

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF THE BENEFITS RECEIVED FROM PARTICIPATING  
IN A STRUCTURED LEISURE ACTIVITY

by

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at

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF HEALTH AND HUMAN PERFORMANCE

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .....	ix
List of Figures .....	x
Abstract .....	xi
List of Abbreviations Used .....	xii
Acknowledgements .....	xiii
Chapter 1. Introduction .....	1
Benefits of Participation .....	1
Problem Statement .....	3
Theory and Philosophy Informing the Study .....	4
Purpose .....	5
Sample and Scope of the Study .....	6
The SYA Program .....	6
Approach to the Study .....	6
Research Questions .....	7
Perceived Benefits of Participation .....	7
Program Elements Assisting in the Accumulation of Benefits .....	8
Strengths of the Study .....	9
Limitations of the Study .....	9
Future Research Plans .....	10
Implications .....	10
Chapter 2. Literature Review .....	12
Defining the Youth Population .....	14
Chronological Age .....	15
Developmental Change .....	15
Biological processes .....	16

Cognitive processes .....	16
Socio-emotional processes .....	16
Life Course Stage .....	18
A More Encompassing Definition of Youth .....	19
Underlying Theory and Philosophy .....	20
Ecological Theory.....	20
Positive Youth Development.....	23
Factors Impacting Youth Leisure .....	24
Parents .....	25
Peers.....	26
Culture and Ethnicity.....	26
Socio-Economic Status.....	28
Gender .....	29
Structured Youth Leisure Activities.....	31
Benefits of Structured Youth Leisure.....	34
Outcomes of Participation .....	35
Processes of Participation.....	36
Developing initiative.....	36
Practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills.....	37
Forming an identity.....	38
Forging relationships with non-familial adults.....	39
Creating social capital.....	39
The Youth Leisure Benefits Model.....	40
Recommendations for Future Research .....	42
Chapter 3. Methodology .....	46
Constructivist Paradigm .....	47
SYA Program Description .....	49
SYA Participant Description.....	51

Researcher Background.....	52
Data Collection.....	53
Focus Group Participants .....	57
Method of Analysis .....	60
Trustworthiness .....	62
Credibility.....	63
Transferability .....	64
Dependability.....	64
Confirmability .....	65
Protocol .....	65
Limitations .....	66
Ethical Considerations.....	66
Dissemination.....	67
Chapter 4. Findings.....	69
The Participants.....	70
Participant Descriptions of the Program .....	72
Program Purpose .....	73
Activities.....	74
Program Themes .....	77
Meaningful and Supportive Relationships .....	78
Relationships with other SYA youth. ....	78
Youth-adult relationships.....	80
Respect.....	83
Building an Identity.....	85
Risk of being labeled in the regular world.....	85
SYA identity development.....	87
Unique Learning Opportunities.....	89

Relevant learning.....	90
Youth as teachers or mentors.....	91
Learning to lead.....	94
Youth affecting change.....	96
Perceived Benefits of Participation.....	98
Positive Changes as a Result of Participation.....	98
Lessons Learned.....	102
Chapter 5. Discussion.....	108
Revising the Research Questions.....	108
Focus Group Discussion Summary.....	110
What Benefits do Youth Perceive to Accumulate from their Participation in a Structured Leisure Activity?.....	112
What Program Elements Assist in the Accumulation of Perceived Benefits?.....	113
Benefits of Participation as Related to the Existing Literature.....	115
Description of SYA as it Relates to Activity Definitions.....	115
Benefits of structured youth leisure activities.....	118
Outcomes of participation.....	119
Process of participation.....	121
Developing initiative.....	121
Practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills.....	125
Forming an identity.....	127
Forging relationships with non-familial adults.....	128
Creating social capital.....	129
Strengths of Current Research.....	131
Limitations of Current Research.....	133
Future Research Plans.....	134
The SYA Program and Ecological Theory.....	136
Implications of Current Results.....	140

References.....	142
Appendix A. Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Guide .....	149
Appendix B. Socio-Demographic Form.....	153
Appendix C. Research Study Protocol.....	155
Appendix D. Consent Form for Older Adolescents .....	158
Appendix E. Assent Form for Younger Adolescents.....	164
Appendix F. Guardian Consent Form.....	170



## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1	Summary Characteristics of the 16 Interviewed Program Participants....	71
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## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	The youth population.....	20
Figure 2	Ecological theory nested systems.....	21
Figure 3	Viewing youth through a contextual lens.....	24
Figure 4	Factors impacting youth leisure.....	31
Figure 5	Adult-youth program leadership continuum.....	33
Figure 6	Structured leisure and program leadership.....	34
Figure 7	The Youth Leisure Benefits Model.....	41
Figure 8	SYA Participant Perceptions Diagram.....	111
Figure 9	Adult-youth program leadership continuum.....	117
Figure 10	SYA programs in the context of ecological theory.....	137

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined youth participants in a structured leisure activity and their perceptions regarding the benefits accrued as a result of participation. 4 male and 12 female youth between the ages of 13-16 participated. Data was collected through focus group discussions and analyzed using a thematic analysis. The perceived benefits of participation and the characteristics of the program that caused this accrual were identified.

Perceived benefits included improvement in school marks and self-confidence, increased volunteer participation, and the development of prosocial behaviours, social competencies and cognitive skills. Program characteristics included meaningful and supportive relationships, opportunities to build an identity, and involvement in unique learning opportunities.

The study was not generalizable to other programs and focused solely on the benefits of participation; not the negative repercussions. It has implications for program design and implementation, and provides support for the need to develop programs that incorporate a positive youth development philosophy.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED**

SYA	Structured Youth Activity
PYD	Positive Youth Development

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## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

When discussing the youth population, it is not uncommon for adults to focus conversations on concerns that include youth crime, substance abuse, obesity and harmful sexual activity. In fact, these conversations stem from many frightening statistics. The rate of violent youth crime has approximately doubled that of 20 years ago (Dauvergne, 2008). Nearly half of all violent incidents were comprised of common assaults, and in 2007, the youth homicide rate was the second highest since 1961. In 2004-05, it was concluded that 63% of Canadian youth in grades 7 to 9 had tried alcohol, and 17% had smoked marijuana (Health Canada, 2007). In 2003, 28% of youth aged 15 to 17 reported having had sexual intercourse, with the average age of first-time sexual intercourse being 16.5 years (Rotermann, 2005). Finally, in 2004, it was concluded that the rate of overweight/obese youth in Canadian provinces between the ages of 12 and 17 years was 29%. These statistics clearly indicate that youth are engaging in harmful behaviours, and at an increasing rate. So one must ask the question, what can be done?

One method of addressing these negative health behaviours is by encouraging youth to participate in structured activities. These activities are "characterised by adult supervision with emphasis on skill building and structure over a specific time frame; the lack of these characteristics in an activity defines it as unstructured" (Abbott & Barber, 2007, p. 60). Participation in structured leisure activities results in a reduction of problem behaviours among youth and encourages developmental progress; progress which includes improving a wide variety of skills. Recognizing that some research has indicated that structured leisure activity participation can result in negative behaviors, such as problem drinking, in order to narrow the scope of this study, only the benefits of participation will be addressed (Eccles & Barber, 1999).

### **Benefits of Participation**

The benefits youth receive from participating in structured leisure activities can be separated into two categories; outcomes of participation and processes of participation. Outcomes of participation are correlated with general indicators of development and are a result of developmental change over time (Hansen, Larson & Dworkin, 2003). Structured

leisure activities are favorably associated with such outcomes as improved self-concept, reduced rates of school drop-out and substance abuse, and improved rates of participation in community organizations as an adult (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Marsh, 1992; Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss, Yates & Su, 1997b).

Processes of participation are those changes that occur within an individual that eventually result in the outcomes (Hansen et al., 2003). A review of the relevant literature indicated that there are five processes that participants engage in during structured leisure activity participation.

1. *Developing initiative* - youth gain the ability to become motivated and direct attention towards the completion of challenging goals (Larson, 2000). Structured leisure activities provide youth with the opportunity to accomplish freely chosen and meaningful goals over time.
2. *Practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills* - structured leisure activities provide a context in which young people can practice and hone physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills (Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003).
3. *Forming an identity* - structured leisure activities allow individuals to try new things and gain self-knowledge, as well as provide youth with experiences to be used in the reflection process, a key component in identity exploration and development (Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003; Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997a). By trying new things, gaining self-knowledge and reflecting on experiences, youth begin to identify themselves as both an individual, and as part of a group.
4. *Forging relationships with non-familial adults* - structured leisure activities provide youth with opportunities to access adult advice regarding personal, academic and occupational issues, as well as the opportunity to learn specialized skills from adult experts (Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001; Dworkin et al., 2003; Jarrett, Sullivan & Watkins, 2005; Larson, Walker & Pearce, 2005).

5. *Creating social capital* - social capital involves social relationships that result in the transfer of resources and provide positive benefits for individuals (Jarrett et al., 2005). Participation in structured leisure activities provide youth with a wider social network, which often includes non-familial adults, thereby allowing youth opportunities to access previously unattainable knowledge, skills and support from these adults.

### **Problem Statement**

An investigation of the youth leisure literature resulted in the identification of some gaps. While numerous studies have concluded that participation in structured leisure activities results in both positive outcomes and processes of participation, many researchers have recommended that future research involve a qualitative methodology (Larson, 2000; Larson, Hansen & Moneta, 2006; Sibthorp, Paisley & Gookin, 2007). For example, Sibthorp et al. (2007) suggested using a qualitative approach in order to further investigate the processes of participation and to provide a more detailed understanding of them. In addition to this gap, the literature did not reveal any studies that investigated youth perceptions of the benefits youth received as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity. Furthermore, much of the research involving youth focuses on 'youth at-risk', as opposed to the general youth population. While the 'youth at-risk' population deserves special attention, researchers should not ignore the beneficial impact structured leisure activities can have on all youth who participate.

Therefore, in order to help address gaps in the literature, this study focused on the perceptions of the general youth population regarding the benefits accumulated as a result of their participation in a structured leisure activity. For the purposes of this study, the general youth population will be defined as those youth that have not been involved in the juvenile justice system, and participate in the structured leisure activity of their own free will, as opposed to being required to participate. In order to best understand the perceptions of youth, a qualitative methodology, with focus group discussions and thematic analysis as the data collection and analysis techniques, was employed.



## Theory and Philosophy Informing the Study

The study was based upon two contextual building blocks; ecological theory and the philosophy of positive youth development (PYD). Ecological theory suggests that the developing person is a dynamic entity that is not only impacted upon by the environment, but also creates an impact on the environment in which it resides (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The environment includes not only the entity's immediate surroundings, but its encompassing surroundings, as well as the interconnections between the surroundings. These surroundings, or systems, are nested and include the following:

1. *Microsystem* - patterns of activities, roles and relationships experienced by a developing person in a given setting. With respect to this study, the microsystem would consist of patterns, roles and relationships experienced by youth who participate in a structured leisure activity.
2. *Mesosystem* - the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates. For example, the relationships a child experiences between home and school.
3. *Exosystem* - settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant but affect or are affected by what happens to the developing person. Using a youth as an example, this system may include a parent's place of work.
4. *Macrosystem* - refers to the form and content of the lower order systems that exist at the level of subculture, culture as a whole, belief systems and ideologies. These are the cultural and social forces impacting human development (Strachan, 2008).

In addition to describing the nested systems, Bronfenbrenner (1999) suggested that human development occurs through complex and reciprocal interactions between a human organism and the people, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment. In order to encourage development, these interactions must occur on a regular basis and over a long period of time. Bronfenbrenner (1999) further suggested that these interactions vary based on differences in the characteristics of the developing person, the learning environment, the developmental outcomes under consideration, and the

historical time period. Therefore, ecological theory suggests that the different settings in young people's lives act as distinct learning environments that provide different opportunities for development.

The philosophy of positive youth development (PYD) represents a shift in how researchers and practitioners view youth (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas & Lerner, 2005). This perspective does not view youth as a problem that needs to be solved, but focuses on encouraging the promotion of desired outcomes in the developing person. This is done through mutually influential relationships between the developing person and such characteristics as his or her biological, psychological, familial, community, and cultural factors. A similar method of explaining this perspective is through the use of the Appreciative Approach (Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development, n.d.). In this approach, youth are not viewed as dependants or problems, but as innovators who can contribute to the community as participants and leaders in social change initiatives. As a consequence of this, as youth begin to positively contribute to their communities, negative health behaviours are likely to reduce.

Ecological theory and PYD work together to impact both individual youth and society as a whole. Both positive and negative development can occur based upon how participants and events in each system view and interact with specific youth. Should society treat youth as positive contributors, it can be suggested that individuals in each of the lower-order systems will be impacted upon by the societal view, and treat youth accordingly. Conversely, based on the actions of individual youth, players in each system will view youth as either positive or negative contributors. These players will then begin to shape the societal view of youth.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the meanings youth have regarding the benefits, both outcomes and processes of participation, they accrue as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity.

### **Sample and Scope of the Study**

The scope of this study included 16 youth, aged 13-17, who were active participants in the 2010-11 Structured Youth Activity<sup>1</sup> (SYA) in Canada. Male and female youth were recruited, and they represented both newly enrolled and longer term members of the group.

### **The SYA Program**

SYA is offered by a municipal recreation centre and is designed for youth ages 12 to 17 years. It has approximately 40 active participants, who are defined as youth who have participated in at least one activity in the past year.

The SYA program focuses on the areas of Personal Skills Development, Leadership Development and Opportunities, Community Service and Environmental Action, and Social Involvement. The program schedule varies depending on the season, with the majority of activities taking place during the fall, winter and spring. Program activities can take place as frequently as six times per month, or as infrequently as one activity in three months.

A balance exists between the amount of program direction that comes either directly from the youth or the Program Co-ordinator. SYA participants are responsible for setting the activity schedule, contributing activity ideas and facilitating activities. The Program Co-ordinator is responsible for recruiting new youth, organizing activities and events, communicating information to participants, parents, partner organizations, and ensuring that the SYA program operates smoothly.

### **Approach to the Study**

This study employed qualitative methods that were informed by a constructivist paradigm. This paradigm acknowledges the existence of individually held perceptions of experiences and events, and focuses on constructing concepts that are not merely a single truth, but ones that are more or less informed. The researcher was recognized as being an

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the program has been changed to protect participant anonymity.

active creator of the findings, and worked within and among participants to interpret the individually held constructions in order to assemble a communal understanding

In order to construct this communal concept, data were collected through the use of two focus groups. Each focus group consisted of 8 participants, and employed the use of a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then imported into the Atlas.ti qualitative software program for analysis. Interviews then underwent a thematic analysis, which identified patterns, categories, and themes found in the text.

### **Research Questions**

At the initial outset, the following questions were used to frame the study:

1. Do youth feel they benefit from participation in a structured leisure activity?
2. How can the benefits be carried over to other settings?
3. Do youth feel the need to create awareness about the benefits received from participation?

Due to the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry and the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions, appropriate conclusions could not be drawn to answer these questions. However, the emergent themes revealed that other questions could be answered. Therefore, the following revised research questions were developed:

1. What benefits do youth perceive to accumulate from their participation in a structured leisure activity?
2. What program elements assist in the accumulation of these perceived benefits?

### **Perceived Benefits of Participation**

Based on the focus group discussions, the participants explicitly and implicitly identified benefits they perceived to have accrued over time. These benefits included improvement in school marks, increased participation in different volunteer

opportunities, increased self-confidence and self-awareness, a greater sense of respect for self and others, and opportunities to develop new interests and practice social skills.

The participants also indicated that they had learned lessons as a result of their participation. These lessons focused on approaching situations with realistic outlooks, understanding personal biases, the importance of empathy, and understanding the consequences of one's actions. Attached to these lessons were skills that the participants had developed, and included persistence, prosocial behaviors, social competencies and cognitive skills.

It should be noted that while these benefits were identified by respondents, it is possible that not all youth would have benefited in the same way as a result of their experience.

#### **Program Elements Assisting in the Accumulation of Benefits**

Throughout the course of the focus group discussions different elements, in this study entitled *Program Themes*, were identified as having contributed to the accumulation of benefits. These themes included *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*, *Building an Identity*, and *Unique Learning Opportunities*. These themes did not exist in isolation, but impacted one another in a variety of ways.

The theme *Meaningful and Supportive Relationship* focused on the opportunities that the program participants had to meet new people. These new people included other youth, with whom the participants shared interests and values, and adults, who acted as role models and mentors for the participants. Underlying all of the interactions and relationships was a safe atmosphere informed by the concept of respect.

The theme *Building an Identity* focused on the opportunities that participants had to try new things that reflected their interests and values. The focus group discussions revealed that the SYA participants considered the program to be different from their school experience. Within the school experience, youth indicated that they ran the risk of being negatively labeled by their peers if they did not conform to the actions of the larger population. Participation in the SYA program, and the respectful relationships youth had

developed with others in the program, allowed participants the opportunity to build identities that truly reflected their interests without fear of reprisal.

The final theme was that of *Unique Learning Opportunities*. The participants identified the SYA program as employing learning methods and opportunities that differed from their school experiences. Youth were afforded the choice to attend only opportunities that were of interest to them. This meant that the participants were expected to play an active role in their own development. Participants engaged in experiential learning methods, which allowed them opportunities to develop specific skills, and then reflect on their experience in order to better understand how these new skills might be applied to future situations. The SYA youth were provided opportunities to act as teachers and mentors for others, which allowed them to learn facilitation skills and demonstrate their expertise and skills for others. Finally, the SYA program communicated the message that youth have the ability to positively impact the future through their actions.

### **Strengths of the Study**

This research provides the reader with an in-depth description of a structured leisure activity for youth, which will provide some indication as to the type of benefits participants may accumulate as a result of similar programming. This research also focuses on the perceptions youth hold regarding their participation, which was an identified gap in the literature. This study helps to provide additional information to address this gap, and it corroborates research conclusions made in the existing literature. This study also focuses on a general youth population, as opposed to 'youth-at-risk', and provides insight into the benefits that individuals in the greater youth population can accrue as a result of participation. Finally, as an emerging researcher I was diligent in ensuring that the research process was executed in a manner that could be deemed to be trustworthy.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As a result of a limited ability to recruit demographically diverse focus group participants, this study is limited by the fact that the perceptions of the participants only

relate to a large group and cannot be related to any one demographic variable. Related to this limitation is that the conclusions in this study are not generalizable to all youth or youth programs. Differences in programs and individual participants may impact the types of benefits youth perceive to accrue. A third limitation is that this study only focuses on the benefits of participation, and does not address any negative impacts. While steps were taken to minimize any negative outcomes, the results still may have been impacted. Finally, a gap in the literature led to the development of three research questions that were not answered. The severity of this limitation was lessened due to the researcher's ability to revise the research questions in order to better reflect the emergent themes.

### **Future Research Plans**

Further research to develop a more thorough understanding of the perceptions youth have as a result of their participation in structured leisure activities is required. There is a need understand how youth with varying characteristics, such as sex, age and ethnicity, perceive the benefits of their participation. Future research should focus on the perceptions of participants in a program that is similar to the SYA program, but still different. A comparison of programs would allow researchers to better understand if the accumulated benefits are generalizable across programs. Further study is required to address the concerns related to a lack of rigor found in the literature, and could be addressed through longitudinal studies (Larson et al., 2006). Finally, further research is required to better understand the interactive relationships between the *Program Themes* identified in this study.

### **Implications**

The conclusions drawn from this study have important implications with respect to the design and implementation of youth-focused structured leisure activities. The study provides an understanding of the aspects of youth programming which youth perceive to be most important, and therefore deserve attention. The study supports the concept that youth have the ability and willingness to direct their own development and can be used by program developers to intentionally design opportunities. These implications also suggest that similar program design tactics and facilitation styles can be used when

working with adults. It is reasonable to assume that adults would desire similar learning environments to youth; therefore the *Program Themes* described in this study can be applied to learning environments for adults.

Finally this study has implications for how structured leisure participation can impact both individuals and society as a whole. The impact of participation could lead to the development of youth who are confident, respectful of themselves and others, emotionally well-adjusted, altruistic and motivated to succeed. From a societal perspective, this research could inform both the public and policy-makers, and encourage them to place a greater value on the impact that structured leisure participation has on youth development.



## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The aging of Canada's population and the impact this trend will have on Canadian institutions has been a focus of many groups, yet youth are of equal importance. In 2006, there were approximately 8.0 million Canadians over the age of 55 years, comprising 25.3% of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, n.d). While the importance of this demographic trend should not be overlooked, it should not necessarily be the sole focus of researchers and policy-makers. Another sizeable cohort is that of the youth population. Canadians between the ages of 10 and 24 years consisted of 6.3 million people, approximately 19.9% of the total population in 2006 (Statistics Canada, n.d.). Based on these demographic statistics, it is prudent to pay as much attention to the youth cohort as is currently paid to the older adult cohort.

Generally speaking, the adult population tends to perceive youth as participating in negative health behaviours such as youth crime, substance use, unprotected sexual intercourse, and poor activity and dietary patterns. A brief investigation into these issues yielded the following results. According to Dauvergne (2008), the youth crime rate had remained relatively stable over the past decade, with approximately 176,000 youth aged 12 to 17 being accused of a criminal offence in 2007. It was also noted that the rate of violent youth crime was approximately double that of 20 years ago, with common assaults comprising nearly half of all violent incidents. In addition to this, the youth homicide rate in 2007 was the second highest since 1961. In 2006, 18,000 youth were accused of drug-related offences, a statistic that has been rising for the past ten years, and almost doubled that of 1996. Although the majority of these offences was cannabis use, cocaine and other drug offences have more than doubled since 1996 (Taylor-Butts & Bressan, 2008).

In 2004-05, a survey of Canadian youth in grades 7 to 9 indicated that 63% of youth had tried alcohol compared to 54% in 2002 (Health Canada, 2007). Of the youth that had consumed alcohol in the past, 37% had at least 5 or more drinks on at least one occasion. The report also indicated that the average age of first alcohol use was 11.1 years. With respect to cannabis use, 17% of youth had smoked cannabis at some point,

with the average age of first use being 12.6 years. Finally, with respect to tobacco use, in 2004-05, 21% of youth between grades 5 and 9 had tried a tobacco product, with the mean number of cigarettes smoked being 9.6 cigarettes per day. The average age of smoking a whole cigarette was 11.8 years.

In 2003, 28% of youth aged 15 to 17 reported having had sexual intercourse, with the average age of first-time sexual intercourse being 16.5 years (Rotermann, 2005). In addition to this, approximately 40% of sexually active youth between the ages of 15 and 24 who were either single and/or sexually active with multiple partners reported not using a condom during their last sexual encounter.

Finally, in 2004, it was determined that the rate of overweight/obese youth in Canadian provinces between the ages of 12 and 17 years was 29%, which is more than double that of overweight/obese youth in 1978-79 (Shields, 2006). This difference is particularly important, due to the fact that adolescence is a critical time for the development of adult obesity. A key factor associated with adolescent obesity is that of screen time, which includes watching television, playing video games and using the computer. Youth obesity rates were 23% and 35% for those that spent 10 screen time hours or less per week and 30 screen time hours or more per week, respectively.

The statistics stated above indicate that more attention needs to be paid to issues concerning the youth population, and that action must be taken in order to help youth become healthy adults. But, how can society do this? Both conventional wisdom and academic research suggest that youth participation in structured leisure activities results in positive outcomes, such as reduced problem behaviour, and encourages the progression of developmental processes, such as the building of initiative (Caldwell, Baldwin, Walls & Smith, 2004; Hansen et al., 2003). In an attempt to better understand both the youth cohort and the impact participation in structured leisure activities has on youth, a literature review regarding youth leisure participation was conducted.

This discussion will begin with a definition of the youth population. Using a combination of three different characteristics, chronological age, developmental change, and life course stage, the reader is presented with a more encompassing definition of

youth than any single definition could provide. In order to provide the reader with a contextual lens through which the author views the youth population, ecological theory and the philosophy of positive youth development (PYD) will then be presented (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner et al., 2005). Following the underlying theory and philosophy, a brief description regarding some of the factors that affect youth leisure will be provided. Influencing factors include parents, peers, culture and ethnicity, socio-economic status, and sex. The discussion will then focus briefly on outlining the differences between unstructured and structured leisure participation. This will be followed by a description of the two types of benefits that are a result of youth participation in structured leisure activities. These benefits include outcomes and processes of participation. The discussion will conclude by presenting the reader with a visual representation of the aforementioned benefits through the use of the Youth Leisure Benefits Model and outlining recommendations for future research that have been indicated in the literature.

