and/or developing a career in an industry they are passionate about.

This report is the result of six months of data collection, observations and interviews with The Remix Project staff, participants and graduates by an external research and evaluation consultant. It is the third in a series of documents that identifies and assesses the extent to which The Remix Project addresses the evidence-based risk and protective factors for positive youth development. The report identifies how The Remix Project promotes positive mental health by providing:

- Opportunities for self-expression
- A place where they feel like they belong
- Relationships with positive role models
- Hope for the future



THE ARTS FOR SELF EXPRESSION AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

"Music helped me to deal with my emotions and the things that I was going through. My pain is your entertainment."

Jay-Z, Recording Artist

"One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain"

Bob Marley, Trenchtown Rock

The arts are a creative way of expressing emotions. Plato wrote: "Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything." Neuroscience can explain why music is so powerful. Listening to music releases dopamine in the brain – a neurochemical that goes to the part of our brains responsible for emotions and helps us to cope with feelings (Salimpoor et al, 2011).

Many of the participants in the program are interested in hip hop music. Hip hop, like any other genre of music, is used to tell a story and as a method of self-expression. In hip hop music, a 'cypher' is when two or more rappers gather in a circle, taking turns saying their lyrics, interacting and responding to each other's words. In mental health, group therapy is a form of treatment where a small group of people meet regularly to talk through issues they are struggling with. Comparing the two, Ian Levy, educator and hip hop artist, writes: "The group therapist methodically builds a group culture that is conducive to effective group interaction and growth...cypher."

"Music is the most important way that someone can express themselves. Especially being immigrants, you don't have a huge foundation - cousins, family etc. Music and art allows you to express how you feel and what you're doing. Music is my life – there are no boundaries when it comes to being creative - in other industries there are boundaries. Remix is the only place that doesn't have limits."

"I guess it can be said that I rap for myself, as an introspective diary, which deals with issues that affect the world I live in, and most likely, the world my audience lives in as well. By immersing myself in music, I find a sense of self-gratification that I rarely find outside of it."

"I learned more about the industry and the art of music. There are so many ways to express my creativity and thoughts through Remix. I will be forever grateful for the learnings and friendships Remix has brought me. It deepened my relationship to art – by using it as a method to express a message."

"I had recently lost two friends when I got the call from Remix. If it hadn't been for this program my mental health would have been in the gutter. It's therapeutic to write about these experiences"



POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

“Making sure every child has a supportive, positive relationship with at least one adult is the most powerful protective factor we can provide. The bottom –line conclusion...is that resilience is about relationships.”

Dr. Ann Masten in Schonert-Reichl (2008)

Relationships are the key to resilience; the ability to succeed despite difficult circumstances. Studies that have followed children for several decades have identified the key factor that enables some young people to thrive in the face of challenges while others do not. The evidence is clear that having quality relationships can buffer against negative social outcomes like mental health problems and crime. In a ground-breaking book titled child development entitled *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The Science of Early Child Development*, Shankoff and Phillips (2000) recommend that initiatives that foster positive relationships should be paramount.

At The Remix Project, participants develop supportive relationships with several positive community members, including the program manager (a qualified child and youth worker), program leaders, as well as their mentors. They also form bonds with other participants who all share a passion for the arts, as well as with community organizations that have partnerships with Remix. Even after participants have graduated from the program, they are still able to access people and resources. Participants reported that:

“It’s overwhelming getting that support. There’s not one person that’s not supporting you. “

“There are several people you could turn to. You could ask for anything here.”

“At Remix people tell you you’re somebody. If you don’t get that anywhere you’re going nowhere”

“Lots of people come from places where no one ever says ‘good job’. At Remix everyone says ‘great job’.”

“I feel so inspired being here. In all my time in social work I’ve never been in a place that’s so positive – you can do art and also talk to whoever about whatever. It re-evaluated how I think about social work practice.”

Remix Support Worker



SENSE OF BELONGING

“A feeling of belonging to a country, region, and local community can influence people's sense of identity and the extent to which they participate in society. Generally, a strong sense of belonging is positively associated with better self-reported physical and mental health. A strong sense of belonging also contributes to individual and community well-being.”

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2003

The Remix Project brings people together based on a love of the arts and gives them a place where they feel accepted for who they are. The program places an importance on the language they use, for example, young people are not simply participants in a community program, they are a participant, a graduate and then an alumni of a professional creative organization. The name of the program is also important, in that it lacks the negative connotations of being a program for disadvantaged youth. When participants go to Remix, they go to develop skills and talents and to pursue passions, not to be singled out as being ‘at risk’. Participants also reported:

“When I come to Remix I’m greeted, and when I leave there’s a sense of being missed.”

“Right off the bat you know that it’s somewhere you belong. You can be yourself without being judged, without worrying about how people are perceiving you or how you’re dressed.”

“It’s really important, even just talking to one person. It’s nice to have that security - to have that sense of belonging...somewhere. “

“Waking up every day, I know that I’m going to a space where I’m accepted. You know that you’re going to get open doors. That’s like peace of mind.”



HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

“Research suggests that certain human strengths such as courage, hope, and optimism, can act as buffers against psychological disorders”.

Arnau et al., 2007, p. 1

“The greater the potential for their culture and actions to be accorded respect, the more self-confidence and hope can flourish.”

Sam Seidel, Author

The Remix Projects gives youth hope for the future by empowering them to achieve things they never thought possible, and giving them the resources, skills and connections to find work in an industry they are passionate about. From the beginning of the program, participants plan how they can achieve their hopes for their future. They develop a plan to accomplish a particular goal – develop a portfolio, record songs, start a business. They also work towards an exit strategy that includes education and/or employment. Others have been supported in obtaining funding from community organisations to pursue their art.