Before proceeding any further it should be noted that for the remainder of this discussion the terms youth and adolescent will be used interchangeably. It should also be noted that the term youth is a concept primarily used in industrialized societies. Longer life spans in these societies allow for the division of cohorts into categories including, but not limited to child, youth, older adolescent, and adults. In a society where the average life expectancy is much lower, the term youth or adolescent has little relevance.

### **Defining the Youth Population**

Before discussing the benefits organized leisure programs have on positive youth development, one must have a clear understanding as to how the youth population is defined. This is a complex definition because depending on the source, youth can be defined using any combination of three characteristics; chronological age, developmental change and life course stage. The following describes the three characteristics in more detail and provides a definition of youth for the purposes of this discussion. It should be noted that this definition is not meant to be exhaustive; it is merely provided in order to give the reader more insight into specific characteristics of the youth population.

## **Chronological Age**

Chronological age, on a basic level, is an indication of years since birth (Freysinger, 1999). A more complex way of defining chronological age states that it is an indication of maturation and experience, which in turn indicates a person's ability to function physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally. Age is used as a means of assigning responsibilities, social roles and individual privileges. For example, in Canada when a person reaches the age of 16 it is assumed that an individual has the necessary abilities to drive, and is therefore granted permission to seek a driver's license. Chronological age can also be defined as a group of historical moments an individual shares with others of the same birth year, also known as a birth cohort, which is a recognition of the dynamic and historical meaning age holds (Freysinger, 1999). Each cohort ages in a unique way due to experiencing different life events at particular ages. Therefore, a person 16 years old in 1988 will have very different opportunities, expectations and perspectives compared to those of a person who is 16 years old in 2008.

Chronologically, adolescents are generally defined as being between the ages of 10 years and 22 years old (Cordes & Ibrahim, 2003; Santrock, 1996; Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Leung & Malcolmson, 2003). Cordes and Ibrahim (2003) further divide this group into younger and older adolescents. Younger adolescents are defined as being between the ages of 10 and 16 years, whereas older adolescents are defined as being between the ages of 17 and 22 years.

## **Developmental Change**

Adolescence is a developmental transition from childhood to adulthood that begins with puberty (Cordes & Ibrahim, 2003). This transition is a result of three intertwined processes; biological, cognitive and socio-emotional (Santrock et al., 2003). Biological processes involve changes in an individual's physical nature. Cognitive processes involve changes in an individual's thoughts, intelligence, and language. Socio-emotional processes involve changes in an individual's emotions, personality, and relationships with other people.

### ***Biological processes.***

From a biological standpoint, puberty is considered to be the most important marker for the beginning of adolescence. It is a period of rapid physical maturation, involving changes in hormone levels, which leads to increases in height and weight, as well as sexual maturation.

### ***Cognitive processes.***

One method of understanding the cognitive changes that youth undergo during adolescence is using Piaget's stage of Formal Operational Thought (Santrock et al., 2003). This stage of cognitive development states that an adolescent is able to think in a more logical, idealistic, and abstract manner when compared to his or her ability to think as a child. At this period in their lives, youth are provided with more opportunities to make their own choices, which results in a period of increased decision making. It is also during this period of time that youth become more egocentric, which is defined by having a heightened self-consciousness (Santrock et al., 2003). This self-consciousness is manifested in two ways; youth begin to believe they are invincible and unique. Beliefs that youth will never suffer harmful experiences, otherwise known as feelings of invincibility, are often expressed through reckless behaviour such as drag racing, drug use, suicide and harmful sexual practices. Adolescent's senses of uniqueness makes them feel as though others cannot understand how they truly feel. In order to retain this sense of uniqueness youth may concoct fantastical stories about themselves. These stories can often be found in diaries and journals (Santrock et al., 2003).

### ***Socio-emotional processes.***

One of the most prominent socio-emotional processes occurring during adolescence is that of identity formation (Santrock et al., 2003). Identity formation involves two different processes, individuation and identification (Erikson as cited in Kelly & Freysinger, 2000). Individuation is the sense of self that is separate from others, whereas identification is the act of aligning one's current self with future roles (Erikson as cited in Kelly & Freysinger, 2000). While all youth go through individuation and identification, the progression through and outcomes of each process will be different for

each individual. The difference can be partly explained by the influences of family, ethnicity and gender on identity.

Identity formation is enhanced for those youth that have family relationships that are both individuated and connected. The former encourages adolescents to develop their own opinions, whereas the latter helps to provide security which leads to an exploration of the social world of youth (Santrock et al., 2003).

Adolescence is also a period where most adolescents from ethnic minority populations will confront their ethnicity for the first time. At this time youth begin to define their ethnic identity, which is both a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the attitudes and feelings related to that membership (Santrock et al., 2003). As one ages, ethnic identity strengthens, which leads to improvement in the dimension of self-concept and attitudes towards other ethnic groups (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Depending on factors dealing with issues of prejudice, discrimination, and barriers to the fulfillment of goals, these individuals will achieve positive identities with either ease or difficulty (Santrock et al., 2003). A more detailed description of the leisure trends of youth minority populations will be provided at a later time.

Gender, which is the cultural connection associated with one's biological sex, is another influencing factor in adolescent identity development (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw & Freysinger, 1999). Once biological sex has been determined, society begins to place a number of expectations on an individual. These societal expectations tend to steer both females and males into gendered activities and roles that are deemed culturally appropriate, which eventually determines behavior.

With regards to identity formation, individuation has been found to be more descriptive of boys' adolescence, whereas girls experience attachment and connection with others, resulting in identity formation that is more focused on identification (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000). Like the effect of ethnicity, the effect of gender on adolescent leisure will be discussed at a later time.

Therefore, as adolescents age and the biological, cognitive and socio-emotional processes occur, developmental change results. Biologically, youth enter a period of rapid physical maturation. Cognitively, youth begin to make more of their own decisions, while at the same time begin to feel more self-conscious. Finally, from a socio-emotional standpoint, youth engage in identity development, which can be influenced by such factors as family relationships, ethnicity and sex.

### **Life Course Stage**

The term life course illustrates the transitions of a person's development related to aging over the life span, from infant to older adult, and possible life stages, which may include the roles of parent grandparent, spouse or widower (Singleton, 2007). In other words, life course is a way of understanding the process of aging (Singleton). Because every person is different, the life course stages can only be defined using generalities. Singleton defines the early adolescent period (ages 12-15 years) as a time when family and school influences begin to diminish, experimentation with drugs and alcohol occurs, and the areas of sexuality and intimacy are explored. This life course stage often sees youth living at home with at least one guardian, attending secondary school and beginning their first job.

Hagan and Wheaton (1993) state that life course stages are not only categories in which to conceptualize descriptive material, but can also have explanatory powers. The turbulence adolescents frequently face can provide a momentum that shapes events in later life stages. The term *role exits* is a concept used to describe the transition from one life course stage to another (Hagan & Wheaton). During adolescence two role exits are encountered, the transitions from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood. These role exits are punctuated by a search process which focuses on a way of escaping either the child or adolescent roles. The search process can include negative health outcomes such as running away from home, suicide attempts, unsafe sexual engagement, or alcohol and drug abuse (Hagan & Wheaton). While not all youth engage in the search process for role exits, most youth will at the very least contemplate them.

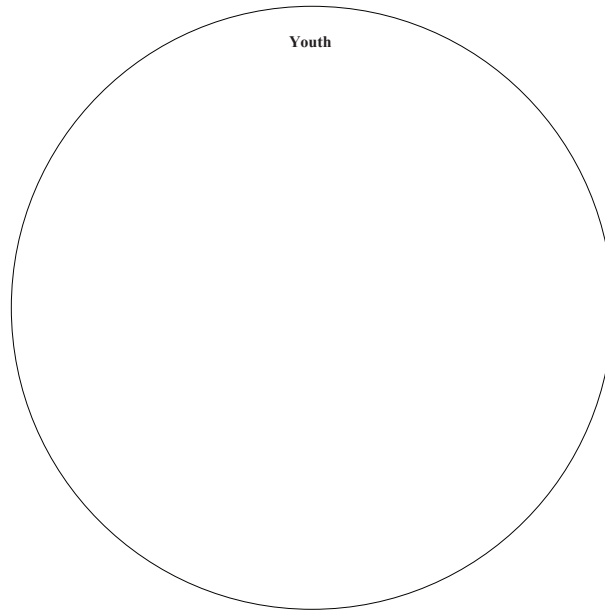
The above explanations of the life course tend to focus on the negative aspects of adolescence; however, this life course stage can also be a setting for positive development. What constitutes whether or not an experience has positive or negative outcomes is most often a judgment based on the values of adults. For example, while the diminishing influence of family is often considered to be negative from a parent's perspective, one may argue that it results in increased independence and provides an opportunity to engage in identity development.

### **A More Encompassing Definition of Youth**

As previously stated, the chronological definition of youth is the most basic way of defining this population. This simplicity is the reason that chronological age will be used as a general definition of youth during this discussion. However, without the added detail that the developmental change and the life course stage definitions provide, the reader will be left with an incomplete understanding of the youth population. Therefore, the term youth used in the remainder of this discussion will incorporate different elements from all three definitions.

Youth are those individuals between the ages of 10 and 22 years, who are in the process of biological, cognitive and socio-emotional development. This period is characterized by rapid physical maturation, increased decision making, responsibilities and privileges, and the development of identity. Adolescence is also a time when youth encounter two role exits, a transition from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood. These transitions are defined by a search process, which can lead to a shift in focus from relationships with family to relationships with other adolescents, experimentation with alcohol and drugs, and exploration in the areas of sexuality and intimacy. While decisions made and actions taken during this search process are often considered to be negative, positive results, such as increased independence, can occur. Figure 1 (p. 20) provides a visual representation of the youth population. Throughout the remainder of this discussion this visual representation will be used to help describe youth, factors that influence this population and how structured leisure activities can result in beneficial development.





*Figure 1.* The youth population.

### **Underlying Theory and Philosophy**

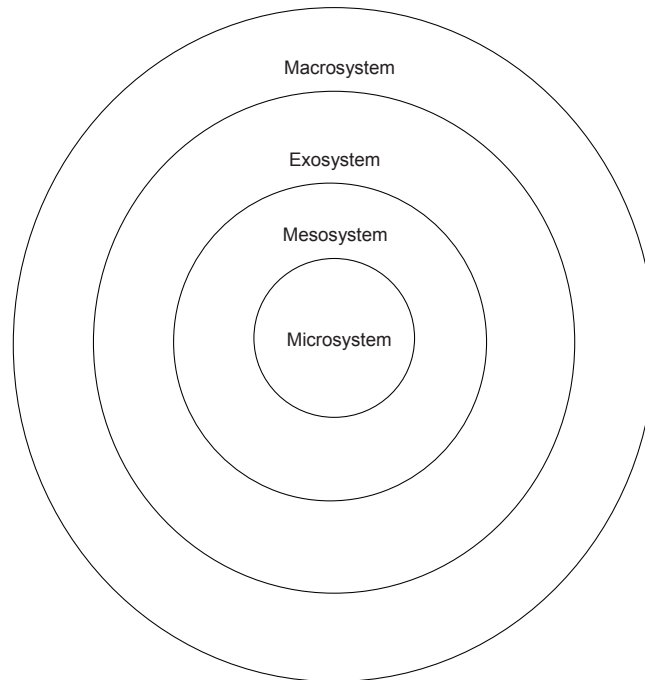
Before delving too deeply into the topic area of youth and leisure, it is important to state the underlying theory and philosophy upon which this discussion is based. This discussion is important because it provides the reader with a context regarding how the author understands the topic area. These contextual building blocks include ecological theory and the philosophy of positive youth development (PYD).

### **Ecological Theory**

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing lives, as the process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21)

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) definition suggests that the developing person is a dynamic entity that is not only impacted upon by the environment, but also creates an impact on the environment in which it resides. In addition to this, this environment is not

only the immediate setting, but includes larger surroundings, as well as the interconnections between the settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In order to fully appreciate an individual's development, one must understand these settings and the interactions between them. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes these systems as being nested (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Ecological theory nested systems.

"A microsystem is the pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). This system includes participants, locations and programs of activities (Strachan, 2008).

"A mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). This is a

compilation of microsystems and is formed or extended whenever the developing person moves into a new setting (Strachan, 2008).

"An exosystem refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). Using an adolescent as an example, this could include the parent's place of work, a class attended by a sibling, or the local school board (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Events could occur in these settings that may not be directly connected to the youth, but still impact the youth in question.

"The macrosystem refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower order systems, (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). This can also be referred to as the cultural and social forces impacting human development (Strachan, 2008).

Bronfenbrenner (1999) further suggested two propositions with regards to human development. Proposition one states that human development occurs through complex and reciprocal interactions between a human organism and people, objects and symbols in its immediate environment. Called proximal processes, these interactions, especially in early development, must occur on a regular basis and over a long period of time. Examples of proximal processes include parent-child activities, group or solitary play, learning new skills, and performing complex tasks. Proposition two states that these proximal process vary systematically as a function of the characteristics of the developing person, the environment in which the processes occur, the developmental outcomes under consideration, and the changes occurring over the historical time period in which these processes take place.

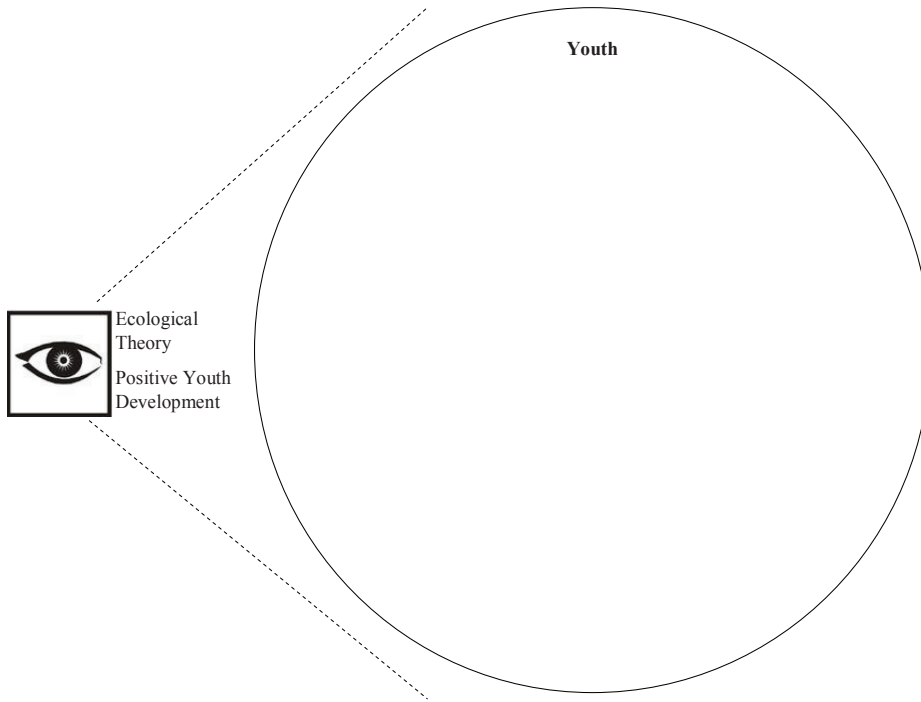
Therefore, human development should be viewed as developmental outcomes that occur in response to individual attributes combined with environmental requirements, characteristics and opportunities over a long period of time (Strachan, 2008). As Larson et al. (2006) stated, "ecological theory suggests that people should view the different

settings in young people's lives as distinct learning environments that provide differing structures of opportunity for development" (p. 849). One method that individuals can use to view these differing structures of opportunity is that of positive youth development.

### **Positive Youth Development**

With roots in disciplines such as comparative psychology, life-course sociology and developmental systems theory, the positive youth development (PYD) perspective represents a shift in how researchers and practitioners view youth (Lerner et al., 2005). In the past, youth have been thought of as a problem to be solved, however, the PYD perspective argues that behavioural change occurs as a result of the interactions between a person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture, physical and designed ecology, and historical niche. This suggests that a developing system, in this case a developing person, can be directed to the promotion of desired outcomes, and not only to the prevention of undesirable behaviors.

A similar method of explaining this perspective is through the use of the Appreciative Approach (HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, n.d.). This approach encourages adults to view youth not as problems, dependants or clients to serve, but as participants, partners and leaders who can contribute to community development and social change initiatives. The PYD perspective will be adopted for this discussion; youth will be viewed as assets to be developed, and not as problems to be solved. Using ecological theory and PYD as a contextual lens, one can better understand how the benefits of organized youth leisure are described (see Figure 3, p. 24). For example, with this perspective the researcher can investigate the benefits youth receive as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity from the richest data source possible, the actual youth participants.



*Figure 3.* Viewing youth through a contextual lens.

### **Factors Impacting Youth Leisure**

Now that a brief description of the youth population has been provided and the contextual lens of the author has been described, youth leisure and the factors influencing it can be discussed. As previously explained, youth who are involved in leisure activities, which can be considered a microsystem, will be impacted upon by outside factors regardless of whether these factors are a part of the meso-, exo-, or macrosystems. As per Bronfenbrenner's (1999) second proposition, these factors will impact youth differently depending on the characteristics of the individual, the environment in which the interactions occur, the developmental outcomes under consideration, and time period, or era, being studied. The following will discuss some of those factors that help to shape an individual youth's leisure. It should be noted that this should not be viewed as an extensive review, merely a brief glimpse of some of the factors impacting youth leisure. Through the use of a qualitative methodology, this study will attempt to obtain a better understanding of these factors.

## **Parents**

As previously stated, adolescence represents a shift from the roles and responsibilities of childhood to those of adulthood. Howard and Madrigal (1990) concluded that during childhood parents, more specifically the mother, play an instrumental role in determining the recreation participation patterns of children. Furthermore, it has been concluded that leisure interests developed at a young age are carried into adulthood (Scott & Willits, 1998). Youthful participation rivals gender, education and income as a predictor of adult involvement (Scott & Willits, 1998). Therefore, the decisions made by parents regarding their child's leisure activities will affect the activities engaged in during adolescence.

Hutchinson, Baldwin and Caldwell (2003) concluded that parents utilize a number of techniques to structure, regulate and support their adolescents' leisure. Parents explicitly communicate their values surrounding free time leisure and express their expectations to their children. These values and expectations are then either reinforced, by providing a rationale for the expectation, or enforced through a punitive action, by either taking away or threatening to take away a privilege or preferred free time activity. Parents tended to direct their adolescents' activity engagement by making autonomous decisions about the child's activity involvement or offering activity options from which a child could choose. Parents also influence their adolescent's free time by monitoring the activities in which the youth participate. Monitoring includes limiting computer services, such as instant messaging; creating password protected channel blocks on the television, so adolescents would not have access to specific channels; and meeting those youth with whom their child spends free time, which included getting to know the parents of their adolescent's friends. It was concluded that parents affect their adolescents' leisure through the provision of resources, such as time, money, space in their homes, and transportation to specific activities.

Shannon (2006) further discussed the impact that parents have on their adolescent children's leisure, not only by influencing the specific activities engaged in, but also the attitudes and values youth hold about the roles of leisure time and specific activities. Shannon concluded that adolescents generally shape their leisure activities to conform to

the messages that parents communicate. These messages stress the importance of leisure being restorative, functional and a means to an end.

Shannon and Shaw (2008) concluded that mothers communicate both intentional and unintentional messages regarding the importance of leisure which their daughters observe, evaluate and interpret. Generally speaking, mothers teach specific leisure activity skills that are both a source of personal enjoyment and reflect their traditional roles as women, such as baking, sewing and gardening. Mothers also explicitly communicate the benefits of leisure to their daughters. These benefits include developing friendships, developing life skills, developing skills that might later lead to employment opportunities, and having fun. Finally, after evaluating the examples provided by their mothers, daughters conclude that leisure opportunities and experiences change after becoming a mother. Despite trying to communicate the importance of balancing both life and work, most mothers display behaviours that place family needs before their own personal leisure needs.

### **Peers**

Parents play an instrumental role regarding how youth view leisure, however, the influence of peers should not be forgotten. In the field of physical activity research, it has been concluded that youth who experience peer support and companionship during physical activities demonstrate greater levels of positive affect during the activity, and are more likely to continue participation in the future (Duncan, 1993). Peer relationships, peer pressure, and peer endorsement of activities have also been linked to youths' decisions to become involved, stay involved in or quit structured activities (Huebner & Mancini, 2003; Patrick, Ryan, Alfed-Liro, Fredricks, Hruda & Eccles, 1999). Furthermore, Persson, Kerr and Stattin (2007) concluded that peers have an influence on the choice youth make to not participate in an activity, or to change participation from one structured activity to another.

### **Culture and Ethnicity**

Silbereisen (2003) suggested that each society and culture holds values and expectations concerning the role of leisure. These values are experienced through such

social institutions as family, school, and work, provide a mold that not only dictates the range and quality of leisure opportunities in which a youth can engage, but also the potential benefits youth can receive from participation.

In a comparison of youth leisure throughout Europe, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, and the United States, research indicates that sports participation is widespread, television and movie watching is common to all countries, and that boys are more active in sports and less active in arts, cultural and social activities than girls (Verma & Larson, 2003). In addition to this, there is a pattern for girls in Asian cultures to be more involved in household responsibilities and be subject to cultural constraints that limit their ability to participate in activities in the public forum. In terms of differences, Verma and Larson (2003) suggested that Asian adolescent leisure is more focused on the family, as opposed to North American and European cultures where leisure is less adult monitored and more likely to occur with friends. This example helps to emphasize the cultural importance placed on that of the family and of peers, respectively.

Within the United States, social activities are reported to be among the favorite types of activities for African, Asian, European and Hispanic American university students, with some variation to the extent that the social activity is preferred (Barnett & Klitzing, 2006). It was observed that European Americans are more likely to participate in social leisure and outdoor leisure than the other ethnic groups, and that European and African Americans are more ardent sport participants than Asian and Hispanic Americans. Finally, African and Asian Americans are more likely to participate in the performing arts than their European and Hispanic counterparts.

Furthermore, in North America the leisure opportunities for youth from immigrant and minority populations are even more affected by ethnicity than the opportunities for those youth from the dominant cultural group. Both perceived and actual discrimination, in the form of verbal abuse, social isolation and physical attacks, may lead an individual to avoid areas where they will expect to experience discrimination (Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Gramann & Allison, 1999; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000). Immigrant youth and their leisure options are also constrained by the level of support offered by the



host country, the prevailing societal attitudes towards this population, and the size of the immigrant community surrounding them (Gramann & Allison, 1999). Leisure opportunities are also constrained and affected due to differences between familial values and the values of the dominant culture (Tirone & Pedlar, 2000). These differences can lead to conflict between youth and their parents, a more restrictive social life, fewer dating opportunities, and increased participation in those activities that occur under the supervision of parents.

Finally, in an investigation of different sport and physical recreation participation experiences of immigrant youth, Doherty and Taylor (2007) concluded that participation can lead to both positive and negative experiences. While immigrant youth saw participation as a means to have fun, become properly oriented into mainstream culture, and improve language skills, it also led to feelings of social exclusion due to language difficulties, unfamiliarity with mainstream sports and prejudice on the part of their peers.

### **Socio-Economic Status**

With respect to leisure, socio-economic status has numerous impacts for both youth and adults. Social class analysis is the division of the social system into layers measured by opportunities derived from economic prosperity (Kelly, 1999). Individuals from wealthy backgrounds have the resources available to engage in a wide range of activities, are able to adopt specific leisure preferences, and access opportunities and locations to which others may not have access. These individuals also often have a greater ability to manage and rearrange their work schedules in order to engage in their preferred form of leisure (Kelly, 1999). The literature also suggests that there is a negative relationship between socio-economic status and interpersonal constraints, meaning youth with a higher economic background perceive fewer intrapersonal constraints to their leisure choices (Raymore, Godbey & Crawford, 1994). These intrapersonal constraints are individual preferences or psychological states that affect participation, such as anxiety or perceived self-skill.

Conversely, individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds are often excluded from opportunities. As Kelly (1999) stated, having little discretionary income,

fewer opportunities to develop leisure skills and interests, and a limited ability to be admitted to different leisure environments, people from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to engage in leisure that has a low cost and involves no travel. While investigating a low-income community in Atlantic Canada, Tirone (2003/2004) concluded that residents were unable to access recreation programs in their community because the delivery of essential program services, such as job readiness, health, and nutrition programs, took priority over that of recreation programs. In addition, due to their relative poverty, residents were unable to access programs outside of the community and therefore lacked the recreation opportunities many other people with greater economic prosperity would have enjoyed and benefited from (Tirone, 2003/2004). Furthermore, after completing focus groups in five Canadian cities with youth and parents from low-income families, it was concluded that the focus group participants faced similar barriers to recreation program participation (Frisby, Alexander, Taylor, Tirone, Watson, Harvey & Laplante, 2005). These barriers included an inability to afford program and equipment fees, distant program locations, a lack of transportation, uninviting program structures and schedules, and experiences with racism and stereotyping.

### **Gender**

Gender has also been shown to impact the leisure practices, opportunities, and experiences of individuals (Shaw & Henderson, 2005). Generally, females are more likely to engage in social leisure, such as hanging out with friends, watching movies, and the arts, whereas males are more likely to participate in supervised and unsupervised sport, computers and high-risk activities (Barnett & Klitzing, 2006; Frisby et al., 2005; MacLean & Hamm, 2008; Offord, Lipman & Duku, 1998). While trends can be partly explained by the identity formation processes of individuation and identification, they can also be explained by those factors that either prevent, reduce or modify participation in an activity, or affect the quality and enjoyment of that activity (Shaw, 1999).

Female leisure is constrained and shaped by the lack of opportunities for women to become involved in specific sport teams and leagues, often referred to as structural constraints (Shaw & Henderson, 2005). One example is the lack of female wrestling teams found in Canadian high schools and universities, as opposed to male wrestling

teams. Other examples may include the lack of female hockey teams, the disproportionate number of female video game players, and the relatively low number of female mechanics when compared to their male counterparts. With regards to intrapersonal constraints, meaning personal preferences that affect participation, it was concluded that individuals with lower self-esteem will perceive a greater number of constraints (Raymore et al., 1994). Due to the fact that female adolescents report lower self-esteem than male counterparts, females may experience a greater number of intrapersonal constraints on their leisure (Raymore et al., 1994). Finally, with regards to interpersonal constraints, meaning those constraints that arise due to relationships and interactions with other people, it has been concluded that the social disapproval of activities considered being inappropriate by friends and family may also have an impact on the types of leisure activities engaged in by female youth (Shaw & Henderson, 2005). Therefore, women tend to avoid participating in those activities that their support network deems to be inappropriate. While there appears to be many different constraints on female leisure, it should be noted that women tend to have a greater number of social relationships than their male counterparts (Shaw & Henderson, 2005). This results in women having a greater number of potential leisure partners, which can enable the engagement in leisure opportunities.

While gender is often considered an enabler for men, it can be argued that males, like females, do experience some constraints with respect to leisure opportunities. In order to conform to dominant ideologies of masculinity, some men may reject those leisure activities that are considered to be feminine (Shaw & Henderson, 2005). For example, men may avoid gender stereotyped activities such as sewing or figure skating (Shaw, 1999). In other circumstances, males may engage in an activity out of obligation. For example, some boys and men may engage in a sport in order to portray an image of masculinity to the outside world (Shaw & Henderson, 2005). These constraints and compulsory activities help to shape adolescent male leisure.

As stated, parents, peers, culture and ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender are not the only factors that impact youth and their leisure. However, these factors do have an impact on every young person throughout the world. As ecological theory

suggests, these factors are part of the macro-system, which are the social and cultural factors that impact the development of an individual. These factors, along with a variety of other variables, impact youth and their leisure in ways that are different from other populations, such as the adult population (see Figure 4).

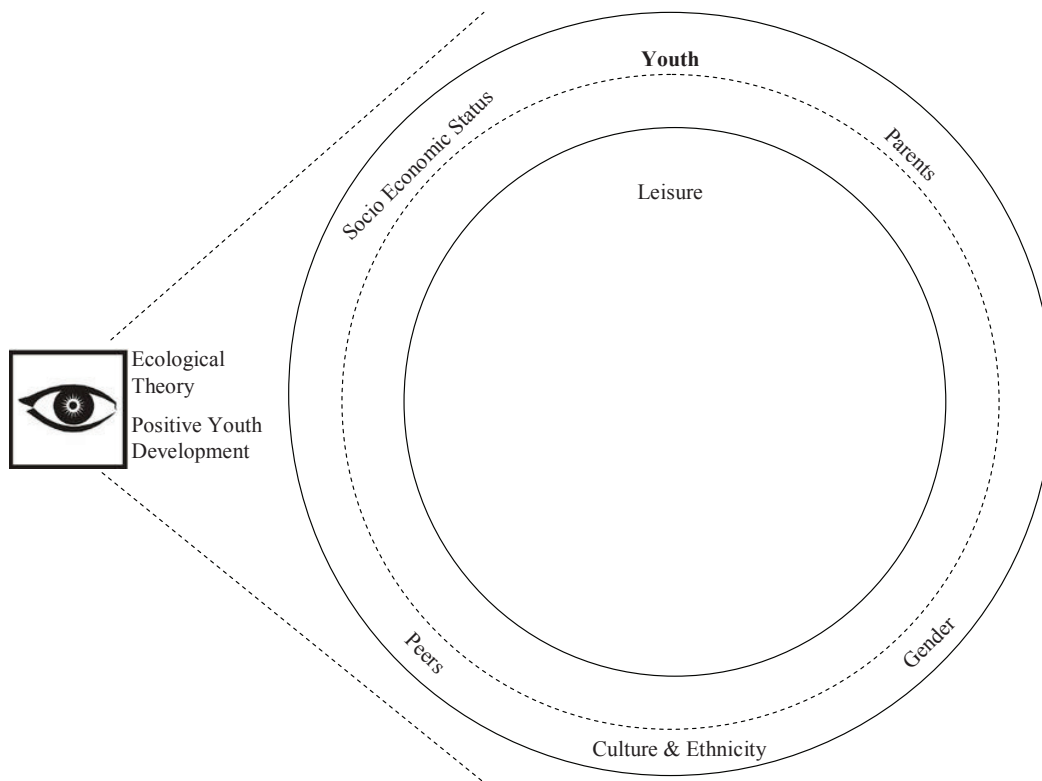


Figure 4. Factors impacting youth leisure.

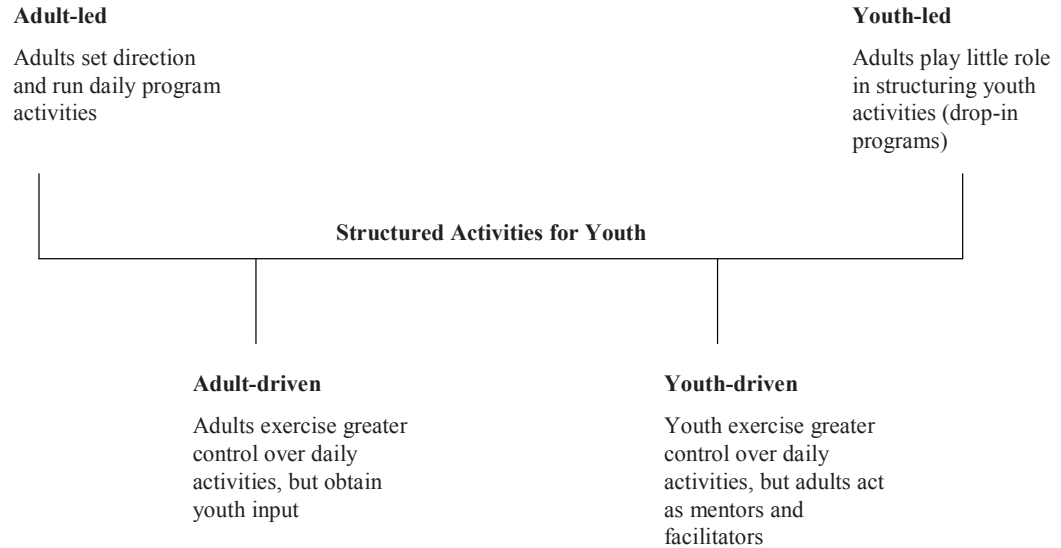
### Structured Youth Leisure Activities

Leisure involvement can be separated into two different types of activities, unstructured and structured. Simply put, "structured activities are those characterised by adult supervision with emphasis on skill building and structure over a specific time frame; the lack of these characteristics in an activity defines it as unstructured" (Abbott & Barber, 2007, p. 60). While both types of activities create opportunities for youth to learn skills and obtain knowledge, and provide youth with distinct sets of values and experiences, this discussion will only investigate the benefits of participation as they relate to structured leisure activities (Hansen et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2006). In order to

remain consistent with the philosophy of PYD, this discussion will focus solely on the benefits youth derive from leisure participation, and not the negative influences participation may have on a youth's development.

Eccles and Barber (1999) stated that structured activities provide a forum in which one can express his or her identity or passion in sports, the performing arts, or leadership activities. These activities provide challenges that lead to opportunities to enhance particular skills within a context characterized by guidance, supervision, and developmentally-based rules and expectations (Abbott & Barber, 2007). Examples of different types of structured activity involvement include prosocial (church and volunteer activities), team sports, school involvement (pep club, student council), performing arts (drama, marching band), and academic clubs (science club, foreign language club) (Eccles & Barber, 1999). While participation is voluntary, structured activities do require that participants attend scheduled meetings or practices regularly over a specific time period, for example the length of a sports season (Abbott & Barber, 2007).

One key characteristic of structured youth leisure activities is that an adult is involved in the planning, supervision and monitoring of an activity (Abbott & Barber, 2007; Larson et al., 2005). However, Larson et al. (2005) state that structured youth activities differ along a continuum with respect to how much input, daily decision-making and authority adult supervisors have versus youth participants (see Figure 5, p. 33). At one extreme there are programs where adults set the direction, create the agenda, and run the program activities with little to no input from the youth. On the other end of the spectrum there are programs in which adults play a very small role in structuring youth activities, such as in a drop-in centre (Larson et al., 2005).



*Figure 5.* Adult-youth program leadership continuum.

Larson et al. (2005) suggest that closer to the centre of the continuum lie two other variations of structured youth programs, adult-driven and youth-driven. The former sees adults exercising greater control over the daily activities of the group, while at the same time obtaining youth input, whereas the latter sees youth exercising control and adults acting as mentors and facilitators. The control of daily activities can be described as program aspects involving setting the program direction, creating rules and facilitating the actual activities.

The rationale behind the adult-driven approach is that adults have more background knowledge and experience than youth, which suggests that adults are better able to guide program activities. The primary objective of these programs is to teach specialized skills, and is therefore primarily used in sport and performing arts settings. In the area of sports research, when coaches create environments that emphasize fun, skill development, encouragement, and positive reinforcement, youth show decreased performance anxiety, lower rates of attrition, and have more positive feelings towards peers (Smith & Smoll, 1997).

The rationale informing the youth-driven model is that youth become active participants and learners when they have control of program direction (Larson et al.). The

objective of these programs is to promote the development of leadership skills in youth and to facilitate youth empowerment. Youth-driven programs create collaboration between adults and youth, where adults play a role in facilitating youth growth and change, and are present for reasons of safety and liability. In these situations youth set the direction for the program, thereby acting as agents in their own development. Figure 6 depicts how structured leisure activities lie within the realm of youth leisure, as well as how adult and youth-driven programs are situated within structured leisure.

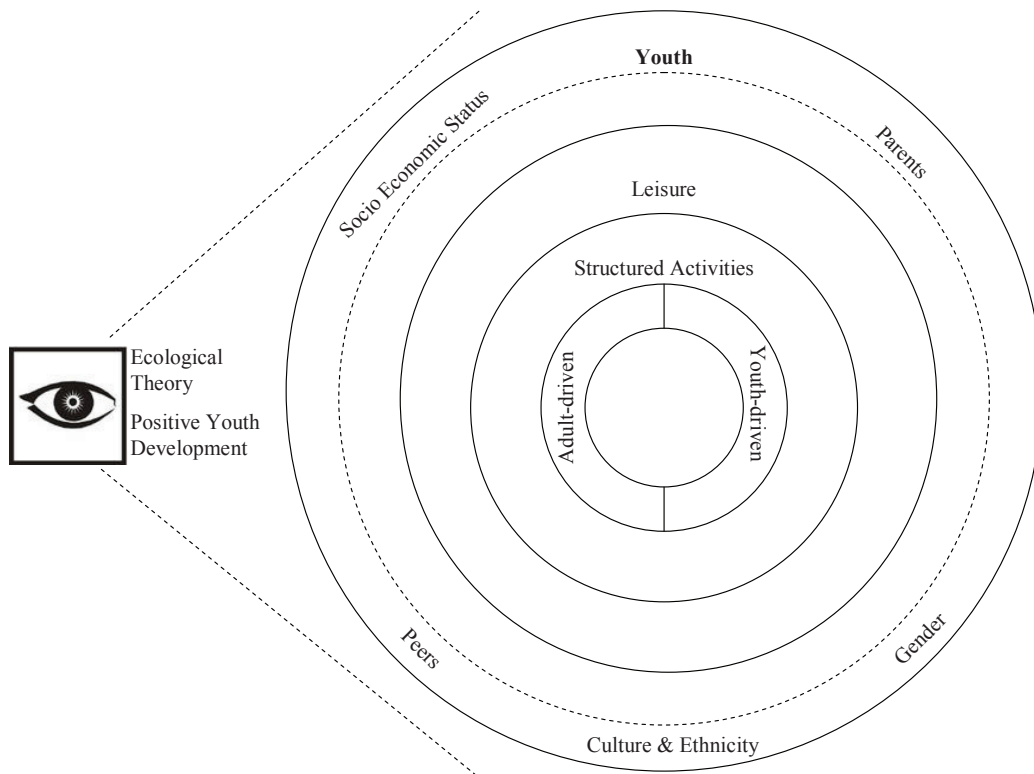


Figure 6. Structured leisure and program leadership.

### Benefits of Structured Youth Leisure

Regardless of the difference in rationales and control of program direction between adult-driven and youth-driven structured leisure activities, youth benefit from participation. The literature indicates that youth who participate in structured leisure opportunities receive positive outcomes, which in turn are a result of being engaged in positive developmental processes. The outcomes of participation are correlated with

general indicators of development, such as reduced problem behavior (Hansen et al., 2003). The processes of participation are those changes occurring within an individual that result in the outcomes, for example the development of initiative (Hansen et al., 2003). The following will discuss both the outcomes and processes of participation in more detail.

### **Outcomes of Participation**

As previously stated, outcome benefits are those benefits that are correlated with general indicators of development. These benefits are a result of developmental change over time. Structured school extracurricular activity participation is favorably associated with such academic outcomes as improved academic self-concept, higher grade point average (GPA), higher educational aspirations, increased likelihood of college attendance and graduation, and reduced rates of school drop-out (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Outside of the academic sphere, youth involved in structured activity participation report having higher occupational aspirations and report lower rates of substance abuse than non-involved peers (Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Youniss, McLellan, Su & Yates, 1999; Youniss et al., 1997b). Finally, with respect to the long-term effects of structured leisure participation, adults who were characterized as involved youth are more likely to vote, become involved in community organizations and continue their activity patterns (Barber et al., 2001; Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss et al., 1997a). It should be noted that the impact of confounding factors, such as gender, socio-economic status, and individual ability have all been accounted for and controlled for in these studies. While the confounding variables may have made an impact in some circumstances, these results can be considered to be generalizable to all youth in western cultures.

While the above is not an extensive review, it does provide the reader with a general sense that structured leisure participation results in positive outcomes. This is useful information, but in order to intentionally design and implement programs that will have the greatest positive impact, one must understand the specific mechanisms through which change occurs (Sibthorp et al., 2007). These mechanisms, or processes, are the



developmental changes occurring within an individual youth due to participation in structured youth leisure activities.

### **Processes of Participation**

A review and compilation of the process literature suggests that there are five processes in which participants engage during structured leisure activity participation, thereby resulting in the aforementioned positive participant outcomes. These processes include: (a) developing initiative; (b) practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills; (c) forming an identity; (d) forging relationships with non-familial adults; and (e) creating social capital. Each of these processes will be discussed in more detail.

#### ***Developing initiative.***

Initiative, which is the ability to be motivated and direct attention towards a challenging goal, is a combination of three critical elements, intrinsic motivation, concentration, and the temporal arc (Larson, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is characterized by feelings of freely chosen participation, and positive beliefs and attitudes about an activity (Watts & Caldwell, 2008). Concentration is the ability to devote thought and effort towards some form of action despite constraints, rules, and challenges (Larson). Finally, the temporal arc requires that intrinsic motivation and concentration occur over time.

During structured leisure activities, youth experience a combination of intrinsic motivation and concentration that is rarely present during the experiences of schoolwork and unstructured leisure. Structured leisure activities are often ideal for the development of initiative because they are perceived as being desirable by youth, offer support, structure, and freedom, and are designed to avoid negative influences, such as bullying (Watts & Caldwell, 2008). Furthermore, structured leisure activities encourage youth to overcome constraints and barriers to action by assisting them in the development of specific skills, such as planning, time management, and problem solving (Larson).

Structured leisure activities that focus on initiative development provide youth with the opportunity to accomplish freely chosen and meaningful goals over time. The

literature suggests that by designing programs that emphasize initiative development, adults can help youth to learn how to restructure boring situations into more interesting experiences (Caldwell, Baldwin, Watts & Smith, 2004). Youth who have the ability to restructure these situations have a greater likelihood of pursuing activities of choice despite constraints, are more likely to participate in new activities, have higher levels of awareness regarding community opportunities, and have higher levels of decision-making skills.

***Practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills.***

Structured leisure activities provide a context in which young people can practice and hone physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills (Eccles et al., 2003). Youth who are engaged in structured activities that teach specific technical skills, such as sports programs or leadership development programs, are provided with an opportunity to practice physical and intellectual skills, and tend to improve in these technical areas (Larson et al., 2005). In addition to this, youth who are involved in adult-led activities are exposed to and can internalize more relevant information concerning these skills than those youth who are not involved in the activity (Jarrett et al., 2005).

From a social standpoint, after a study of adolescents' accounts of growth experiences in youth activities, it was concluded that structured leisure participation enables youth to learn to work as a group or team, to learn about responsibility, and to learn how to receive and provide feedback (Dworkin et al., 2003). Structured leisure activity participation also enables youth to learn how to distinguish between constructive and negative criticism, and teaches youth communication skills.

Finally, structured activity participation provides youth the opportunity to practice those competencies related to emotional self-regulation, such as managing feelings, controlling impulses and reducing stress. According to youth participants, program involvement enables them to practice and hone the skills of preventing positive and negative emotions from interfering with attention and performance, controlling anger and anxiety, and acquiring strategies for managing stress.

It can be suggested that the process of practicing physical, intellectual, social and emotional skills results in positive outcomes. By practicing and mastering these skills, youth obtain positive outcomes in areas such as higher self-efficacy, higher self-esteem, and improved decision-making skills.

***Forming an identity.***

Youth reports state that structured leisure activities allow individuals to try new things, gain self-knowledge and learn personal limits (Dworkin et al., 2003). Examples of each include sport participants trying new positions when a teammate was hurt, continuing participation in an activity even when one did not enjoy it, and knowing one's ability level, respectively. Through trial and error, as well as learning from their mistakes, youth are able to identify their abilities and thresholds in different situations. These activities also provide youth with experiences to be used in the reflection process, which is a key component of identity exploration and identity development (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss et al., 1997a). By trying new things, gaining self-knowledge and reflecting on experiences, youth begin to identify themselves as both an individual, and as part of a group.

Depending on the activity group with which youth identify, participation results in different positive and negative outcomes (Eccles et al., 2003). Youth who identify themselves as being involved with peer groups that engage in volunteer and community service-type activities have higher rates of academic achievement and lower rates of substance abuse than those youth who identify themselves as being involved in other types of activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Therefore, it has been concluded that the process of positive identification is associated with improved academic achievement. It should be noted that academic achievement is not clearly defined in the literature, but it can be inferred that the positive outcomes of academic achievement include higher GPA, increased likelihood of college attendance and graduation, and reduced rate of school drop-out.

### ***Forging relationships with non-familial adults.***

One key aspect of structured leisure activities is that adults are involved in planning, supervising and monitoring an activity (Larson et al., 2005). Structured programs provide youth with an opportunity to forge relationships with adults outside of the family context. Consequently, program participation provides youth with greater access to adult advice regarding personal issues, as well as the opportunity to discuss future academic and occupational plans (Barber et al., 2001; Dworkin et al., 2003; Jarrett et al., 2005). Adult investment is a partial explanation for the improved academic and occupational outcome benefits of structured activity participation (Barber et al., 2001). Youth-adult relationships formed in programs also provide youth the opportunity to learn specialized skills from adult experts (Larson et al., 2005). These opportunities to learn can result in improved skill or subject-based competencies.

### ***Creating social capital.***

Related to forging relationships with non-familial adults is the idea of creating social capital. Social capital is the result of being a member of a group where both intangible resources, such as knowledge or skills, and tangible resources are pooled and shared voluntarily (Jarrett et al., 2005). Interactions between group members result in the provision of resources that individuals would not otherwise have access to. Bonding and bridging are two types of social capital, which either promote solidarity and reciprocity among members, or encourage connection with outside communities to share diverse resources, respectively (Putnam, 2000).

Jarrett et al. (2005) suggest that structured leisure activities are well suited to facilitating youth's development of social capital. These activities are intentionally constructed social structures that bring youth and non-familial adults together, and are often supportive in nature. Through interactions with adults during structured leisure activities, youth are able to access knowledge, skills and support. The positive interactions between youth and adults during these activities also provide youth with a wider social network. Adults are often connected to different social networks than the youth with whom they interact. Through these different adult networks, youth can access previously unknown individuals and expand their social capital.

Structured leisure activities also help youth to learn about their community and how it operates (Dworkin et al., 2003). Learning about the community provides youth with the information and skills needed to positively contribute to society during both adolescence and adulthood. These activities provide youth with experiences that allow them to learn how to navigate the world around them.

The literature indicates that youth participation in structured leisure activities results in benefits for participants. These benefits can be separated into two categories, outcomes of participation and processes of participation. Outcomes are characterized by general indicators of development, such as reduced problem behavior and improved GPA. Processes of participation are described as the developmental changes that occur within an individual that are a result of participation, and include: (a) developing initiative; (b) practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills; (c) forming an identity; (d) forging relationships with non-familial adults; and (e) creating social capital.

### **The Youth Leisure Benefits Model**

With the addition of the outcomes and processes of participation, the Youth Leisure Benefits Model is complete (see Figure 7, p. 41). The creation of the model began with a definition of the youth population. After describing the three most common definitions of youth, chronological age, developmental change, and the life course stage, it was determined that a more encompassing definition would be used. Therefore, youth were defined as those individuals between the ages of 10 and 22 years, who experience biological, cognitive and socio-emotional change and encounter role exits, which lead to a search process, eventually leading to both beneficial and harmful development.

After defining the population, both the underlying theory and philosophy that will be used as a contextual lens with which to view the youth population were described.