Participants are surrounded by people who have succeeded in their chosen career, or who they consider being on the road to success, which makes them believe that they can also succeed. Of the youth that were surveyed, 23/24 (96%) agreed that they are more hopeful about their future as a result of participating in the program. Participants reported:

“The percentage of people who succeed in the music business is small, but Remix exposes you to these people which reassures you that there is someone succeeding in this business.”

“(I got) a second chance at my goals and dreams. I was stuck not going anywhere before and now I have a clearer vision of what I need to do to get where I want to be. I gained confidence.”

“Remix made me realize I could do this professionally and showed me what I’m truly capable of.”

“I’ve gained the confidence to title myself as a photographer! There’s no better gift than this. I got from here more than I had expected. I will be forever thankful. Thanks Remix”

“I’m feeling free in Toronto – I feel like nothing could stop me. Now I’ve got the kit and the tools. It broadened my horizons and my ability to do more, and there’s no need to stop at one thing.”



CONCLUSION

“Remix is like friends and family for life. There are no barriers here. Everybody comes together to share a love of art. You get to see participants who are so talented, driven, and passionate. Places like this provide different outlets – it’s important to have outlets for people who are fuelled by negative experience – they need ways to filter those emotions and express them in positive ways. When they walk in the door, they’re not stressed and they’re supported, so their brains aren’t overwhelmed, and they can learn in the context of supportive relationships.”

Remix Support Worker

For youth from marginalized communities, a lack of access to education and training often means that their job prospects are limited. At The Remix Project, the opportunity to pursue a job in a creative industry gives participants a purpose in life beyond a minimum-wage job where they don’t feel valued. The positive relationships that participants build help to counteract the negative influence of peers from their neighbourhoods, who face similar challenges and who also lack alternatives. The program provides a place where young people feel like they belong, particularly those youth who rejected, or were rejected by mainstream education because they didn’t see themselves reflected in the curriculum or staff. As a result, participants believe that there is hope for the future, in a job they are passionate about. By focusing on developing young peoples’ talents, The Remix Project naturally creates an environment that promotes positive mental health.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Mental health problems affect not only individuals but also society in terms of the financial cost. “There is mounting evidence that the growing cost to society of mental illness is not sustainable—the total cost to society could be greater than the entire cost of the health care system in Canada.”

(Roberts and Grimes, 2011)

The Mental Health Commission of Canada recently published the first strategy for mental health in Canada. In their report *Changing Direction, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy for Canada Unveiled*, the authors suggest that “As a country, we must pay greater attention to the promotion of mental health for the entire population and to the prevention of mental illness wherever possible. Compelling evidence for the effectiveness of promotion and prevention programs has been accumulating in Canada and internationally for many years, and we cannot afford to wait any longer to implement these programs as widely as possible”. (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012, p. 9). Mental health promotion can also be cost-effective in addressing the factors that contribute to costs in other sectors, including the criminal justice system (Smith and Smith, 2010).

Although there are mental health services designed to help youth facing mental health difficulties, there are a number of factors that prevent young people from accessing or benefitting from them. A lack of resources means that there are long waiting lists for services. In addition, a weekly appointment with a mental health expert might not be enough to counteract the negative experiences of youth from marginalized communities. Young people need regular access to safe and supportive environments that promote positive mental health by engaging them in creative opportunities that will help them achieve their goals.

“The likely solution...lies in promoting mental health and preventing mental illness. Research has demonstrated that promoting positive mental health can: Reduce lifetime mortality rates; increase life expectancy by 7.5 years; improve overall health; reduce stroke incidence and improve survival rates; reduce heart disease; and lower the number of chronic diseases overall” (Friedli and Parsonage, 2007 in Roberts and Grimes, 2011, p. 26). By providing youth with opportunities and relationships that contribute positively to how they feel about themselves, the world, and their futures, The Remix Project is effective in promoting positive mental health and potentially reducing the economic burden on society.



REFERENCES

- Arnau, RC., Rosen, D.H., Finch, JF., Rhudy, JL., and Fortunato, VJ. (2007) Longitudinal Effects of Hope on Depression and Anxiety: A Latent Variable Analysis. *Journal of Personality*, 75(1).
- Friedli, L., and Parsonage, M. (2007) *Mental Health Promotion: Building an Economic Case*. Belfast, Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health.
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. (2003) *Indicators of Wellbeing in Canada*. Accessed July 9th, 2012 <http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/.3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=71>
- Jané-Llopis, E. & Braddick, F. (Eds). (00) *Mental Health in Youth and Education*. Consensus paper. Luxembourg: European Communities.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2007). Promoting and Protecting Mental Health as Flourishing: A Complementary Strategy for Improving National Mental Health. *American Psychologist*, 62(2), 95-108.
- Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2012). *Changing Directions, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy For Canada*. Calgary, Ab.
- Public Health Agency of Canada. (2011) *The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada*. Accessed July 9th, 2012 <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2011/cphorsphc-respcacsp-06-eng.php>
- Roberts, G and Grimes, K. (2011) *Return on Investment: Mental Health Promotion and Mental Illness Prevention*. Canadian Policy Network at the University of Western Ontario.
- Salimpoor, VN., Benovoy, M., Larcher, K., Dagher, A., and Zatorne, RJ. (2011) Anatomically distinct dopamine release during anticipation and experience of peak emotion to music. *Nature Neuroscience*, 14, 257-262
- Schonert-Reichl, K. (2008) *Considering Resilience in Children and Youth: Fostering Positive Adaptation and Competence in Schools, Families and Communities*. Accessed June 20th, 2012 http://www.tlpresources.ca/policyresearch_conference_NDRY_2008/Schonert-Reichl.pdf
- Shankoff, J., and Phillips, D. (2000) *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Harvard Centre for the Developing Child, Washington, National Academy Press.