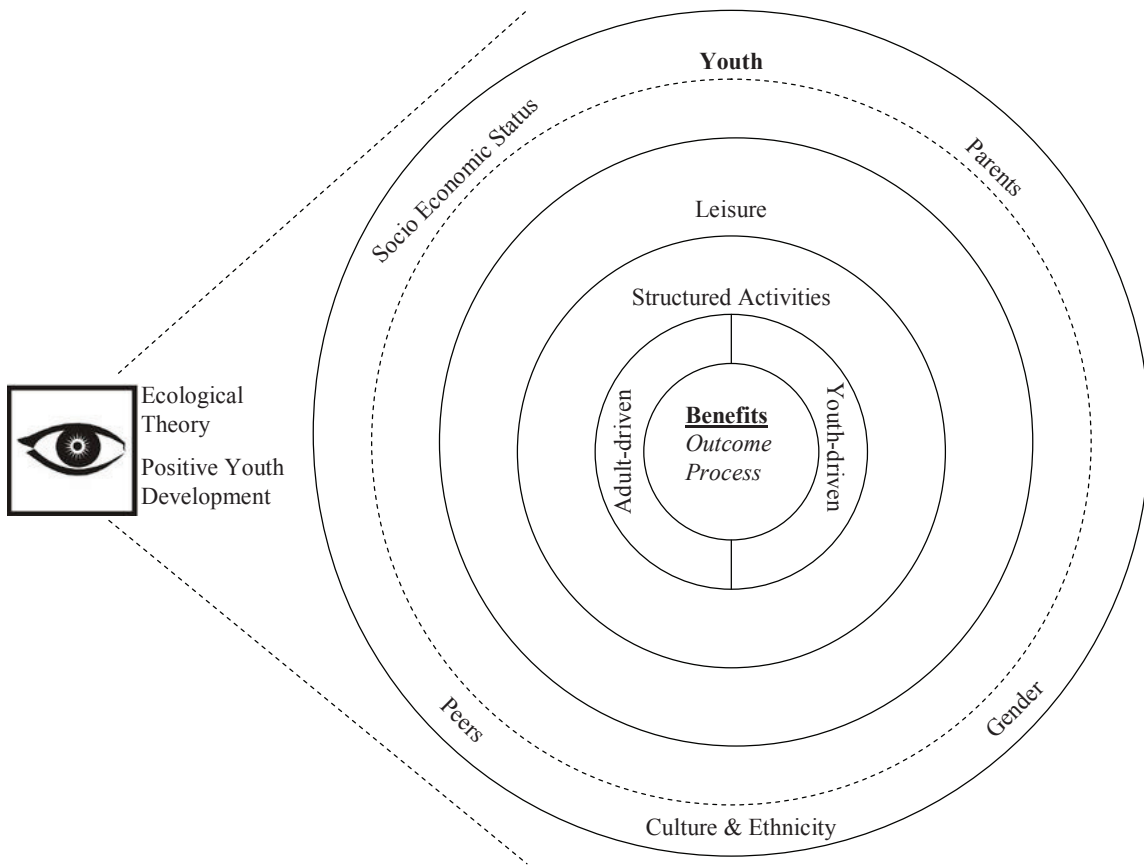


Figure 7. The Youth Leisure Benefits Model.

Ecological theory suggests that the developing person is a dynamic entity that is impacted upon by the environment, and impacts the environment in which he or she resides. This environment includes both the immediate setting and society as a whole. Ecological theory suggests that the different settings in young people's lives are distinct learning environments that provide differing structures for development (Larson et al., 2006). The philosophy of positive youth development suggests that researchers should not view youth as a problem to be solved, but as competent innovators who are active contributors to their own personal development (Lerner et al., 2005).

In order to understand what shapes youth leisure, a description of the different impacting variables was provided. While this list was not an extensive review, it did shed some insight into those factors that affect youth leisure participation. The factors discussed included parents, peers, culture and ethnicity, socio-economic status, and

gender. While the impacts of these factors varied for every individual, they affected every young person throughout the world in some manner. As ecological theory suggests, these factors impact youth and their leisure in ways that are different from every other population.

Structured leisure activities are characterized by adult supervision and place an emphasis on skill building and structure over a specific time frame. These activities create opportunities for youth to learn skills, obtain knowledge, and provide youth with distinct sets of values and experiences (Hansen et al., 2003). Structured activities also provide a forum where one can express their identity or passion (Eccles & Barber, 1999). These activities can be further described based on the amount of input, daily decision-making and authority adult supervisors have in relation to youth participants. At one extreme reside programs where adults set the direction and agenda, and run the program activities with little to no input from the youth. On the other end of the spectrum there are programs in which adults play a very small role in structuring youth activities. Adult-driven programs often teach specialized skills and are primarily used in sport and performing arts settings (Larson et al., 2005). Youth-driven programs promote the development of leadership skills in youth and facilitate empowerment.

Finally, a review of the benefits of structured leisure indicated that there are two categories of benefits; outcomes and processes of participation. Outcomes can be characterized as the general indicators of development, while the processes can be described as the developmental changes that occur within an individual that are a result of participation. The processes outlined in this document include: (a) developing initiative; (b) practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills; (c) forming an identity; (d) forging relationships with non-familial adults; and (e) creating social capital.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The Youth Leisure Benefits Model presents an understanding of the factors that affect youth leisure, an overview of the types of youth structured leisure activities and the benefits derived from participation. While this model provides a synthesis of the youth leisure literature, further research must be conducted in order obtain a more complete

understanding of the benefits youth derive from structured leisure participation. After reviewing and compiling the recommendations for future research, some common themes were uncovered. These themes include the need to design studies that minimize self-selection bias, the need to engage in qualitative research that helps to better describe the processes of participation, the need to understand why youth decide to stop participating in structured activities or switch to unstructured ones and the need for research that is more rigorous.

While a number of different studies have concluded that participation in structured leisure activities results in to the youth participants, a common concern among researchers is the lack of critical rigor found in these studies (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 1999; Dworkin et al., 2003; Larson, 2000). Researchers have indicated the need to use experimental designs in order to test theoretical hypotheses that link processes of participation to positive outcomes (Eccles et al., 2003; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006; Sibthorp et al., 2007). These experimental designs should include the use of comparison or control groups, as well as sample sizes that are larger than those used in past studies (Catalano et al., 1999; Dworkin et al., 2003). Dworkin et al. suggested the use of time series designs, which look at a participant over multiple time periods. This would allow the researcher to better understand the process of change and development over the course of the activity. Larson et al. (2006) recommended the use of a longitudinal design in order to determine the long-term impact structured leisure activities have on development. Furthermore, Hansen et al. (2003) suggested having youth report on the benefits of participation in both structured and unstructured leisure activities so that within-person comparisons may be investigated. Hansen et al. also recommended the replication of studies across communities in order to understand the impact community-level factors have on youth's experience.

One limitation that arose in the studies was that of the impact self-selection bias has on entry into and continued participation in activities (Eccles et al., 2003; Larson, 2000). Do youth developmental programs attract and retain youth with certain skills, characteristics and backgrounds (Eccles et al., 2003)? How much of a program's success can be attributed to the characteristics of the youth who join? Larson et al. (2006)



recommended addressing these questions by studying the characteristics of individuals, such as developmental stage, reasons for participating, and their prior participation experience, in order to understand the variations among youth.

Many researchers also recommended future research using a qualitative methodology (Larson, 2000; Larson et al., 2006; Sibthorp et al., 2007). Larson (2000) recommended closely following the progress of individuals and groups so that models of the change processes can be developed. This could be accomplished by investigating those groups that have shown exemplary change and comparing them to groups showing less progression. Sibthorp et al. (2007) suggested using a qualitative approach in order to further investigate the processes of participation, in order to provide a more detailed understanding of them. By investigating participant perceptions of the changes that had occurred, researchers may gain a better understanding of the specific causes of the change that are common to all participants. Larson et al. (2006) indicated the need for more in-depth qualitative research that indicates how the processes of participation may differ across activities. This information would allow researchers to better understand the settings, more specifically the different types of youth programs, which provide different opportunities for development (Larson et al., 2006).

Finally, it has been noted that there is a lack of research discussing why youth stop participating in structured activities and why they may switch from structured to unstructured activities (Catalano et al., 1999; Person et al., 2007). Related to this line of inquiry is the need for research that draws conclusions about the impact that parents and peers have on a youth's decision to begin, continue or quit an activity (Person et al., 2007; Shannon, 2006). This research could evaluate how effectively parents communicate their intended messages regarding leisure choices, how accurately youth interpret these messages, and determine what impact peer pressure has on youth leisure choices when the messages either conflict or coincide with the messages from parents.

Despite the vast amount of information found within the youth leisure literature, two noticeable gaps were found. The review of the literature revealed very little information regarding studies that investigated youth perceptions of the benefits received

from structured leisure participation. Furthermore, the majority of the research involving youth focused on 'youth at-risk', those youth "who are in trouble at home or school, who may have been involved in substance abuse, and who may or may not have been brought into the juvenile justice system" (Cordes & Ibrahim, 2003, p. 87). While structure leisure activities may be of great benefit to this population, researcher should not ignore the impact that structured leisure activities can have on the general youth population. For the purposes of this study, the general youth population will be defined as those youth that have not been involved in the juvenile justice system, and participate in the structured leisure activity of their own free will, as opposed to being required to participate by the juvenile justice system.

With both the recommendations for future research and the gaps in the literature in mind, the following questions can be presented:

1. Do youth feel they benefit from participation in a structured leisure activity?
2. How can the benefits be carried over to other settings?
3. Do youth feel the need to create awareness about the benefits received from participation?

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the meanings youth have regarding the outcome and participation process benefits received as participants in a structured leisure activity.

## CHAPTER 3      METHODOLOGY

The literature review provided support for and an understanding of the benefits of youth participation in structured leisure activities. While these benefits have been observed in many different situations and studies, there is little understanding of youths' perceptions of these benefits. Both ecological theory and the philosophy of positive youth development (PYD) were used in order to address this gap in the literature. As previously discussed, ecological theory recognizes the developing person is a dynamic entity both influencing and impacted upon by his or her environment. Development is unique for every individual because each person has a different background, abilities and experiences. The PYD perspective suggests that due to the mutually influential relationships between the developing person and his or her environment, including such characteristics as biology, psychology, family, and community culture, the developmental system can be directed to the promotion of desired outcomes (Lerner et al., 2005). The ultimate goal of PYD is to encourage youth to become active participants in their own development.

Ecological theory and PYD work together to impact both individuals and groups of youth. Depending on how participants in each ecological system view and interact with youth, either positive or negative development can occur. For example, should society as a whole (macrosystem) treat youth as positive contributors, it can be theorized that individuals embedded in the exo-, and mesosystems will also begin to treat youth as positive contributors. In addition to this, individual youth (microsystem) will recognize the positive contributions that can be made and begin to seek out those opportunities that will allow for positive development. Youth can also affect each system level through positive and negative actions. Based on the actions of youth, players in the meso-, exo- and macrosystems will view youth as either positive or negative contributors and interact with them accordingly. The optimal situation is that youth learn to become active participants in negotiating each sphere in a positive manner.

This chapter will discuss the research paradigm used in this study, and how ecological theory and PYD helped to guide the choice and application of the paradigm. In

addition to this, descriptions will be provided for the program and participants, the data collection methods, the method of analysis and the ethical considerations.

### **Constructivist Paradigm**

A paradigm is a basic belief system or worldview that guides a researcher in the fundamental choices related to ontology, epistemology and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontology discusses the nature of reality, and therefore what can be known about reality. Based on the researcher's perspective there exists either one true reality, or multiple realities. This project used a constructivist paradigm. The ontology of the constructivist paradigm suggests that reality is a mental construction created by individual persons or groups. The form and content of this intangible construction is a result of individual traits and experiences. Constructions of reality are not judged to be more or less true in any absolute sense, but more or less informed or sophisticated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

A constructivist ontology is a strong fit for this study as the overall goal was to understand youth's perceptions of the benefits from participating in a structured leisure activity. The concept of multiple realities is consistent with the idea that development is unique for every individual due to the differing interactions with his or her environment. By better understanding individual youth perceptions and analyzing similarities and differences, a more informed and sophisticated construction can be created.

Epistemology focuses on the nature of the relationship between the researcher and what can be known. Epistemology can help to guide the researcher to either become a detached observer of a phenomenon or actively create findings with the participants. The epistemology of constructivism assumes that the researcher and the object of investigation are interactively linked (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, the researcher helps to create the findings during the course of the investigation.

The constructivist epistemology was optimal for this study because as the investigator, I had an impact on the data and the information that was constructed. During the investigation, I was an active player in each participant's microsystem. My questions and actions impacted upon participant thoughts and perceptions, which affected the data

being revealed. One example that helps to illustrate this impact occurred when I asked a question that pertained to the relationship between youth participation in structured leisure activities and reduced substance abuse. Until this point it had appeared as though the discussants had not considered reduced substance abuse as being an outcome related to their participation. Once this concept was broached, some of the discussants considered the idea and responded in kind.

Methodology determines how the researcher will explore knowledge. Depending on how the researcher answers the questions of ontology and epistemology, methodology can range from being quantitative to qualitative. Within a constructivist methodology:

the variable and personal (intra)mental nature of social constructions suggests that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction *between and among* investigator and respondents. These varying constructions are interpreted using conventional hermeneutical techniques, and are compared and contrasted through a dialectical interchange. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111)

With respect to this study, a constructivist methodology was deemed appropriate as each participant possessed an individual construction of reality, as per ecological theory. As the investigator, I was required to interact between and among the respondents in order to assist in the reconstruction process. This interaction was not only in the form of probing and reflection questions asked during the focus groups, but in also in the form of my non-verbal reactions to the participant responses. For example, an encouraging look or a smile may have encouraged a participant to expand on his or her thoughts, whereas a frown or an uninterested tone in my voice may have suggested to the participant that their thoughts were not valuable. This meant that I had to focus on ensuring that both my verbal and non-verbal interactions with the participants encouraged open and honest discussion.

The technique used in the constructivist methodology is hermeneutical; a detailed examination of text, which could refer to a conversation, written words or pictures (Neuman, 2000). Therefore, in terms of the methodology, a qualitative study was concluded to be most appropriate as it provided the richest detail regarding the

constructions of reality that the youth held regarding the benefits received from their participation in a structured leisure activity.

The constructivist paradigm was considered to be most appropriate for this study for several reasons. The constructivist ontology and ecological theory are consistent as each acknowledged the existence of individually held realities, and focused not on one sole truth, but on concepts either more or less informed. With respect to the constructivist epistemology, the investigator is seen as an active creator of findings and not as a confounding factor that needs to be controlled. Again, this understanding is consistent with ecological theory, as the investigator was one part of the participants' microsystem that impacted the data being revealed. Finally, I was required to work within and among participants to interpret individually held constructions through a detailed examination of the text, which in this study was done through an examination of individual transcripts based on two focus group discussions, as well as an examination of notes I had recorded during and after the focus group discussions had occurred. By examining the words used by the program participants, I was able to begin to understand how the participants understood the program, as well as the benefits they received as a result of their participation. In addition, the examination revealed commonly used phrases, which helped to highlight those program messages youth received on a regular basis as a result of their participation in the program.

### **SYA Program Description**

The Structured Youth Activity (SYA) is a program designed for youth ages 12 to 17, and is offered by a municipal recreation centre in Canada that offers programs focusing on environmental education, youth leadership and outdoor recreation. Generally, the majority of events and activities occurred throughout various locations across the municipality (Anon<sup>2</sup>, personal communication, November 2, 2009). The justification for offering activities in numerous locations was to increase the number of opportunities for a variety youth to participate. In 2009, SYA had approximately 40 active participants,

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<sup>2</sup> The name of the source has been removed to protect participant anonymity.

meaning youth who have participated in at least one activity during the calendar year. In addition to this, there were approximately 60 more youth who received emails regarding SYA activities and events.

SYA has four program focus areas, which include Personal Skills Development, Leadership Development and Opportunities, Community Service and Environmental Action, and Social Involvement (Anon, personal communication, November 2, 2009). Personal Skills Development affords participants the opportunity to connect with other youth and adults in order to learn various skills, including resume writing, sewing and rock-climbing. Leadership Development and Opportunities connects participants with other groups and organizations, and encourages participants to practice and share their skills by offering and facilitating presentations, workshops, and training sessions. Specific partnerships include offering a March Break Camp for children, and organizing and facilitating activities for a local science centre. Community Service and Environmental Action has also become an area of importance for SYA. SYA focuses on servicing the community through such activities as volunteering at the food bank and soup kitchen. SYA also helps the environment through activities such as community clean-ups, where participants spend time picking up discarded waste within their neighborhoods. Finally, Social Involvement provides participants opportunities to interact with like-minded people. Through holiday socials, movie nights, and special events, such as the SYA three-day orientation camp program, youth are able to interact and connect with youth and adults that have similar interests and values.

The SYA program schedule varies depending on the season, with the majority of activities taking place during the fall, winter and spring. Program activities can take place as frequently as six times per month, or as infrequently as one activity in three months. SYA participants are responsible for setting the activity schedule, and therefore, activities and events most often occur during weeknight evenings or weekends.

In terms of program co-ordination, SYA is organized by an employee of the recreation centre. The SYA Co-ordinator is the hub of all SYA activities, and is responsible for recruiting new youth, organizing activities and events, communicating

information to participants, parents, partner organizations, and ensuring that the SYA program operates smoothly. Assisting the Co-ordinator is a group of adults, or Mentors, who have made a connection with the recreation centre and the SYA program. Mentors include past staff members, parents of participants, community members that see the benefit of the SYA program, and past SYA youth who are too old to be participants, but still want to be involved. Mentors contribute to the program in numerous ways, including transporting youth, providing skill development sessions, acting as chaperones during events, and connecting SYA youth with other organizations.

In terms of the amount of youth input guiding the program direction, the Co-ordinator stated that participants contribute some activity ideas, slightly less than half of all activities and events, but generally wait for opportunities to be defined and presented to them. While the hope is for SYA to be directed solely by participants, currently this is not the case. In addition to this, youth do not generally organize or facilitate SYA activities and events.

### **SYA Participant Description**

In 2009, the ages of SYA participants ranged between 12 and 17 years with an approximate average age of 15 years (Anon, personal communication, November 2, 2009). The distribution between male and female participants was approximately even. All participants were residents of the municipality and were residing in various districts throughout the region. Generally, participants were Caucasian and came from middle-class families. For the majority of SYA participants, this was not their first experience with a structured youth leisure activity. While some had not been enrolled in a structured program, many had prior experience in sports programs, student council and other youth activities.

Youth are recruited to the program through multiple methods. The majority of youth enrolled in SYA are past participants of other child and youth programs offered by the recreation centre. In other instances, the Program Co-ordinator met youth at different events and encouraged individuals to attend the program. At times participants also became involved in the program because they had learned about it through a friend.



Finally, youth sometimes attended the program due to parental encouragement, although this appeared to be a rare occurrence.

### **Researcher Background**

Between the years and 2003 and 2010 I had been working directly with youth in structured and unstructured leisure programs through an that focused on youth recreation programming. During this time I gained experience as a youth program leader, organized special events for youth, facilitated multiple youth focus groups, and acted as a supervisor and mentor for youth employees. My experience allowed me to become comfortable interacting with youth; I learned how to engage youth in informative and meaningful conversations and I demonstrated the ability to encourage youth to participate in activities when they were uncomfortable. These skills allowed me to create a supportive and open environment during the data collection process.

I initially became interested in this study because of my work experience. Since I had been involved with the provision of structured leisure programs for youth, I had observed youth in structured leisure programs and the positive changes that occurred due to their participation. I questioned whether these changes occurred due to specific differences in the youth as compared to the greater population, the programs offered were somehow different from other youth programs, or were simply influenced by a trend in the youth participating? After conducting the initial literature review and recognizing that youth generally benefited from their participation in structured leisure activities a question was raised: do youth recognize the positive changes that occur due to their participation? All of these questions eventually led to an interest in learning about the perceptions of youth regarding the benefits gained by participating in youth leisure programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the meanings youth have regarding the benefits, both outcomes and processes of participation, they receive as participants in a structured leisure activity. In order to best understand these perceptions, thorough data collection and analysis methods were required. The following will describe these methods in more detail.

## **Data Collection**

Focus groups are a type of group interview where the interaction among participants is the focal point of both research data generation and analysis (Mayan, 2009). The use of focus groups as a data collection method is advantageous when the interaction among participants will likely yield the best information, when they are similar and cooperative with each other, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information (Creswell, 2007; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Focus groups consist of approximately six to ten participants who have a shared experience and are willing to respond in a group interview setting to a prepared set of questions (Morgan as cited in Mayan, 2009). This study employed the use of two focus groups, each group consisting of eight participants, with a semi-structured interview guide as a data collection method (see Appendix A). According to Richards and Morse (2007), semi-structured interview guides are used in situations where the interviewer understands the topic area well enough to develop questions, but not well enough to predict the answers. These guides provided the researcher with the organization and comfort of preplanned questions, while at the same time inviting participants to provide detailed and complex answers.

With respect to the use of focus groups in this study, it was determined that the use of these groups was consistent with the constructivist methodology. As previously stated, a constructivist methodology is used in order to reconstruct the realities held by participants, so that a more sophisticated construction can be created. Recognizing that the interaction among participants was the focal point of the data collection, the use of focus groups was deemed to be appropriate. Focus groups allowed for multiple voices of youth to be heard, and identified the similar and dissimilar opinions participants had. It should also be noted that focus groups with youth participants are commonly used throughout the qualitative literature, including the areas of adolescent tobacco use and physical activity. Previous research has identified that focus groups can be used in order to increase the comfort level of participants, thereby encouraging participants to reflect and formulate their own opinions while listening to others (Plano Clark, Miller, Creswell, McVea, McEntarffer, Harter, Mickleson, 2002). Similar to Plano et al. (2002), the focus

groups in this study helped to provide a comfortable atmosphere which encouraged participation and reflection. The use of focus groups also allowed participants to listen to different perspectives and opinions, and build upon the responses of others in the group. An example of this occurred during the focus group when the discussion revolved around the topic of the comfortable atmosphere of the program, and how it differs from that of the school environment. Fred initially indicated that the program created opportunities for people with a wide age range to interact, which led to an understanding that the age of program participants did not matter. Elle then built on this statement and claimed that in school youth feel as though they can only interact with people in their same grade, thereby highlighting a difference between the SYA program and the school system environments.

With respect to the use of a semi-structured interview guide in this study, the guide was very helpful. The guide provided the researcher with direction during the conversation, and helped to ensure that the participants provided complete answers to the questions. However, after the first focus group had concluded it was decided by the researcher that the semi-structured interview was too long. Therefore, before the second focus group had begun, the researcher analyzed the questions in the guide and removed questions eliciting repetitive responses. The resulting semi-structured interview guide was shorter in length, thereby allowing additional time for the focus group so that participants could provide more in-depth responses to fewer questions.

The use of focus groups discussions also allowed me to play a role in the data collection process; not just as an observer, but as an instrument. As stated, using a constructivist methodology requires the investigator to interact between and among the discussants to assist in the reconstruction process. My previous experience working with youth allowed me to develop an easy rapport with the discussants, and led to the development of an atmosphere that encouraged informative group discussions. In addition, my experience allowed me to better direct the flow of conversation to ensure that all discussants were able to share their perspectives and move the conversation from one topic to another when an idea had been sufficiently explored. Therefore, as a result of

my reflective lens, it is likely that I was able to gather more rich data than other interviewers may have been able to.

Despite the appropriateness of the use of focus groups, some potential limitations were identified. However, due to the nature of SYA and the study design the impact of these limitations was minimized. The first potential limitation involved issues surrounding the willingness of SYA youth to participate in the focus group discussion. The primary concerns focused on whether a specific youth might either try to take over the conversation or not respond to questions at all. Since SYA was an established group that had already participated in many different events, activities, and team-building opportunities, it was assumed that participants would be comfortable enough to share their true thoughts and opinions with the researcher and the group. It was also assumed that since the researcher was experienced working with youth in similar situations, there would be little difficulty encouraging full and honest participation.

To reduce the potential impact for this limitation, before the interview began the researcher engaged the participants in an icebreaker activity, entitled King Frog, which helped to create a comfortable atmosphere (see Appendix A). While the majority of participants freely provided their input, two participants did not speak as many times during the conversations as other members of the groups. During the interviews, the researcher made note of this trend and pointedly asked questions to these individuals in order to engage them in the conversation. In both instances the participants either responded by stating that they had nothing to add to the conversation, or provided a one word response. It is possible that these participants either felt uncomfortable providing their responses in a group setting or because it differed from the larger group. It is also possible that they felt that their perspective had already been voiced by another participant or that these individuals do not often speak in group settings. Regardless, these behaviours were localized to specific individuals and not the group as a whole.

The second potential limitation identified involved interview questions that may either elicit one-word responses or create conversations that deviated from the research questions. In order to minimize this limitation, a semi-structured interview guide was

used, and included both general questions and more specific probing questions. This allowed the researcher to focus on specific topic areas when needed. In order to ensure the appropriateness of the guide, it was piloted with two SYA members, the child of the Program Co-ordinator, and the child of the Program Co-ordinator's supervisor. The researcher conducted a single interview with both individuals and adjusted the interview guide based on the responses from the discussion. While the researcher kept the notes from the pilot, the notes based on the specific responses provided by the two individuals were destroyed. In addition to these adjustments, changes were made to the interview guide after the first focus group discussion, as previously stated. The creation and adjustments made to the semi-structured interview guide helped to minimize the likelihood of one-word answers and tangential conversations during the interview.

An additional limitation that was recognized was related to participants who may have been hesitant to express negative comments about the program. Hesitation may have stemmed from the possibility that the Co-ordinator could learn about negative comments either from other participants or the researcher. This limitation was minimized by explaining to all participants that all information collected would remain confidential, and that no identifying information would be attached to any comments made during the interview. In addition, participants were reminded that all comments during the interview would not to be shared with others.

The final limitation involved the researcher's ability to recruit enough youth in order to be able to conduct focus groups. Initially it was assumed that since SYA was already an established group with regular meetings throughout the year, issues of recruitment would not be a factor. The researcher was able to enlist the aid of the Program Co-ordinator who helped to encourage the SYA youth to participate. Finally, the focus groups were also scheduled to meet at the recreation centre during a convenient time for the youth, which increased the likelihood that youth would be able to participate.

Despite the steps taken to ensure that the appropriate number of youth would participate in the focus groups, the researcher had a very difficult time recruiting youth. Two factors influenced the recruitment process. The first factor was that of timing. The

researcher had initially hoped to conduct the focus groups during the summer months. This proved to be a poor time of year as most SYA members were unavailable to meet either due to family vacations, summer employment or other obligations. A key lesson learned from this experience is that successful recruitment requires the need to time data collection very carefully, keeping in mind the schedules of the potential participants.

The second factor that influenced the recruitment process was related to the researcher's relocation to a different province during late July. This relocation impacted the researcher's ability to focus on conducting research and connecting with potential focus group participants, as well as scheduling an appropriate time to conduct the focus group discussions. The lesson learned from this experience is that a researcher must be very flexible with respect to the scheduling of data collection. When conducting focus groups, a researcher must ensure that he or she is able to meet participants at a time convenient for them.

It should be noted that the Program Co-ordinator was very helpful during the recruitment and scheduling processes, which lasted between the months of July and November, 2010. The Co-ordinator provided advice with regards to appropriate interview times, and also was used as a vehicle to send the recruitment letter to SYA members directly. Had it not been for the assistance of the Co-ordinator, the researcher would have had a much more difficult time recruiting participants.

### **Focus Group Participants**

Effective qualitative research requires samples that are selected purposefully or with intention (Mayan, 2009). In this study purposeful sampling was used in order to ensure that the highest quality data was collected. The goal of this sampling technique was to create focus groups that best reflected the demographic composition of SYA participants.

As previously stated, participants were recruited through the SYA Program Co-ordinator. A request for participation was disseminated to the SYA participants multiple times, resulting in interview dates and times that were scheduled in order to ensure the maximum number of youth would be able to participate. The focus groups were located

in the recreation centre, which helped to ensure the interview was as convenient and comfortable as possible for all participants.

The initial recruitment plan included using a purposeful sampling technique in order to create focus groups that most closely reflected the demographic composition of all SYA youth. The ideal SYA focus groups were to include equal numbers of males and females, youth with an average age equal to approximately 15 years including both a youth who was 12 years old and one who was 17 years old. In addition, the appropriate number of individuals from rural areas and the urban core were to be selected to ensure geographic requirements were satisfied. Finally, while the majority of SYA youth have been Caucasian, including individuals from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds was desired to provide different perspectives. Therefore, effort was made to include individuals who were from a visible minority group, or had recently immigrated to Canada in order to obtain their perceptions.

As a result of the struggles encountered during the recruitment process, the purposeful sampling technique was abandoned. SYA members were informed of the dates, and available youth attended the focus group that best fit their schedule. Demographic data for each participant was collected at the outset of each focus group using the Socio-Demographic Form (see Appendix B).

Two focus groups, each consisting of eight participants were used to collect the data. Each group met once to answer the interview questions, and then were provided with an executive summary of the findings in order to ensure credibility. The number of participants per group allowed for the construction and collection of rich and diverse data, while at the same time did not overwhelm the researcher with too much data to analyze. Initially, the focus groups were designed so that more junior members would attend one interview and more senior members would attend the other. This would have allowed the researcher to encourage discussion based upon the experiences that were most relevant to the youth who attended each interview. This design would have also allowed the researcher to better understand the benefits participants perceive as a result of short-term SYA participation versus long-term. However, the researcher was forced to

abandon this design characteristic due to the difficulty associated with recruiting participants for the interviews.

It is possible to argue that participants should have been separated based on their sex during the focus group interviews. This is based on the concept that the gendered experiences of the participants, both during the SYA program and the focus group sessions, could affect participant outlooks and responses during the interviews. In this situation, participants may have decided to censor their responses in order to gain the approval of the other group members. This argument can be countered by stating that because SYA is a well established group that focuses on teamwork and establishing trust among group members, the likelihood that a participant would self-censor their response would be minimized. As previously stated, during the focus group discussions two instances occurred where individuals did not contribute to the conversations to the same extent as other focus group members. One of these instances might have occurred due to the fact that one individual was the sole male among a group of female discussants. This uneven distribution between the sexes may have made this focus group participant feel uncomfortable and made him unwilling to provide input or add to the discussion. Ensuring that an equal number of male and female SYA members participated in the focus groups may have alleviated this issue.

One variable that was not addressed in this study was that of socio-economic status. This study did not examine the effect of socio-economic status on the perceptions of youth participants for two reasons. The first reason was due to the difficulty in obtaining accurate data. Asking participants directly may have provided inaccurate responses, as participants may not have been aware of their household income. The use of attributing a level of socio-economic status based on postal code or area in which a youth lived may also have provided an inaccurate response as all regions and neighborhoods contain households with varying degrees of wealth. The second reason that socio-economic status was not examined was because this variable is generally considered to be a more sensitive subject than age, gender or ethnicity. Had participants been asked about their family income in the demographic questionnaire prior to the focus group, their responses and the degree to which they chose to participate may have been affected.



With respect to exclusion criteria, it was assumed that the most useful information would be provided by those youth that had been active participants in the program. Only those participants that had attended the program at least three times in the previous six months were invited to participate in the study. In addition to this, since this was an investigation of youth perceptions regarding the benefits received from current participation in SYA, the study was delimited to the Co-ordinator, Mentors, parents of participants, and past participants. As previously stated, the children of both the Program Co-ordinator and the Program Co-ordinator's Supervisor were SYA members. It was decided that including these individuals in the focus groups may have affected the validity of the other participants' responses. Therefore these individuals were not included in the focus group interviews. However, these individuals did have the opportunity to assist with the research by participating in a pilot study. They responded to the interview questions in order to ensure that the questions were appropriate. Adjustments to the questions were made based on their responses and feedback. The pilot data was not used in the analysis.

### **Method of Analysis**

Thematic analysis is the search for and identification of common threads through an entire interview or set of interviews (Morse and Field as cited in DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). These threads, or themes, may refer to the observable content of the data, such as a specific term (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Conversely, themes may also be more latent, such as conversations in which the theme is implicitly referenced. Thematic analysis focuses on explaining the themes and patterns of behaviour (Aronson, 1994).

The first step in thematic analysis is to collect the data (Aronson, 1994). In this study, there was an audio-recording of each interview, which was then transcribed verbatim through the assistance of a transcriptionist. The transcribed interview was then imported into Atlas.ti, a qualitative software program and compared to the audio-recording in order to ensure that the transcription was accurate. Any difference between the two was immediately rectified.

To identify the emergent themes in the data, Strauss's (as cited in Dumond, 2002) three stages of coding were used. These stages included open, axial and selective coding. In the initial stage, I engaged in open coding which, as Strauss and Corbin (as cited in Brent & Slusarz, 2011) state, have labels and themes that are often derived from the language of those people being studied or the literature. With respect to this study, I read through each transcript and applied at least one code to each sentence. For those sentences that appeared to refer to more than one idea, multiple codes were attached. For example, while describing the program one participant noted:

*Bailey: just because it's a chance to really get outside and really show what you can do in the outdoors and like, be yourself and be like crazy and wild, or be like really chill and easy going, like it's whatever you want it to be and you're leading these people so like you're gaining respect from these people.*

The codes that were applied to this sentence included *Acting as a Group Leader*, *Be Myself*, *Outdoor Focus*, *Respect* and *Show What You Can Do*. The transcripts were then read through again to ensure that codes had not been missed during the initial pass.

According to Strauss and Corbin (as cited in Brent & Slusarz, 2011), axial coding focuses in contextualizing, which requires relating specific codes to broader categories or themes and to one another. During the axial coding stage, I began by merging those codes that appeared to be duplicates. For example, I decided to merge the code *School is Tough* into the code *Regular World*, because school is a major component of a youth's regular world. Once I was satisfied that I had eliminated any duplicate codes I began to sort the codes into different themes, which were then re-examined and built into a conceptual model. The creation of the model required multiple revisions and required me to revisit the initial codes to ensure that the collective experience was accurately represented.

The final stage of the analysis was that of selective coding, which involved scanning the data and codes to selectively look for cases which illustrated the key themes (Brent & Slusarz, 2011). This helped to create the narrative.

As a result of the thematic analysis, an evolution of research questions occurred. In the initial stages of the study, the research questions consisted of the following:

1. Do youth feel they benefit from participation in a structured leisure activity?
2. How can the benefits be carried over to other settings?
3. Do youth feel the need to create awareness about the benefits received from participation?

Due to the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry and the content of and the themes that arose from the focus group discussions, new questions were developed. While the literature led me to believe that the initial research questions would provide me with the most appropriate information to address the purpose of the study, I found that the youth perspectives provided me with much more rich data. The questions that arose from the process consisted of the following, and the process describing the development of these revised questions will be addressed in a later section.

1. What benefits do youth perceive to accumulate from their participation in a structured leisure activity?
2. What program elements assist in the accumulation of these perceived benefits?

Using the steps outlined above, youth perceptions regarding the benefits received from participating in a structured leisure activity became apparent. However, there was still a need to ensure the validity of the conceptualization. The following will describe how the study was evaluated.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that based on the paradigm associated with qualitative research, specific criteria must be used when evaluating qualitative research. The authors use the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as criteria to assess qualitative inquiry.

## **Credibility**

Credibility determines if the findings are an accurate representation of the data (Mayan, 2009). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, the implementation of the credibility criterion is a twofold task; to carry out the study in such a way that the credibility of the findings is enhanced, and to demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the participants. Methods of ensuring credibility in this study included prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, pre-testing instrumentation, and member checking.

1. Prolonged engagement: The purpose of this activity is to invest sufficient time in order to learn the culture of the group, test for misinformation introduced by either the researcher or participants, and to build trust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to obtain the best information possible, I participated in one SYA activity before the interview process began. My participation allowed me to examine my understanding of the group culture, forge relationships with the participants, become an accepted member of the group, and identify both intended and unintended misinformation. Based on a comparison of my reflective understandings and the focus group responses, I felt confident that the information communicated was accurately represented.
2. Peer Debriefing: This is the process where the transcript and analysis is shared with a peer in order to verify the interpretations of the findings. This process helps to clarify the basis of each interpretation, test working hypotheses, develop the next steps of the methodological design, and provides the researcher an opportunity for catharsis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study I worked with my supervisor in the act of peer debriefing. My supervisor was able to address concerns surrounding the youth literature and the general research process, more specifically the process of data analysis, synthesis and communication of findings.
3. Pre-testing Instrumentation: In order to ensure that the interview guide incorporated language that was understandable and that the meanings of the questions were clear, the interview guide was pre-tested prior to the focus group discussions. Questions were posed to the children of both the Program Co-

ordinator and the Program Co-ordinator's supervisor, and adjusted based on the feedback received. Based on the pre-testing of the socio-demographic form, it was determined that the choice of wording was appropriate and required no revisions. Based on the responses to the semi-structured interview guide, it was determined that the guide was too lengthy and some questions which elicited repetitive responses needed to be removed. In addition, it was determined that visual representations and description of the SYA program foci, as well as the definitions of process and outcome benefits were needed to help facilitate some of the questions. These items were written on flip chart paper and referred to during both focus groups interviews.

4. Member Checking: This process tests the data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions with members of the stakeholding group from which the data were collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process allowed participants to review the researcher's interpretations of the themes raised during the interview. The participants were individually mailed executive summaries of the themes that were identified, and provided the opportunity to comment on the summary.

### **Transferability**

Transferability is a method of determining the ability to transfer the findings from the research setting to other settings, and is done through the use of a *thick description*. (Mayan, 2009). A thick description is characterized by sufficient description and direct quotations which allow the reader to develop thorough understanding of the situation and of the thoughts of the people represented in the research (Patton, 1990). Descriptions of the program foci, program setting, and experiences of the participants have been provided in such a way that the reader could understand the experiences of participants, follow the interpretation of the data, and determine if the conclusions were applicable to other settings (Dumond, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the opportunity to review how decisions were made throughout the course of the study (Mayan, 2009). This is usually done through the use of

an audit trail, which enables researchers to document why, when, and how decisions were made during the course of the research (Mayan, 2009). Audit trails are made available so that reviewers can examine the research process and product to ensure that judgments can be deemed trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They also allow the researcher to defend major analytical decisions (Mayan, 2009). For this study the audit trail took the form of a personal journal, which detailed the decisions made regarding research design and analysis. The audit trail was made available to my supervisor so that the process and product of my work could be examined for consistency and overall quality.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is used in the data collection and analysis phases to ensure that findings are logical (Mayan, 2009). This often occurs in the form of an audit trail, which, in this study, took the form of a personal journal. This allowed me, as the researcher, the opportunity to examine data and interpretations. More specifically, this journal identified and described the coding process that was used to tie the findings to the participants' words and actions. The journal also included reflections regarding how my biases, decisions, actions and skills affected both the participants and the research process (Dumond, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Protocol**

The research process was carried out using a very specific and intentional protocol. The study began with the creation of a reflective journal, followed by my participation in a SYA activity. The next step in the process included obtaining ethics approval from the Dalhousie University Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, followed by a pilot of the interview guide. After adjustments were made to the guide, SYA recruitment through the Program Co-ordinator began and was followed by information packages being mailed to those SYA members who had expressed interest. The youth that were able and willing to attend were enrolled in one of the two focus group discussions, and were reminded via phone call of the scheduled time as the date of the discussions approached. Focus group discussions were conducted with the two groups, and were followed by the transcription of the audio-recordings. The data was then analyzed using a thematic analysis, and the study discussion and conclusion were

written. As this occurred, member-checking was conducted through an executive summary which was emailed to study participants. Upon completion of the discussion, conclusion and member-checking, I defended my thesis. After making the necessary adjustments, I wrote an executive summary of my findings and communicated them to the appropriate stakeholders. A more detailed description of the study protocol can be found in Appendix C.

### **Limitations**

Due to the fact that this study employed purposeful sampling, no claims can be made stating that the conclusions can be transferred to other youth program contexts or youth programs in general. However, because the study provided a detailed description of the program setting and participants, readers are able to determine if the findings are applicable to their own specific settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, the study findings may prove useful when adapting the current SYA program.

Delay (as cited in Dumond, 2002) states that it often takes more than six months before the full effect of a program on one's life can be evaluated. Since youth perceptions were sought while the youth were still enrolled in the program, it is possible that participants may not have had the time to reflect on their experiences. With inadequate time for reflection, the youth enrolled in the program may not have been able to determine all of the benefits they had received as a result of their participation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

When undertaking any type of research the issue of ethics must be taken into consideration. With respect to this study, while the investigation posed minimal risk to the participants, it was acknowledged that study participants were youth and therefore part of a vulnerable population. A signed consent form for older adolescents was obtained from those individuals that were ages 16 years and older (see Appendix D). For individuals under the age of 16 years, both a signed informed assent form was obtained from participants (see Appendix E) and a signed informed consent form was obtained from the participants' guardians (see Appendix F). These forms included information pertaining to the study purpose, data collection, and data analysis.

With respect to the ethical issues surrounding data collection, participants were informed of their rights to participate voluntarily and withdraw at any time. Explanations were provided to the participants regarding the procedures of the study, including the amount of time participants were likely to expect participating, and the researcher's use of a digital audio recorder to obtain data. The researcher also informed the participants that they had the right to ask questions at any time during the research process, and would be provided with an executive summary of the study upon completion. It was stated in writing that should any participant reveal information regarding abuse, the researcher was ethically bound to contact child protective services on the participant's behalf. Finally, while it was not expected that the study should evoke any negative emotions, had a participant experienced a crisis, the Child Help Line phone number would have been provided. These explanations were provided in writing through the consent and assent forms, as well as verbally during the focus group discussion introduction. Before data collection began, a proposal of the study was approved by the Dalhousie University Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board.

In terms of ethical issues surrounding data analysis, the researcher protected the confidentiality of individuals by using aliases during the data coding process. Participant contact information was not stored with either the focus group discussion or socio-demographic data. In addition, once the transcribed interviews had been verified, the original audio-recordings were destroyed.

Finally, in order to ensure that the interpretation of the data were consistent with participant perceptions, the researcher engaged in member checking. Once published, the transcribed interviews and the socio-demographic forms will be kept for 5 years in a secure and safe area with the researcher's supervisor and then destroyed.

### **Dissemination**

The study conclusions were disseminated through a variety of means, including a thesis manuscript, presentations and reports. Upon publication of the thesis, an executive summary of the manuscript was made available to all of the participants involved in the



research process. In addition to this, a complete copy of the thesis manuscript was provided to the municipal recreation centre. Finally, it is possible that findings will be presented at relevant conferences held by governing bodies such as the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

The previous chapter identified that a constructivist paradigm was used to inform this study, and provided support as to why this paradigm was the most appropriate to use. The chapter also provided detailed descriptions of the SYA program and participants under inquiry, the methods used to collect and analyze the data, and the protocols used to ensure that the information being gathered and analyzed could be deemed trustworthy. All of this was done in order to address the following questions:

1. Do youth feel they benefit from participation in a structured leisure activity?
2. How can the benefits be carried over to other settings?
3. Do youth feel the need to create awareness about the benefits received from participation?

The subsequent analysis resulted in the development of a more thorough understanding of the SYA program. The following chapter will provide a more in-depth look at the individual youth that participated in the focus group discussions, their descriptions of the SYA program and the benefits they perceive to have accumulated as a result of their participation. Furthermore, the chapter will provide the reader with my interpretation of the characteristics of the program, or *Program Themes*, that facilitated the accumulation of the identified benefits. All of the themes presented, and my related interpretations, will be supported by text illustrations. For the purpose of clarity, the themes and sub-themes imbedded in the data were categorized as the following:

### Participant Descriptions of the Program

- Program Purpose
- Activities

### Program Themes

1. Meaningful and Supportive Relationships
  - a. Relationships with Other SYA Youth
  - b. Youth-Adult Relationships

- c. Respect
2. Building an Identity
  - a. Risk of Being Labeled in the Regular World
  - b. SYA Identity Development
3. Unique Learning Opportunities
  - a. Relevant Learning
  - b. Youth as Teachers or Mentors
  - c. Learning to Lead
  - d. Youth Affecting Change

#### Perceived Benefits of Participation

- Positive Changes as a Result of Participation
- Lessons Learned

### **The Participants**

The youth who participated in this study presented a range of backgrounds (see Table 1, p. 71). A total of 16 youth, four male and eight female, participated. These youth ranged in age between 13 and 17 years. According to self-reports, the youth had been enrolled in the program from as few as three months to as many as 50, and within the previous six months had participated in as few as three activities to as many as 20. Many participants had difficulty providing a response when asked their ethnicity on the socio-demographic form, so the youth were asked to indicate the country in which each of their parents was born. Therefore, if each parent was born in Canada, the participant indicated that their ethnicity was Canadian. Based on this definition, the majority of participants identified as being Canadian, with five youth indicating that they were of Mexican/Canadian, Irish/Scottish, American/Dutch, Lebanese, and English descent. Socio-economic status was not included on the demographics form due to the possibility of both obtaining inaccurate data and broaching a sensitive subject that might negatively impact the participants, thereby impacting their willingness to participate. With respect to the current education of the participants, it was assumed that these individuals would either be enrolled in junior high school or high school. The socio-demographic form did not include a question pertaining to current level of education (see Appendix B).

Table 1

*Summary Characteristics of the 16 Interviewed Program Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Months Enrolled in SYA</b>	<b>SYA Activities in Past 6 Months</b>	<b>Ethnicity/Cultural Background</b>
Ava	13	Female	3	8	Canadian
George	14	Male	14	3	Mexican/Canadian
Bailey	16	Female	10	15	Irish/Scottish
Fred	16	Female	43	12	Canadian
Milo	15	Female	9	4 or 5	Canadian
Charlye	15	Female	24	12	Canadian
Bob	13	Female	8	10	American/Dutch
Elle	15	Female	14	More than 5	Canadian
Amy	14	Female	12	10	Canadian
Isaac	15	Female	14	20	Lebanese
Hugo	16	Female	50	9	Canadian
Ed	17	Male	36	7	English
Sasha	15	Male	36	15	Canadian
Joel	13	Male	26	12	Canadian
Charlie	15	Female	36	20	Canadian
Georgia	15	Female	24	10	Canadian

In an attempt to ensure that the focus group discussions included youth from both urban and rural areas, participants were asked to indicate the type of environment in which they lived. Based on these self-reports, it was concluded that 12 youth from urban areas and 4 youth from rural areas were included in the discussions. Participants were also asked to indicate the number of years they had lived in Canada. With the exception of one youth, who had lived in Canada for all but one year, participants stated that they had lived in Canada their entire lives. Finally, participants were asked to indicate the five most recent program activities they had participated in. This allowed the researcher to ensure that the youth attending the focus groups had recent and substantial experience with the program, and provided the youth an opportunity to reflect on the activities that they had been participating in over the previous six months. Examples of activities included bracelet-making, program planning, program facilitation, and working at the food bank. Based on the information gathered from the forms, the focus group discussants, both individually and as an entire group, participated in a wide range of program offerings.

Based on a general description of SYA participants provided by the Program Coordinator, the individuals who participated in the focus group discussions appeared to be a typical group of SYA youth. The participants all were between the ages of 12 and 17 years, and had an average age of 15 years. The majority of the focus group participants were Caucasian, which also is consistent to the previously provided participant description. Participants had also been enrolled in the program ranging from three months to more than four years. It should be noted, however, that while the general SYA group consists of approximately an even number of males and females, the focus group discussions included a far greater number of females. The following section examines the thematic findings discussed by these participants.

### **Participant Descriptions of the Program**

In order to develop an understanding of the participant perspectives related to the program, both focus group discussions began with questions asking the youth to describe the SYA program. Participants were asked to describe the purpose of the SYA program, which included a description of the activities they often engaged in. The following

section will provide a detailed description of the SYA program as understood by the participants, which includes a discussion regarding the program purpose and a brief overview of some of the program activities.

### **Program Purpose**

When asked to describe the purpose of the program, and the areas upon which the programming focuses, the participants provided consistent responses.

*Sasha: ...it basically just provides you with the opportunities to help the earth and it can really show you that it is possible to help the earth.*

*Ed: ...it's kind of self-development, so like personal development, community development and there's the aspect of helping the environment so...I think a lot of it is building that community of youth that have the same passion that want to get involved.*

*Ava: It's making youth and teenagers more aware of the environment and better leaders and more socially capable so that they can be better adults.*

These quotes indicate that the youth understand the purpose of the program as being focused on that of community service and environmental awareness, assisting youth in personal skills development, and providing participants with leadership opportunities. They also demonstrate the desire of the participants to develop skills and improve themselves and their communities. The above quotes, as well as the focus group discussions, were consistent when communicating the message that youth explicitly perceive the SYA program to focus on the areas of community service, environmental awareness, personal skills development and the provision of leadership opportunities.

Beyond merely providing a description of the SYA program, the above quotes also indicate that the participants recognize their ability to both identify areas in which they want to develop, as well play an active role in that development. Through this process, youth perceive themselves as helping to guide the direction of the program. Recalling the literature related to the concept of youth-driven programs, when youth are able to collaborate with adults and set the direction for programs, they are able to act as

agents of their own development (Larson et al., 2005). Therefore, implicitly the youth describe the SYA program as following a youth-drive program model. The concepts of personal and skill development will be discussed in more depth in the theme entitled *Perceived Benefits of Participation*.

Finally, the quotes also suggest that the participants understand that by developing different skills, they are able to have a positive impact on the world around them. The concept of this positive impact will be discussed in more detail in the sub-theme *Youth Affecting Change*.

### **Activities**

During the two focus group discussions, the participants discussed a variety of events and activities that take place within the structure of the SYA program. The activities discussed ranged from bracelet-making and dancing lessons to a residential camp experience and a dramatic informational presentation.

*Bob: I agree with Charlye and Elle and everyone else who said that [unclear] that pretty much everyone can, every youth could take something away from SYA. Like for some people who wouldn't like some things over others, for example maybe some kids wouldn't like the outdoorsy stuff but would prefer the social things or the leadership things. Yah, I think there's something for every person, every youth.*

The participants indicated that the activities did not take place in one sole location, but in a variety of locations, specifically that of the outdoors. Recognizing that one of the program purposes is that of environmental awareness, it stands to reason that many activities would focus on increasing the participants' comfort in nature and take place out of doors.

*Bailey: As much as we can we try to make them outside. Just as a part of SYA we like to be outside so we try to make as many activities as we can in the environment, outside.*

*Charlye: My favourite SYA event would probably be the SYA camp, it is my absolute favourite actually. Only because we get to spend time out in the wild, or in the outside and like I don't know it's very, it's a lot of what SYA represents like there's I don't know how to explain it, like it's very earthy I guess.*

The act of locating the activities outside helps to reinforce the environmental awareness principals that the program was designed to teach.

With respect to the planning and leading of SYA activities, the youth indicated that while generally either the recreation centre staff or other Mentors associated with the recreation centre are the ones to organize activities and events, the SYA participants often assist with the facilitation.

*Georgia: Well mainly it's our leaders who have been at the centre for a while...that put together, but sometimes people that are involved in SYA like us, we get to put on the activities which is really empowering for us and that's really fun.*

In addition to this statement, another comment made by a participant suggested that while the program staff organize the activities, the youth play a more active role in the facilitation.

*Sasha: With the Fisherman's Clubs it is kind of like put on by (the Program Co-ordinator) or (Program Staff) but it is like mostly the people that are participating in SYA that are really like leading the event and driving the event so I find that's really cool.*

This information is consistent with the implicit suggestion made earlier which described the SYA program as following a youth-drive program model. Youth and adults collaborate to ensure that the youth have an opportunity to grow and develop. The adults play their role by providing some structure and oversight to the program, in order to ensure that activities and events are well-organized and are facilitated in a safe manner. Youth then play the role of facilitating many of the program activities, as both Georgia



and Sasha indicate. These two characteristics suggest that the SYA program falls closer to the youth-driven program area on the adult-youth program leadership continuum.

A final characteristic of the activities that needs to be focused on is that participation in specific events or activities was not mandatory. This act of choice suggests that participants can make the most out of their experience by attending only those activities which interest them, which in turn would make the overall SYA experience that much more meaningful and enjoyable.

*Charlie: Just touching on what Isaac said about how it is kind of a drop-in thing, so you don't, it's not mandatory to come which is really good because it kind of takes like the pressure off of it cause you're not like oh I have to go to SYA tonight, it's more like you want to come and that's why you're there.*

The concept of voluntary participation will be explored more in the *Relevant Learning* section.

Based on the youth responses, the activities in the SYA program appear as though they are specifically designed to encourage youth development and empowerment. The activities that are offered are designed to be interesting and meaningful for the youth audience, and the outdoor locations of many of the activities help to reinforce the message of environmental protection. The description of how the activities are organized and facilitated suggests that SYA employs a youth-driven program model; a model where youth set the direction of the program, and adults help to facilitate growth and provide oversight for safety reasons. The option to choose participation in a specific activity, as opposed to mandatory participation, also allows you to get the most out of their experience because they are able to exercise choice in their attendance. In this way youth are able to determine which activities are of value, and play an active role in their own development.

Now that the reader has been provided with a better understanding of the participant perceptions of the SYA program purpose and the activities in which youth participate, one may begin to focus on the *Program Themes* that help to sustain youth

involvement. The following section will provide some general statements focusing on this, and then delve more deeply into the *Program Themes* that were imbedded in the data.

### **Program Themes**

When asked to provide an explanation as to why they decided to sustain their involvement with the program, the participants provided very general responses. Some youth described their general feelings as they relate to the program;

*Milo: SYA's sort of a little sunshine. If I've sort of had a really bad week it's just like oh there's a SYA meeting on Thursday, I can't wait for that...*

*Bailey: It's something to look forward to, I think you guys just touched on it a lot, it's just something that you can be, like, just get you through.*

Other participants focused on more specific reasons, which included the positive atmosphere of the program, the opportunities for growth, the focus on the environment, the peers and friends that also attend the program, and the fact that parents encouraged their involvement.

*Isaac: One of the reasons I stay involved is I find I get a lot of good opportunities, I meet a lot of cool people and I just learn about a lot of cool things so to me there's not really a reason not to be involved. If you're interested in the environment and meeting people and taking action, so.*

*Georgia: Well definitely the peers that are in SYA are helping me stay cause it's just a great environment and it's really, it's really positive here and also my family is really good with SYA, they love it, my parents really love it and they've always been really encouraging towards the environment stuff.*

While these responses provided a very brief description of why the participants continue to sustain their involvement, a more detailed understanding of the program themes is required to improve and replicate the program. The identified program themes

that have made SYA successful include *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*, *Building an Identity* and *Unique Learning Opportunities*. The following will describe the program themes as was revealed during the focus group discussions by the participants.

### **Meaningful and Supportive Relationships**

Throughout the course of both focus group discussions, the participants indicated that a key reason as to why they enjoyed the program and continued to participate in the program was due to the people. A thorough investigation and analysis of these comments indicated that it was not solely specific individuals to which the participants referred, but the meaningful relationships that the participants had formed with different groups associated with the SYA program. The different groups that were identified focused on other SYA participants and adults affiliated with SYA. With both groups, the sub-theme that was identified which made the relationships meaningful and supportive was that of respect. The following will describe the relationships participants had between other SYA youth, the adults associated with the program, which includes the Program Co-ordinator, and how the concept of respect has impacted the participants.

#### ***Relationships with other SYA youth.***

One of the recurring sub-themes during the discussions focused on the fact that a key reason as to both why youth sustained their involvement and why they felt the program was important had to do with the other program participants. The responses suggested that the SYA program provided the youth an opportunity to meet new people and make new friends, particularly friends with whom the youth shared both interests and opinions.

*Bob: ... it's also just a place where you can meet people who are interested in the same things that you are and do things that you're interested in.*

*Joel: I think SYA is also a great way to get youth together that have mutual feelings about something. It's, I find it's really easy to make friends when you feel the same way about something big or if you're going to the same camp, then you're probably there for a reason so, I think it's great.*

As both Bob and Joel state, SYA was considered by the participants to be a place where they could meet new people who were interested in the same things or share similar views. Charlie further corroborates Joel's claim that meeting new people and making friends was easier when they felt as though they had shared interests.

*Charlie: Like Joel had mentioned earlier, it's easier to meet people who have the same views so that's really good for me cause I love meeting new people and it just makes it much more easier if you have things to talk about, and also the people here are always really nice.*

Furthermore, Georgia indicates that she was able to meet new people and make friends with individuals that she may have never met had she not been enrolled in the program.

*Georgia: ... I find that I've made a lot of really close friends that I would never have made if I wasn't in SYA.*

Moving beyond the concept of friends is that of family. Many of the focus group discussants indicated that they felt as though being involved with the SYA Program was much like being part of a family. When asked what SYA meant to her, one participant stated:

*Fred: SYA is family and being together.*

On a separate occasion, another participant supported the claim that SYA is like a family by saying:

*Hugo: One thing, another thing is that it's extremely like comforting and accommodating, there aren't any cliques, everybody gets along with one another and personally like I find that, like, there's a big difference between that and, like, school in that way and it's like a second family, it's great.*

While it is important to know that the participants feel a sense of belonging, and feel as though the SYA program is a family, it is equally important to understand the

reasons behind these feelings. Drawing from the data in the focus groups it can be suggested that these feelings have been engendered in the youth as a result of creating an atmosphere that is accepting, safe and supportive. These claims are supported by the following quotes.

*Bob: ... it's a nice feeling, everyone here is very supportive, everyone here has similar interests as you so it's nice to go to a place like that where you can just chill with people who get along with each other well, like do the things you like a lot.*

*Elle: I find like what Charlye said, you can speak your mind and people will listen and not be judgmental about what you're saying and...*

*Isaac: ...I find it's a really, really comfortable, fun, safe environment, like there's nothing awkward. Everyone's really, really accepting...*

Therefore, the SYA program has been able to provide opportunities for youth to meet new people, make new friends and create a sense of belonging that can be likened to that of a family. SYA participants identified that these characteristics and the program atmosphere is such that the youth feel as though they are accepted as part of the larger group and the feel safe and supported.

The majority of this section has focused on the participant to participant relationships, therefore, in order to better understand the SYA participant perspectives, it is necessary to investigate the types of relationships that the participants have with those adults that are involved in the program from time to time.

#### ***Youth-adult relationships.***

As previously stated, the SYA program enlists the assistance of various adults, which include past participants, parents of participants, interested community volunteers, and professionals in the areas of youth and community development, to ensure high-quality program delivery. These adults, also known as Mentors, participate and lead various SYA activities throughout the course of the program. As a result, SYA

participants have regular interaction with the Mentors over the course of the year. One element of the SYA program that was appreciated by the focus group participants focused on age not being a barrier. The participants recognized that the program was designed for youth between the ages of 12 and 17 years, but also recognized that individuals over the age limit could still play a role in the activities. Fred supports the claim that age is not a barrier.

*Fred: I'd like to add in as well, when you're at a SYA event, age does not matter. You'll see a huge group of people talking and you'll have a 13 year old having an in-depth conversation with someone in their late 30s and like have a 17 year old join in and it's just like nobody knows your age and nobody really cares cause you're all just here to have a good time.*

Other participants supported this statement with their own comments.

*Elle: Because earlier in the interview people were talking about how you can have a 30 year old talking to a 13 year old, 17 year old comes in the conversation, like hey what's up and they all respect each other.*

During the discussion, the participants were directly asked if, as a result of participating in the program, they had built any relationships with non-familial adults. The participants indicated that this had occurred, and as a result the participants were able to identify and connect with role models.

*Isaac: I find in terms of making relationships with adults that, like, aren't in your family, I find that's a big factor for me I guess because it was mentioned earlier there's, it's not just like high school students or junior high students, it's like people from junior high all the way up to like not in school, like mature adults and I find through SYA I have made a lot of good relationships with, and role models especially with people from SYA so that's important.*

In addition to the Mentors that are involved with the program, the Program Coordinator also plays a pivotal role, not only in the area of organization, but in creating a

comfortable and inviting program atmosphere. When asked about the role of the Program Co-ordinator, the participants responded by stating that she was involved in multiple aspects of the program, including coordination, facilitation and learning.

*Fred: Program Co-ordinator sounds kind of weird to describe (the Program Co-ordinator) because she's, she doesn't just coordinate everything for you, she's right down there in the mud with you, playing these games and like teaching you and learning with you and she makes you feel involved.*

In addition to appreciating the act of organizing and coordinating the program, the participants also indicated that the Program Co-ordinator focused on ensuring that the participants had the best experience possible. This included getting to know participants, expressing a genuine concern for them, encouraging them to grow and develop into strong leaders, but at the same time expecting them to be mature.

*Elle:...for example she just tries to get to know everyone and, like, when you're talking to her she wants to know, not like, ah what's going on with you, like in a nosey way, she just genuinely, like, cares about you and she wants you to have a good day*

*Georgia: She really brings like worth to the program. And she really encourages us to become like really good leaders. Like I know so many people that have passed through this, the SYA program and leadership program and (the Program Co-ordinator) has really helped them become who they are today and they're great people, like all of them so... At the same time, she is also, does have a stern, like, aspect to her which is not a bad thing but it's like no nonsense kind of thing. Like you're expected to follow rules and you're expected to not like have, just be mature I guess and if it's just something you learn during the SYA thing and it just comes naturally to you after a while so it's good.*

Furthermore, on multiple occasions different participants indicated that the Program Co-ordinator dealt with the stress of programming and scheduling so that the youth could get the most out of their participation.

*Bailey: So I guess for me I'm seeing a little bit of behind the scenes I guess with the SYA, with planning SYA and planning parent camp and planning all of these different types of camps, seeing the organization that goes into it and the time commitment is unbelievable because she just, not hides it all, but she takes it upon herself to hold that stress inside of her so that we can have such a positive and just learning experience.*

No matter which adult, a Mentor or the Program Co-ordinator, participants forged relationships with, the data indicated that the concept of respect was a very important issue for the discussants. The next section will focus on youth experiences related to the sub-theme of respect and the SYA Program.

### ***Respect.***

The sub-theme of respect was discussed multiple times over the course of the focus groups. The youth indicated that the SYA program was a place where people were automatically respected.

*Elle: SYA to me is a place where you can come and you're respected no matter what you say, how old you are, what gender you are, you're just respected by all.*

*Bailey: I think my main reason for wanting to be her is the respect I get, that I might not get at home or at school or from my teachers.*

*Charlye: I never really had a lot of respect for myself, or older people, not old but like adults, and then I came to SYA, it was like I was given automatic respect, like they didn't even know me and they automatically gave me the respect.*

This idea of respect, while not explicitly stated, appeared to be based on different types of interactions that occurred within the group. Multiple youth indicated that they



felt that there was a lack of judgment among participants, which allowed participants to feel comfortable, make connections with others, and be able to express themselves.

*Ed: Something kind of playing on what Hugo and Sasha said, is that unlike sports teams where it's like in a competitive environment, you aren't always judging people based on like performance or things like, that, so it's a much more comfortable setting to be making friends in and developing relationships.*

Other youth indicated that respect was manifested when people of different ages were able to converse openly, and yet confidentially, with another person.

*Bailey: ...it's just basically the respect of everyone, whether they're younger than me or a lot older than me...like having an in-depth like deep conversation with someone who's like 50 and... just knowing that it's confidential.*

A final demonstration of respect that was drawn from the data has to do with the program staff seeking feedback and suggestions from the participants to improve the program.

*Ed: ...they've got a really excellent form of feedback and kind of like they make you think about everything...but they make you look back at everything you do...through them you get the opportunity to really look back on what you've done and it makes it much easier for development when you do it that way.*

While this example can be thought of as merely a form of evaluation and program improvement, the fact that the staff are open to participant suggestions to improve the program should be noted as an act of respect. This form of feedback suggests that the staff recognize the validity of the views that the youth hold and realize that the participants have the knowledge and ability to make improvements.

One of the primary reasons that the participants find value in the SYA program is due to the meaningful and supportive relationships that are built. These relationships exist not only with other participants, but with the adults who are also involved with the

program. The discussants indicated that they felt a sense of family and belonging and that the entire atmosphere engendered in the program was one that was accepting, supportive and safe. The participants indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to interact with those adults who were associated with the program, including the Program Co-ordinator. The adults acted as mentors, organized and facilitated the activities, and genuinely cared for the participants. Finally, these relationships were built on a foundation of respect. The participants stated that they felt respected by others, and the data suggested that this respect was demonstrated when participants could express themselves freely, youth and adults could have open, and yet confidential, conversations, and that the program staff sought out participants' feedback in order to improve the program.

### **Building an Identity**

The second program theme that was discussed in detail throughout the course of both discussions focused on the concept of building an identity. As was revealed in the section focusing on *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*, the participants indicated that they felt SYA was a safe environment in which they could be themselves. Furthermore, the youth also indicated having the opportunity to truly be themselves was unique when compared to how they felt they could act in the regular world. This section will first investigate the concept of participant identity in settings other than SYA, more specifically at school, and will then be followed a description of why participants feel SYA is a unique opportunity.

#### ***Risk of being labeled in the regular world.***

Throughout the course of the focus group discussions, the participants often made references to the regular world. While a definition of the regular world was not requested, or specifically provided, based on the context of the discussions, it can be suggested that this was a synonym for school. During the conversations that focused on the school setting, the participants shared the need to fit in with the popular group, the negative consequences of not fitting in, and the fact that the youth hold back aspects of their identities as a result.

*Charlye: Well before I got involved with like anything with SYA at all, I got sucked into the whole junior high aspect where everything has to be perfect and you have to fit in with the right people and like you have to do the right thing... like it was always important to fit in.*

Charlye uses the words "you have to fit in with the right people", but does not indicate what happens if one does not fit in with the right people. However, Milo and Bob provide a bit more information.

*Milo: I go to junior high where everybody seems to be on these sort of different levels like there's the really populars and there's the not so much [unclear].*

*Bob: For example I'm in middle school right now which is like really sort of tough, like if you don't fit like a certain mould then you're seen as the weird and not very popular or something...*

Coupled with Charlye's comment, Bob and Milo indicate that within the school setting that it is desirable to be a part of the popular group of students, and one must act in a specific manner in order to be a part of this group. As Bob suggests, by not fitting into a mould, youth run the risk of being labeled, either as someone who is weird or unpopular.

This labeling activity does not only appear with peers in the school system, but as Hugo suggests, it can also happen among those who are considered to be friends.

*Hugo: A lot of my friends aren't into it (environmental action) and sometimes if I want to make, if I want to do some kind of action at school, I feel like I'm labeled because of it... so I feel like outside of SYA I hold back on like environmental aspect to, like when it comes to making, like doing environmental things I feel, sometimes I feel like I'm judged.*

These quotes indicate that the SYA participants recognize that while at school they run the risk of being negatively labeled by their peers for the actions that they

commit. Charlye stresses the importance of fitting it, and Bob indicates that these labels can have negative emotional impacts on individuals. Even among friends, as Hugo suggests, SYA participants recognize that the possibility of being labeled or viewed in a negative light is likely. This risk results in the participants not being able to completely express themselves or their identities. When outside of the program, the participants appear to conform to expectations of the group with which they are associating. This means that some of the activities or values in which the SYA participants either participate in or espouse, must either be avoided or regulated to in order to conform.

***SYA identity development.***

While SYA participants might run the risk of being labeled outside of the program, while they attend program sessions and activities they claim to have more opportunities to act in accordance with how they view themselves. This is likely due to the safe environment they enter when they attend the program, as was discussed in the *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships* theme. Unlike the school environment, the SYA youth do not feel that they will be labeled or judged based on their interests or views.

*Georgia: ...it's kind of like you're just being yourself around the people in SYA and you can express your views freely and you don't have to be judged about it.*

The concept of being oneself in the program is described multiple times throughout the discussion, and in a variety of ways. While the term being myself is used extensively, a more descriptive term and explanation was provided by Bailey, and supported by Ava.

*Bailey: I can get to try hard to be who I want to be. Like I try, like when I come to the SYA I am trying hard to take off that whatever mask I have outside of SYA and I get to try hard to be who I really want to be.*

*Ava: You're trying to be who you want to be, not what other people want you to be.*

These two quotes suggest that the youth recognize that while at school they cannot act in a manner that truly reflects their thoughts, feelings and interests. Wearing a mask allows them to hide their true intentions and navigate the regular world. Without explicitly stating it, Ava indicates that while in the regular world she lives up to the expectations of others, whereas in the SYA world she is able to act in a manner that more truly reflects her identity. Bailey continues to use the explanation of a mask with this quote.

*Bailey: SYA is an escape from, I don't want to say the real world, but who I don't want to be, if that makes any sense. So I can come here and cause outside of SYA like sometimes you let yourself slip and you can put on like a mask of someone else, but here I definitely feel like I can always be myself and, like, it's an escape to, like, your real, true self.*

With this quote Bailey suggests that as a result of participating in SYA, she is better able to understand the type of person she does not want to be. Furthermore, there was also an indication that the participants played an active role in developing their own identity. This active role was described in a three step process. The first step focused on a practical application of one's views and beliefs, or trying out an identity that was different than the one used at school.

*Charlye: At school we have a completely different personality and we're completely different. In SYA you can just basically be whoever you feel, like whatever you feel like is right, you can be exactly that.*

This method allowed Charlye to pick and choose an identity that felt more in tune with what she was feeling internally. Without a fear of being judged or the consequences of that judgment, she was able to practice a new identity. The second step used to help develop an identity was through a general affiliation with the SYA group.

*Ava: Being involved with SYA kind of gives you an identity cause as soon as people know that you're kind of an environmental activist person, you go from*

*like kind of a weirdo in the corner to kind of offbeat but kind of cool eco-freak in the corner.*

This allowed Ava to identify with people who held similar beliefs and become part of an established group. By being part of this group (i.e., SYA), she was no longer impacted or intimidated by the consequence of being labeled weird or unpopular while at school. The third step of building an identity within the SYA program was associated with the experiences the youth participated in over time. Ed, a more senior member of the program, stated that participating in the activities helped him to shape who he was.

*Ed: SYA to me is...one of the reasons I am who I am today, like, three years of doing things that I've been doing has made me the person I am.*

By participating in the SYA program, the participants have had the opportunity to build their own identities, identities that are freely chosen. The above quotes indicate that the youth understand that the SYA program is a safe environment, one in which they can act in accordance with their true thoughts and feelings and remove their masks. The youth also indicate that they view the SYA environment as being a place where, unlike the regular world, they do not run the risk of negative consequences of being negatively labeled. The identity development process in which the SYA youth engage allows them to test out new identities, identify with the SYA group without fear of reprisal and participate in activities that are in accordance with how they view themselves.

### **Unique Learning Opportunities**

The final program theme that arose as a result of the focus group discussions focused on the learning opportunities that the youth were able to take advantage of. Based on participant responses, the SYA program appears to differentiate itself from more traditional learning environments, for example a classroom, in a few different ways. From the participants' perspectives, the SYA environment provides learning opportunities that are relevant to the youth, allow youth the opportunity to act as teachers and mentors for others, provides opportunities to learn how to lead, and encourage youth to affect change.

***Relevant learning.***

As anecdotal evidence often suggests, it can be very difficult to teach a person a new skill or concept if that person has little desire to learn, or does not see the relevance in learning said topic. In the case of the SYA program, the program has been structured to provide relevant learning opportunities to the participants. This has been done through two methods; allowing participants to attend by choice, as opposed to requiring mandatory attendance, and employing an experiential education method.

As previously indicated, participants in the SYA program are not required to attend any of the program sessions. This allows the youth to pick and choose those activities that they find to be the most relevant. In some cases, as Ed states, the choice to attend is based on the desire to develop a specific skill, or assist with a specific cause.

*Ed: One of the great things about the variety of different opportunities SYA has is that any individual in SYA can go to whatever interests them. So if they're more interested in the actual taking action and raising awareness about the environment, things like that they can go to those based events. Whereas if somebody's more interested in self-development, they can go to those events.*

This choice allows the youth to become active participants in their own development. Unlike other learning environments where attendance is mandatory, for example in a school classroom or on a sports team, the participants are given the responsibility to determine how and when they should participate. This choice and responsibility means that the youth determine which learning opportunities are and are not relevant or critical to their own development.

Beyond merely having a choice to participate in the activities, the youth recognize and appreciate the use of the experiential education method that is employed by the program. One participant explained it as teaching by doing, and compared it to the methods often used in a standard classroom.

*Hugo: It's taught me about like new ways of learning because like we talk about earth education and teaching by, I can't remember what exactly the phrase, but I think it's like teaching by doing or showing...That there are different ways to learn than just like memorizing and stuff like that, like what we're taught in school.*

This teaching by doing or showing, which is the basis of the experiential learning method, is employed throughout the SYA programming. This method allows participants to first learn the concepts and skills being taught through application and practice, then identify how to make improvements to ensure success. Finally, participants reflect on how these skills might be used in future situations. By using this method the youth are able to demonstrate their competence to themselves and others. This demonstration then provides feedback indicating that the time spent learning the concept or skill has been worthwhile and will be useful for future situations, which can therefore be deemed as being relevant.

***Youth as teachers or mentors.***

A second characteristic that helps to create unique learning opportunities is that of the youth participants acting as either teachers or mentors for others. SYA participants are able to take on the role of a teacher or mentor through programming that is directed at their teenage peers (i.e., youth also enrolled in SYA), adults and younger children. When discussing the programming that was directed at their teenage peers, the conversation focused primarily on an activity called Fisherman's Club.

*Fred: It was started with the quote 'If you give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day. If you teach a man how to fish, he can eat for life', and so it's a group of people who meet and just teach each other a different skill each time they meet. Like last week was bracelet making...*

Fisherman's Club is organized in such a way that the participants offer to teach a group of people skills, and then work with the Program Co-ordinator to organize a time



that will allow those individuals who are interested to attend and learn. Skills that have been taught in the past include fire-building, Indian dancing and bracelet-making.

The focus group participants also indicated that they had been provided with opportunities to act in the role of teacher for adults. Some of the discussants stated that they were part of an extension group of the SYA program, a group called the SYA Reality Check Team<sup>3</sup>. This team of youth offer a dramatic educational presentation which focuses on the current state of the environment and how human behaviour impacts the environment. The team acts in the presentation, and then facilitates discussions with audience members to identify small behavioral changes that can be made to help improve the state of the environment. Presentations have been made in venues from elementary school classrooms to provincial and national conferences.

*Georgia: Also what Hugo was talking about SYA Reality Check Team, I'm also on that and this is my first year on it, and it's great because I find about it with SYA and the fact that I can make a difference in like older people's lives is really, really empowering and the fact that you can go to like conferences that people from like all around Canada and sometimes around the world, it's really, really amazing.*

As Georgia states, acting in the role of a teacher can be very empowering for youth. Bailey corroborates this comment with the following statement.

*Bailey: I have to say my favorite would be leadership opportunities...because it's a chance to really get outside and really show what you can do in the outdoors and like be yourself and be like crazy and wild, or be like really chill and easy going, like it's whatever you want to be and you're leading these people so, like, you're gaining the respect from these people.*

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<sup>3</sup> Program name has been changed to protect anonymity.

As previously stated, an important component of the SYA program is that of gaining respect from other people of various ages, especially older individuals. By teaching adults, youth are provided a position of power and are therefore given respect, something that they might not have in other situations, for example in school.

This concept of obtaining respect from adults might be one reason why there was very little discussion that focused on programming for younger children. While the discussants indicated that they had opportunities to lead a day camp program focusing on teaching some concepts related to environmental education, it was not explored in depth. This lack of discussion might be due to a belief among SYA participants that while leading children's programs was enjoyable and a positive opportunity, the respect that one earns from leading programming for peers and adults is preferred to the enjoyment gained from leading children's programs.

Regardless of which population was being mentored or taught, the focus group discussants indicated that acting in the role of a teacher or mentor can be deemed worthwhile. Hugo indicates that she gets a feeling of satisfaction when she presents Reality Check to adults and affects change.

*Hugo: I have a lot of fun on the SYA Reality Check Team. I realize I've been talking about it a lot but, cause I really, I love acting as well as the environment and it's a really good combination of the two. And it's just, it's extremely satisfying to be able to go to a conference or whatever, whoever the presentation is for and really change people's thinking.*

Furthermore, many of the discussants indicated that they derived satisfaction from not only the act of teaching an individual something new, but from the act of an individual learning something new.

*Ava: I think my favorite thing about the (children's programs) and the leadership opportunities is the teaching like this was the first time that I actually led anything*

*and just like seeing the look on somebody's face when they're like oh my gosh I never knew that, it's huge..*

*Charlye: I completely agree with the teaching, I love, I like that part.*

*I: Fred?*

*Fred: I love the teaching.*

*I: Bailey?*

*Bailey: Teaching yes, but more of them learning I think is more for me. No I totally agree with the term teaching, cause we are teaching, but when you teach not everyone always learns, so I think it's more the actual that they are learning more than we're teaching for me.*

The appreciation for an individual learning suggests that the participants appreciate not only the fact that they can play a role in the act of teaching, but that individuals can expand their understanding of any subject regardless of who the teacher is.

### ***Learning to lead.***

While there is a vast amount of literature regarding how to lead a group of people, this information is a weak substitute for actual practice. As has been discussed, the concept of learning leadership skills, teaching and mentoring was repeated time and again during the focus group discussions. Multiple youth stated that a primary component of being a participant in the SYA program was learning leadership skills, and having opportunities to develop as a leader. Having the opportunity to practice leadership skills and lead groups was a draw for many participants.

*Ed: I joined SYA more for the environment-based stuff, like the taking action, so I suppose my favorite parts are those leadership opportunities and action-based opportunities.*

Ed not only recognizes that his participation in the program has provided him the opportunity to lead, but given him the tools to learn how to lead different groups.

*Ed: ...I've learned through SYA how to facilitate things. So not necessarily like, generally like in sports and things I like to lead by example but it's also taught me other leadership styles so like, just like how to make, almost how to bring the best out of other people and that's a pretty special skill in any setting I think.*

Ed recognizes that leadership looks different depending on the group of people one is working with and the situation in which one is involved. Furthermore, this statement indicates that Ed realizes that there is more than one way to lead and that different styles are needed depending on the situation. In addition to understanding the need for multiple leadership styles depending on the situation, both Isaac and Georgia indicate that they are better able to learn from the actions of others.

*Isaac: Just like what I mentioned before, having different leadership skills and different leadership styles and I really see, if my teacher is teaching us something, if my teacher is teaching... I'll watch the teacher and I'll be like well they could be doing this better or this, or oh they're doing a good job of this.*

*Georgia: Yah I totally agree with you. Right when I started really getting into the leadership aspect of SYA, like teachers or anyone that was taking initiative over me I always critiqued them, not even in a bad way, just like not, things that I've never noticed before they really popped out at me and I don't even know, I guess it was my way of maturing even but I just like started realizing more of that.*

In accordance with Ed's statement, both Isaac and Georgia understand that different situations call for different leadership styles, and that there is no one right way to lead. This appears to be a result of the leadership opportunities that they have had due to their participation in the SYA program. All of the statements suggest that the participants have practiced leading different groups, reflected on their actions and made adjustments to their individual styles in order to improve their leadership skills. This

recurring act of practice and reflection has provided all of the participants with an experiential method of learning to lead, which is not often available in traditional learning environments.

***Youth affecting change.***

Related to the concepts of *Youth as Mentors* and *Learning to Lead*, is that of youth affecting change. A recurring theme that arose throughout the course of the discussions focused on the ability of the program participants being able to make a difference, or affect change, as a result of being involved in the SYA program. Without opportunities to learn how to lead, or act as mentors, the SYA participants would not necessarily have this ability. When asked what the SYA program meant to them, two of the participants provided responses that focused on their actions having an effect on the future.

*I: What does SYA mean to you?*

*Charlie: SYA to me mostly it means the environment. So like it's really good to be able to go somewhere where people have the same views as you so that you can like help future people to have a better future basically.*

*Georgia: What SYA means to me is definitely the environmental-based aspect because I really care about our future and I really care about what's happening to the earth and what we're doing about it.*

These responses suggest that the program has been facilitated in such a way that messages focusing on not only the future, but the participants' abilities to impact the future and have been communicated to the youth. Had these messages not been communicated, or been undermined, it is quite possible that the focus group discussants would not have discussed their ability to affect change whatsoever. Beyond just focusing on the future and having an impact, focus group discussants also made comments regarding their ability to make a difference, not just in people's actions, but in their understanding of the importance of protecting the environment.

*I: Is there anything that's been your favorite (activity)?*

*Fred: My favorites are the getting out and spreading the word, like telling people about environmental issues and teaching them ways that they can lessen their impact.*

*Hugo: ...the reason that I stayed (enrolled in the program) was because of the environment, like the action that we're doing, the satisfaction you get from it, the change that you're making as well as getting a chance to hang out with really, really awesome people at the same time.*

As was discussed in the *Youth as Mentors* section, the SYA participants have been provided with opportunities to engage, interact with and teach children, youth and adults about the importance of environmental awareness. The above quotes indicate that they recognize the impact their actions have had on others and they take pride in the notion that they are helping to affect positive change.

The SYA program provides its participants with unique learning opportunities, opportunities that are not often available to many youth. SYA differentiates itself from other environments, such as the school system or sports teams, by providing its participants with learning opportunities that are relevant, allow youth to act as teachers and mentors, and focus on experiential methods that teach leadership skills. Youth determine which opportunities they find relevant because attendance is not mandatory. Therefore, youth are able to attend only those sessions in which they are interested. This choice allows the youth to play an active role in their own development. Furthermore, the experiential education model that is employed throughout the program allows the youth hands-on experience practicing and refining various skills, and then applying said skills to different situations. These opportunities can also be deemed as unique, as the participants become both teachers and mentors to participants of all ages. The act of teaching results in feelings of satisfaction, not only because the youth are treated with respect, but because other people are expanding their understanding of different concepts. Unlike many learning environments, SYA participants are able to practice different

leadership skills and styles to better understand how to lead with different groups and in different situations. Finally, the teaching and training opportunities have provided program participants with different experiences and sufficient evidence for them to recognize that they are helping to create change and positively impact the future.

### **Perceived Benefits of Participation**

In order to best understand the perceptions youth hold regarding the benefits they accrue as a result of their participation was to ask the question directly. Participants provided responses to this question, but also provided information related to this topic during the general flow of the focus group discussions. The responses were broken down into two different sub-themes. The first sub-theme focused on general positive changes that the youth perceived to have made as a result of their participation. The second sub-theme focused on the life lessons that the youth perceived to have learned as a result of their SYA program participation. The following will discuss each in more detail.

### **Positive Changes as a Result of Participation**

As previously stated, the setting that was most often discussed as being a part of the regular world, was the school setting. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that, when asked, the participants indicated that some of the positive changes they perceived as a result of their participation in the SYA program were related to the school setting. Four of the youth stated that their school marks had increased since they had first enrolled in the program, whereas four youth indicated that their marks had stayed the same. One participant who claimed an improvement in her school marks stated that she thought this positive change might have occurred as a result of lessening the pressure she had put on herself to do well.

*Ava: They've gone up I think because I've stopped putting so much pressure on myself to do well, ironically.*

Interestingly, one of the youth that suggested that her marks had improved, also stated that for some of her classes they had not increased at all.

*Bailey: Yes for some, no for others. No for the ones I've completely lost interest in, yes for the ones I've gained interest in.*

While she does not outright state it, Bailey's comment suggests that for some of her classroom topics, her marks may have decreased as a result of participating in the program. Her explanation for this is that she is better able to discern which topics are of interest to her and she, therefore, only applies her effort to areas that interest her. Beyond the just the content of the classes, it is possible that the method of teaching the content also informs Bailey's application of effort. As was described in the *Unique Learning Opportunities* theme, SYA employs teaching methods that emphasize learning relevant information and skills in an experiential manner. Bailey may not understand the relevance of what she is learning in some of her classes, and therefore does not apply the same amount of effort as she does in relevant subject areas. It should be noted that based on my interpretation of the verbal and non-verbal content of the discussion, I felt as though Bailey's marks would have decreased as a result of her application of effort as opposed to other outside forces, such as more advanced course content. Of the eight participants that directly answered this question, Bailey was the only person to imply that her school grades had not improved, or at the very least, stayed the same.

Another positive change that the participants discussed focused on the concept of being more involved in school, community and general volunteer opportunities. As a result of their participation in the program, 11 of the 16 youth indicated that they had become more involved in various opportunities or tried new things.

*Isaac: I know being involved in SYA, it's made me a whole, whole lot more involved in like my school and my community and the things I choose to do. So I like, I think I mentioned this earlier, I highly doubt I would be like as involved at my school or my community as I am now if I wasn't already part of SYA.*

*Ed: SYA has definitely, SYA was I think my first time really getting involved in the community. I've done some little things during my school but never really put a*



*lot of time in so it's definitely done that. So now I'm quite involved in many other things.*

*Hugo: I'm more open to trying new things because I know that, I've tried new things with the SYA group and it's always been fun so it's like 'hey I'll try this other thing' and I feel like I'm more involved with my school, school events than I would be if I wasn't involved with this.*

The SYA participants indicate that they would not have attempted to become involved with different school and community volunteer opportunities had they not been involved in SYA in the first place. Hugo clearly states that being involved in the program is fun, and then makes a logical step in her thought patterns by stating that being involved in other community activities might also be fun, and to take this thought a step further, meaningful. In some respects, SYA is acting as a testing ground for the youth to experiment by being involved in new activities. If participating in SYA activities is both enjoyable and meaningful, then it is logical to conclude that being involved in other community activities will be enjoyable and meaningful as well.

One of the reasons that the youth might be more willing to participate in other activities outside of the SYA program, including the workforce, may have to do with the fact that the youth describe themselves as not being as self-conscious as they once were.

*Georgia: Well I find like orally like speaking to the public or just speaking and letting my, having my own opinions heard, it's, SYA has really helped me with that. And also just being, like not self-conscious and being like proud of who I am. It's really helped me.*

*Hugo: ...it's also taught me that, because I used to be a lot quieter than I am now and it's really taught me that people are nice, nobody's going to bite your head off if you talk...*

Georgia speaks about the SYA program and how it has provided her with opportunities to practice public speaking and share her thoughts and ideas. Had she not

been enrolled in a program that focuses on the elements of relevant learning opportunities and meaningful and supportive relationships, as well as providing opportunities for youth to act as leaders and mentors, she may not have felt the pride that she currently feels. With respect to Hugo's comment, Hugo alludes to the idea that she was afraid of people she did not know. Her comments reveal that she was apprehensive talking to other people and therefore, would avoid engaging in activities altogether. The SYA program has provided her a safe venue in which to practice her social skills. Again, practicing these skills in a safe environment has allowed her to reduce her anxiety when interacting with other people.

The absence of the feeling of self-consciousness, could also be described as gaining self-confidence. Over the course of the focus groups, many of the youth indicated that they felt more confident as a result of their participation. Hugo, who previously described a lessening of self-consciousness, continues her description by stating she has gained self-confidence.

*Hugo: I feel that it's, that being involved with the SYA group has definitely improved my self-confidence, it's just really satisfying that I'm doing something I enjoy and I'm making a difference and meeting new people and everything.*

The improvement in self-confidence that Hugo describes is again the result of the different programming elements within the SYA program. As was the case with reducing self-consciousness, gaining self-confidence is related to the elements of practicing social skills and meeting new people in a safe and respectful environment. However, this statement also suggests that because the programming opportunities are relevant and meaningful, they have a positive impact on confidence. Furthermore, having opportunities to lead these meaningful activities may also enhance a person's assessment of their own social status, thereby resulting in gains in self-confidence. Finally, Hugo indicates that she feels satisfaction as a result of being enrolled and participating in the activities that the SYA program facilitates.

*Charlye: And I think that helped with my confidence where like I didn't, like before I didn't necessarily so much have respect for myself, I was really like shy and quiet and I didn't like kind of voice my opinion very much and SYA kind of helped that.*

Charlye states that her self-confidence was improved for the same reasons as the previous participants, but also because she had learned to respect herself. As previously stated, one of the characteristics found within the concept of meaningful and supportive relationships was that of respect. During the discussion the participants indicated that they had been treated with respect, and in turn had begun to show more respect to others and themselves. This comment indicates that as a result of respecting herself, Charlye was able to boost her own self-confidence.

### **Lessons Learned**

Not only did the discussants perceive acquiring specific benefits as a result of their participation, but they also indicated that they had learned some specific life lessons. Each of these lessons learned focuses on both specific modes of behaviour and specific skills. While some of the lessons learned are individual specific, some of the lessons are shared by multiple group members. In this section, we will first focus on those lessons that were learned by specific individuals, and then continue to describe those lessons shared by multiple discussants.

Elle shared with the group that she learned that in outdoor activity situations it is important to be satisfied and work with the skills and tangible items that she possesses, as opposed to wishing for items that would make her life easier.

*Elle: And we had a time limit to make this no-trace fire and we used objects around us like wood and pine needles and stuff like that to make the fire and not wishing we had a match or stuff to make the fire easier and instead we just focused on what we had instead of wishing we had more.*

While this lesson focuses on the experience of fire building in an outdoor setting, it can be easily applied to more general situations. Elle's comment suggests that she has learned to approach situations with a realistic outlook; a recognition that one may not always possess all of the necessary components required to easily complete a task. This lesson appears to have provided Elle an opportunity to learn and practice the skill of persistence.

Ava commented that her participation in the program had helped to reinforce a lesson that she had previously learned. She describes how she learned to not judge people based on their outward appearance.

*Ava: I learned and I thought I knew this before, but I really learned not to judge a book by its cover and I have an example of somebody who I met at the training thing, I don't even really know her name, who kind of was wearing all kinds of make-up and designer clothes and I was kind of like you're never going to make a leader, in my head, but then she turned out to be I think the best leader of the crew and I was kind of like, and I thought I knew not to judge people but, that's one thing I learned.*

Obviously, this lesson focuses on learning not to make assumptions or conclusions about anything, before performing research and attempting to understand that thing. However, this lesson appears to have also provided Ava with an opportunity to recognize that she had made an incorrect assumption and allowed her to correct that assumption. Being aware of personally held biases, and being open to readjusting these biases, is a skill that is often used by individuals throughout their lives.

Finally, Hugo indicated that as a result of participating in SYA she has come to learn that there is more to the world than what she is currently experiencing.

*Hugo: I've learned that there's a lot of things outside of our, almost like our bubbles, like our home and school and we don't really think about what else is*

*going on in the world and what other things are happening and I really learned about that and that there's more to the world than just what I'm experiencing.*

This is an important lesson for not only Hugo, but all adolescents, because it helps them to develop a broader understanding of the world and assists them in becoming less egocentric. This cognitive process allows individuals to begin to understand the experiences and point of view of others, or more specifically allows them to become empathetic. Hugo indicates that she is being to recognize that there is a larger world beyond that of her own experience. This quote suggests that she is beginning to understand the experiences of others, which is the first step towards developing empathy. Empathy assists in the development of prosocial behaviours, also known as purposive actions on behalf of another person that involves a cost to the helper (Hoffmann as cited in Barr & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2007). As a result of participating in the program and learning more about the world around her, Hugo has begun to develop empathy which will assist her in the development of prosocial behaviours and will allow her to become more socially competent in the future.

As stated, not only did the participants describe individually learned lessons, but some of the youth learned the same lesson as their peers. In order to differentiate from the individually learned lessons, these will be called shared lessons. The first shared lesson learned focused on the youth learning to think about the consequences or ramifications of their actions.

*Charlie: I think that SYA really helps with that aspect of like, in other situations just being able to actually notice what you're doing before you do it, so like wasting water, things that we would usually take for granted, because of SYA in your own life you notice more. So like now that I've joined SYA I can totally see a difference when I have a shower or brushing my teeth, I always turn off the tap...just little things that would help, that you wouldn't really think of unless somebody actually tells you.*

Charlie's description of thinking about the consequences of her actions focuses primarily on information that is related to SYA's message of environmental education and protection. In addition to learning the importance of thinking about how her water usage impacts the environment, she is also practicing intellectual skills related to cause and effect. By understanding the consequences of her actions in this specific situation, she will be better able to apply this understanding to other situations in the future.

Much like Charlie, Ed bases his understanding of the consequences of his actions to SYA's environmental education message. However, Ed takes this understanding a step further by applying it to his interactions with others.

*Ed: Something that I really like about myself that I do now because of SYA is I think about everything I do before doing it. So like I used to say things without thinking about what I was saying, and that's not necessarily a good thing...but whether it's like being in the shower and really thinking about taking an extra five minutes in the shower and what that, what the implications of that are, thinking about making that joke before saying it, and maybe offending somebody.*

This description demonstrates that Ed understands the consequences of his actions and shows that he is able to apply it to other situations. In addition, by providing the example of how an insensitive joke can impact the feelings of another person, he demonstrates the understanding of empathy and prosocial behaviour that Hugo described. Therefore, one of the lessons learned by SYA participants focuses on understanding the consequences of an individual's actions from both an environmental perspective and a more broad perspective, and at the same time reinforces prosocial behaviour.

The second shared lesson focuses on reframing negative situations and applying a more positive outlook. Both Joel and Charlye discuss how SYA has helped them to learn how to reframe negative situations.

*Joel: You also learn aspects towards yourself I guess... how to look at something with a better point of view than just the first thing that would come to mind.*

*Charlye: I think I'm more positive for just pretty well everything, like instead of always thinking of the negative things that could happen, it's like oh it's, like something good that could happen or what good can come out of it.*

Positive reframing is the act of altering one's thinking to find something positive in stressful situations (Moore, Varra, Michael & Simpson, 2010). Furthermore, positive reframing has been linked to enhanced self-esteem among adolescents (Mozdzierz & Greenblat as cited in Blankenship, Eells, Carlozzi, Perry & Barnes, 1998). The participant quotes clearly indicate that as a result of their participation in the SYA program has provided them the opportunity to practice and employ the technique of positive reframing in their lives. Following that logic, it is reasonable to state that being able to approach stressful situations with a positive outlook may have also provided an enhanced sense of self-esteem for these youth.

The focus group discussions revealed that the SYA participants perceive positive personal change as a result of participating in the program in both explicit and implicit ways. Generally, this section suggests that the youth have been able to improve academically, been more involved in school and community volunteer opportunities, felt less self-conscious, gained self-confidence and allowed them to feel self-respect. The description of the program provided by the participants, found earlier in this chapter, suggest that the youth have gained knowledge and learned skills associated with leadership skills, community service and environmental awareness. SYA has allowed these participants to build a social network with other youth, create relationships with adults and have access to mentors. The program has also been a venue where participants have learned what it is to be respected and the importance of showing other people respect. SYA has provided the youth with opportunities to identify with a not only a group of people, but a cause in which to rally around. Youth have also had the opportunity to act as a mentor for others and practice being in a leadership role with diverse groups.

With respect to the lessons that they youth learned, and the skills that are related to these lessons, one youth claimed to have learned how to approach situations with a

realistic outlook, and this in turn allowed her to practice the skill of persistence. Other lessons focused on reserving judgment before attempting to understand a person or thing, and understanding that there is more occurring in the world than just in one's own experience. These lessons allowed the youth to practice skills related to reflecting on one's own biases and empathy, respectively. Two shared lessons were also discussed within the group. The first shared lesson focused on understanding the consequences of one's actions and related to SYA's message of environmental education, as well as a more general perspective. The second shared lesson focused on the ability to reframe negative situations. This lesson suggests that the youth are better able to cope with negative or stressful situations as a result of participating in the program. All of these skills and lessons accumulated to the participants feeling a general sense of self-improvement.

*Bailey: I think for me I guess it's just improved my overall state of being.*

*Fred: It's not specific but my, I've learned about myself... I can let loose, and I can talk and I can just be excited all the time and be happy for what I'm doing.*

*Ed: ...overall I genuinely think I'm a better person because of SYA.*



## **CHAPTER 5      DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to examine the meanings youth have regarding the benefits, both outcomes and processes of participation, they accrue as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity. This examination was done using a constructivist methodology, with data being collected and analyzed through the use of focus group discussions and thematic analysis, respectively. As a result of the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry and the themes that arose from the focus group discussions, the study required that new research questions be developed. The following chapter will present both the initial and revised research questions, and provide justification for the decision to make revisions to the questions. The chapter will then present a model of the participant perceptions as they were revealed during data collection and summarize the analysis of the focus group discussions. This will be followed by a discussion regarding how the results from this study relate to the existing literature. The strengths and limitations of this research study, as well as a description of and recommendations for future research projects will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with an explanation of how the SYA program relates to ecological theory and final implications of the study.

### **Revising the Research Questions**

The initial research questions were developed after I had conducted a review of the PYD literature. As a result of my review, I was led to believe that the participants would not necessarily be able recognize if they had benefited from their participation in the SYA program, which led to the development of the first question. With respect to the development of the second question, my review led me to believe that if the youth were to identify the benefits accumulated, they could then provide examples of how these benefits had been used in other environments (e.g., at school, at home, etc.). The final question arose from a desire to understand if youth saw the need for different or more focused promotion strategies to better communicate the benefits of structured leisure activity participation among youth. And so, in order to gain a better understanding of all three of these areas, I developed the following questions:

1. Do youth feel they benefit from participation in a structured leisure activity?

2. How can the benefits be carried over to other settings?
3. Do youth feel the need to create awareness about the benefits received from participation?

As stated, after I had the opportunity to analyze and review the themes that arose from the discussions, I realized that the emergent themes did not entirely answer the questions that were asked. This meant that revisions to the questions were required. The following will address the initial research questions and provide insight into how these questions have been altered.

A simple answer to the first research question was that the youth did perceive to have benefited from their participation in the SYA program. While this provided some insight into the benefits of participation, an opportunity to better understand these perceptions would have been missed had the themes not been more fully explored. And so, early on in the analysis stage, it was determined that the question should not focus on 'if' the participants felt they had benefited, but 'how' the participants felt they had benefited. The question was changed in order to recognize that the participants held a thorough understanding of the benefits of their participation, and could identify and provide detailed information as to what those benefits were.

The original second research question was created in order to better understand how the accumulated benefits could be better applied to other situations or settings. The themes that were discussed did not address this question. Instead, themes related to program characteristics and how those characteristics influenced the accumulation of benefits arose from the data. Therefore, this necessitated a change to the question so that it better focused on how the program had helped initiate change in the youth. After reflecting on this question, I concluded that the question could quite possibly be very easy to answer. It may simply be that as individuals learn concepts and skills, they use them in a new setting. This application (i.e., using a practiced skill in a new situation) is the act of how they are carried over to new settings. Conversely, the answer could be very complex, and would therefore go beyond the scope of this study. Regardless, the emergent themes did not effectively answer the question.

The third question was removed entirely because the responses of the youth did not appropriately address the question. While there was a general perception that awareness should be created among youth, there was not enough information provided to suggest why and how to do it. The proposed suggestions appeared to be based more on assumptions than a true understanding of how to promote the program and the benefits of participation. After reflecting on this question, I realized that I had initially asked it because I thought the youth would provide unique perspectives with respect to program promotion. After analysing the data, I realized that the participants did not have enough experience or background knowledge in the areas of promotions or marketing to offer relevant information. Therefore, I was not confident that I could answer the question using the data collected.

As a result of these revisions, two new questions were developed, which included:

1. What benefits do youth perceive to accumulate from their participation in a structured leisure activity?
2. What program elements assist in the accumulation of these perceived benefits?

These two questions will be explored in more detail in a later section.

### **Focus Group Discussion Summary**

As evidenced in the previous chapter, the focus group participants identified the benefits they received as a result of their participation in both explicit and implicit ways. In addition, using the focus group discussions, three *Program Themes* were identified which assisted in the accrual of these benefits. In order to assist in the description of these benefits, the SYA Participant Perceptions Diagram was developed (see Figure 8, p. 111).

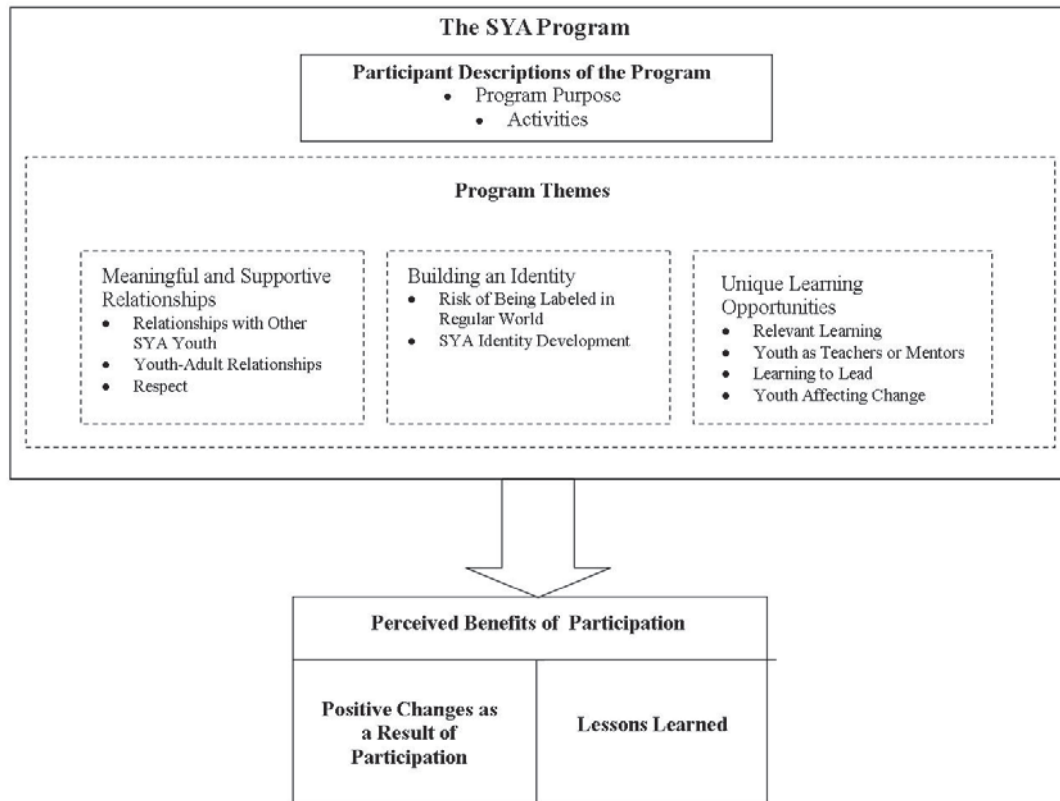


Figure 8. SYA Participant Perceptions Diagram.

The SYA Participant Perceptions Diagram provides a visual description of the themes that arose during the focus group discussions. The SYA program was described by the participants through the use of two themes; *Participant Descriptions of the Program* and *Program Themes*. *Participant Descriptions of the Program* provided information through the use of two sub-themes; *Program Purpose* and *Activities*. Within these sub-themes, the youth described their understanding of the SYA program foci and provided information related to the activities in which they normally engaged. The youth descriptions of the program are necessary so that the reader may better understand the context in which the *Program Themes* exist.

The *Program Themes* described those elements that contributed to the accrual of benefits among the youth. These themes were then further described through the use of sub-themes. For example, the *Program Theme* of *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*, was further described using the sub-themes *Relationships with Other SYA*

*Youth, Youth-Adult Relationships and Respect*. The *Program Themes* of *Building an Identity* and *Unique Learning Opportunities* were expanded upon in a similar fashion.

Looking at the diagram, the reader will notice that the *Program Themes* are surrounded by dotted lines. These lines indicate an interactive relationship between the three theme areas. For example, the SYA youth indicated that as a result of the program they were able to engage in activities that allowed them to build their own identity. However, some individuals indicated that they would not have had the confidence to try new things and engage in this process had the program not encouraged the development of meaningful and supportive relationships between individuals. While this concept is discussed in more detail as it relates to the research questions, future studies to fully investigate the interactive relationships of the themes are required.

By using the *Participant Descriptions of the Program* and the *Program Themes*, the reader is provided with a clear description of the perceptions the SYA youth hold regarding the program. However, this is not the complete without investigating the theme *Perceived Benefits of Participation*. This theme, using the sub-themes *Positive Changes as a Result of Participation* and *Lessons Learned*, describes the benefits that the youth participants perceived to have accrued as a result of the SYA Program. All of the information described by the youth help to inform the *Perceived Benefits of Participation* sub-themes. The following will describe the model in more detail as it relates to the research questions.

### **What Benefits do Youth Perceive to Accumulate from their Participation in a Structured Leisure Activity?**

With respect to the perceived accrued benefits as a result of their participation, the focus group discussants identified numerous benefits, both explicitly and implicitly. It should be noted that while these benefits were identified by respondents, it is possible that not all youth will have indicated that they would have benefited in the same way as a result of their experience.

Some of the perceived benefits of participation held by the SYA youth were clearly identified. These benefits were categorized into sub-themes, *Positive Changes as a Result of Participation*, and *Lessons Learned*. With respect to the positive changes identified,

youth indicated that for many their school marks had improved, they were more willing to become involved with different volunteering opportunities, and they felt more confident, self-aware and had a greater sense of respect for themselves and others. Implicitly, their experiences provided them with opportunities to experiment and try new things, develop a better understanding of their own areas of interest and practice different social skills in a safe environment. Many also indicated that they had learned lessons as a result of their participation. These lessons focused on better understanding how to approach situations with a realistic outlook, the importance of understanding one's own biases, the importance of empathy, the need to think about the consequences of one's actions, and how to reframe negative situations. In addition and attached to these lessons, the youth appear to have benefited by developing skills related to persistence, prosocial behaviours, social competencies, and cognitive skills.

#### **What Program Elements Assist in the Accumulation of Perceived Benefits?**

The second research question for this study focused on obtaining a better understanding of the elements which helped to encourage positive development in youth participants. Throughout the course of the focus group discussions, the *Program Themes* were identified as heavily contributing to the accrual of benefits among the SYA youth. These themes included *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*, *Building an Identity*, and *Unique Learning Opportunities*.

One of the recurring themes that arose during the focus groups discussions revolved around *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*. Youth identified that forging relationships with other youth in the program was a very important component of the program. As a result of being involved with the program, they had been able to meet new people who shared similar interests and views. In many cases youth indicated that the SYA program was 'like a family', meaning they felt a sense of belonging and acceptance, and allowed them identify with a specific group of people. The participants also indicated that being able to establish and maintain relationships with adults in the program was an important component. The youth were able to connect with role models associated with the program, which included the Program Co-ordinator, program staff, and Mentors. These adults helped to encourage growth and development, assisted youth in the

development of new skills, and provided youth with an opportunity to access information and advice. Underlying both of these types of relationships was the concept of respect. The discussants identified that an important part of the SYA program related to the fact that they felt respected by both youth and adults who were associated with the program. Participants stated that the program provided a safe atmosphere; one where individuals could express themselves without being judged. This safe atmosphere and opportunity for self-expression also played a role in the youth being able to build an identity; which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. In addition to a lack of judgment, youth indicated that they experienced respect in the form of confidential conversations when they sought advice from SYA affiliated adults, as well as being provided the opportunity to participate in program planning and evaluation processes.

The second *Program Theme* that was identified focused on *Building an Identity*. During the course of the discussions, the youth made multiple comments indicating that SYA was different from the regular world, which was understood to mean school. The youth stated that within the regular world they ran the risk of being negatively labeled by their peers for the actions they committed. As a result, the youth felt pressure to conform to the expectations of their peer groups and had to act in a manner that may not be genuine, or may not align with their values. Conversely, in the SYA program the youth indicated that they were able to act in accordance with how they viewed themselves without fear of reprisal. The youth had the opportunity to try new things and build their own identities that truly reflected their interests and values. The discussants indicated that they were able and willing to try new things because they felt as though SYA provided a safe and accepting environment, which is closely linked to the concepts of *Respect* and *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*.

The third *Program Theme* discussed was that of *Unique Learning Opportunities*. As stated in the section pertaining to *Building an Identity*, the discussants identified SYA as being different from the school environment. This difference occurred not only as it related to identity development, but to the learning environment. This environment was unique because the program facilitated learning opportunities that were relevant to the SYA participants. In the context of SYA, relevant learning was manifested by providing

the participants the choice to attend those program sessions that were linked to learning specific skills or assisting with specific causes that were of interest to the youth. In this way, youth were expected to take responsibility for their continued involvement in the program and play an active role in their own development. In addition, relevant learning was manifested through the use of experiential learning methods. The participants employed hands-on learning techniques in order to develop skills or learn concepts, and were then encouraged to reflect on the experience. SYA youth were also provided with unique learning opportunities that allowed them to act as teachers and mentors for children, youth and adults. Participants were able to demonstrate their expertise and skills for others, which in turn gave SYA youth feelings of increased confidence, self-efficacy, empowerment and a sense of satisfaction. The experiences also provided the youth with opportunities to practice leadership skills, observe and evaluate different leadership styles, and reflect on their own leadership experiences, which in turn allowed them to better understand how to act as a leader. Finally, SYA's unique learning environment focused on communicating the message that youth have the ability to affect change and impact the future. The program taught youth the importance of environmental protection, and provided them with the tools to have an impact on their own beliefs and actions, as well as the beliefs and actions of others.

### **Benefits of Participation as Related to the Existing Literature**

#### **Description of SYA as it Relates to Activity Definitions**

Before delving too deeply into the benefits SYA youth accrued as a result of their participation, it should be established that the SYA program is in fact a structured leisure activity as defined by the literature. In addition to this, it should be made clear as to what type of program SYA is defined as, as it relates to the adult-youth program leadership continuum (Larson et al., 2005). This information is important to know because these characteristics help to determine the types of benefits that are accrued and rationale behind the program structure and activities.

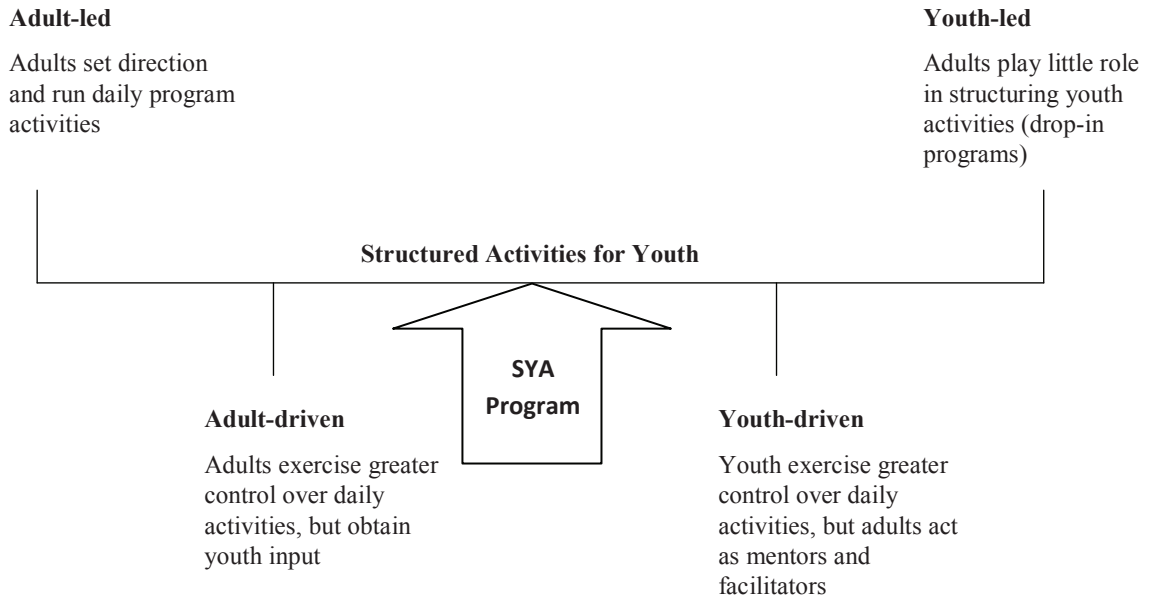
Leisure involvement can be separated into two different types of activities, unstructured and structured. Structured activities have an emphasis on skill building, take place over a specific time frame and are supervised by an adult (Abbott & Barber, 2007).



Structured activities offer opportunities for youth to learn skills, obtain knowledge, and provide youth with distinct sets of values and experiences (Hansen et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2006).

Based on the participant descriptions of the SYA program purpose, it can be concluded that it is a structured leisure activity. The discussants stated that the program focused on personal skills development, the facilitation and provision of various leadership opportunities; opportunities to engage in community service and develop a deeper understanding of environmental awareness. Much like the definition provided by Abbot and Barber (2007), these activities provide challenges that lead to opportunities to enhance particular skills. These activities also provide a forum in which one can express their passion for an area of interest which, in the case of SYA, is defined as environmental awareness and leadership.

Abbot and Barber (2007) also characterized structured leisure activities as having an adult involved in the planning, supervision and monitoring of an activity. Furthermore, Larson et al. (2005) suggested that youth activities differ along a continuum with respect to how much input, daily decision-making and authority adult supervisors have versus youth participants (see Figure 9, p. 117). As Larson et al. (2005) state, the adult-driven model sees adults with greater control over the daily activities of the group, while at the same time obtaining youth input. Whereas the youth-driven programming sees youth exercising control over the daily activities of the group and adult supervisors acting as mentors and facilitators.



*Figure 9.* Adult-youth program leadership continuum.

Based on the discussant descriptions, the SYA program appears to exist in the middle of the adult-youth program leadership continuum. The youth indicated that the program staff and Mentors often organized activities and events, whereas the youth play a more active role in the actual facilitation. The location of the program along this continuum provides an opportunity for the program to be guided by individuals with knowledge and experience. This type of adult influence allows the participants to learn specialized skills, for example fire-building. At the same time, as a result of youth control of the program direction, SYA is able to promote the development of leadership skills and facilitate youth empowerment, as was indicated by Georgia in the description of program activities. Youth have the opportunity to organize daily activities, but require adult assistance and expertise to ensure these activities are offered in an organized manner. By comparing the definitions of structured leisure activities and the adult-youth program leadership continuum to the focus group discussions, it can be concluded that the SYA program is a structured leisure activity that tends to be more youth-driven than adult-driven.

Following the example of the SYA program, recreation professionals should note that they are able to create this type of youth-driven program structure, but must

recognize that it will require developing a true partnership between the youth and adult stakeholders. From the youth stakeholders it will require more than just passive participation, but a desire and willingness to engage in the planning and organization of youth programs. This means that the youth will have to put time and effort into program planning and development. Conversely, the adult stakeholders will need to embrace the concept of PYD and be willing to relinquish some programming control. This will mean that the adults provide youth opportunities to make decisions relating to program direction, and be willing to allow youth to make and learn from their mistakes.

During the focus group discussions, the youth described the concept that the SYA program was different from and preferred to the regular world. The shifts in roles and responsibilities discussed above represent one of the changes in a youth's everyday life that needs to occur in order for youth to have more positive experiences in the regular world. By providing youth with more opportunities to set the direction for their own learning, youth not only learn new skills that can be applied to real world situations, but feel valued in the process. This sense of feeling valued, or respected, is a second shift that needs to occur in the regular world. The data revealed that the youth in the study felt attachment towards the SYA program, in part due to the respect they received from other participants and adults affiliated with the program. These respectful relationships and assisted in the development of positive experiences for the participants, something that does not often occur in a youth's regular world. Therefore, it is possible to maximize positive experiences for youth by both providing those opportunities to direct their own learning and engaging in respectful relationships with them. While this study provides some insight into how to provide youth with more positive experiences in the regular world, it does not provide enough information to allow for the development of a recipe for the ideal youth-driven program or school model.

### **Benefits of structured youth leisure activities.**

Youth participation in structured leisure activities result in two types of benefits; outcomes of participation and processes of participation. The former being correlated with general indicators of development and resulting in developmental change over time (Hansen et al., 2003). The latter being changes that occur within an individual that

eventually result in the outcomes. The following will relate the comments made in the focus group discussion and apply them to the concepts of outcomes and processes of participation as stated in the existing literature.

***Outcomes of participation.***

One of the outcomes of participation that the discussants perceived to have gained was related to improved concepts of self. Many of the youth indicated that they felt less self-conscious, had a greater sense of self-respect, had an improved sense of pride in themselves, a greater sense of self-efficacy and they felt less anxious when interacting with others. When comparing these outcomes to ones discussed in the greater body of literature, it can be concluded that the participant perceptions are congruent with the conclusions made in other studies. Barber et al. (2001) concluded that youth who participated in volunteer and community-service type activities, exhibited higher self-esteem than uninvolved youth. Furthermore, in a comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven programs, Larson et al. (2005) concluded that youth gained self-confidence as a result of their participation regardless of the type of program. In a cross-Canadian study of low-income youth perceptions regarding recreation, participants acknowledged that the benefits of participating in recreation activities included the opportunity to improve themselves and developing a positive identity (Frisby et al., 2005). Marsh (1992) also concluded that total extracurricular activity participation was positively associated with both social self-concept and academic self-concept.

A second category of outcomes of participation that were identified by the discussants focused on learning program specific skills. Some of the explicit skills described included Indian dancing, fire-building, leadership, presentation, and evaluation skills. Due to the specific leadership and environmental awareness foci of the SYA program, it can be assumed that not all youth structured leisure activities will teach these specific skills. However, other researchers have concluded that youth learn specific skills as a result of their participation in various activities. For example, youth indicated that as a result of their participation in a dramatic arts program, they developed technical theater skills (Jarrett et al., 2005). With respect to a youth-driven program approach, much like

the one employed in the SYA program, researchers concluded that youth were able to develop leadership skills (Larson & Hansen, as cited in Larson et al., 2005).

Developing a better understanding of prosocial norms was a third category of outcomes of participation that was identified. The discussants perceived that some of the benefits of their participation related to a greater likelihood of thinking about the consequences of their actions, an understanding of the need to readjust biases, increased empathy, and an increased number of friends. This appears to be consistent with the greater body of research, as previous studies have concluded that as a result of their experiences with empowerment in youth programs, youth have reported developing greater empathy with youth from other peer crowds and ethnic groups, and greater comfort with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) youth (Larson et al. as cited in Larson et al., 2005; Watkins, 2003). Patrick et al. (1999) observed that involvement in structured leisure activities offered youth social benefits, particularly by providing opportunities to make and maintain friendships. Mahoney, Eccles and Larson (as cited in Verma & Larson, 2003) indicated that participation in organized activities may enhance emotional adjustment, and encourage prosocial and altruistic behavior.

The fourth category of outcomes of participation as perceived by the SYA youth related to an increased likelihood of being involved in different activities. The youth perceived that as a result of their participation in the SYA program, they were more involved in school and community volunteer opportunities, and they were more likely to explore areas of interest and to try new things, including attending post-secondary education opportunities. It has also been concluded that youth participation in organized activities predict adult participation in community organizations and the likelihood to vote more than 15 years later (Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Youniss et al., 1997b).

Finally, many of the youth identified an improved Grade Point Average (GPA) as being one of the outcomes of their participation in the SYA program. Barber et al. (2001) concluded that adolescents involved in prosocial, performing arts and sports activities predicted positive educational outcomes, which included an increased number of years

spent in school and increased likelihood of graduation from college. Furthermore, multiple studies concluded that participation in leisure activities both in and out of schools were positively associated with positive academic trajectories (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles et al., 2003; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

One positive outcome of participation that arose regularly in the literature that was not discussed in much detail during the focus groups was that of alcohol and drug consumption. Throughout much of the literature, structured leisure participation was associated with lower rates of substance use (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Youniss et al., 1999; Youniss et al., 1997b). With respect to the SYA program, only two of the participants made comments referencing substance use, both of which stated that SYA youth do not regularly engage in substance use, especially during program sessions. The lack of responses may have been due to the fact that SYA youth do not regularly engage in substance use, and therefore do not think to discuss it. Conversely, the conversation may not have occurred because participants may have felt uncomfortable discussing such a sensitive subject with the interviewer and other participants.

### *Process of participation.*

Processes of participation are the developmental changes that occur within an individual due to their participation in a structured youth leisure activity. A review of the process literature indicated that there are five processes in which participants engage during their structured leisure participation. These processes include: (a) developing initiative; (b) practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills; (c) forming an identity; (d) forging relationships with non-familial adults; and (e) creating social capital. The following will review the processes of participation as identified by the SYA focus group participants, and compare the responses to the existing literature.

### *Developing initiative.*

Initiative is the ability to be motivated and direct attention towards a challenging goal. Initiative also is a combination of three elements, which are intrinsic motivation, concentration and the need for it to occur over a period of time (Larson, 2000). Based on

this description, SYA appears to be an ideal environment for the development of initiative.

According to Watts and Caldwell (2008), intrinsic motivation is characterized by feelings of freely chosen participation, and positive beliefs and attitudes about an activity. Involvement in the SYA program is freely chosen. Attendance is not mandatory, unlike other environments such as school or sport teams, and participants are given the choice to attend only those activities that are of interest to them. Based on the comments by some of the focus group discussants, this is an option that is regularly exercised. This freely chosen participation allows youth the opportunity to develop those skills that they are interested in, thereby making learning that much more relevant. With respect to positive feelings that are associated with the program, the terms used to describe the program included 'positive', 'friendly', 'accepting', 'a unique atmosphere', and 'like a family'. When describing her feelings for the program, Milo simply states:

*Milo: SYA's sort of a little sunshine. If I've sort of had a really bad week it's just like oh there's a SYA meeting on Thursday, I can't wait for that...*

Concentration is the ability to devote thought and effort towards some form of action despite constraints, rules, and challenges (Larson, 2000). In part due to one of the program foci, the SYA participants clearly direct thought and effort towards environmental action. Participants are aware of the environmental degradation that is currently occurring, and the role that humans play in the degradation. Participants direct effort towards not only changing their own habits, but informing others about how they can make positive change. Obstacles encountered may include a lack of knowledge among others, and unwillingness to change, or an inability to change, possibly due to limited resources. Therefore, when SYA youth encounter these obstacles, they are required to not only gain new knowledge, but understand how it applies to both themselves and others. They then must utilize a variety of skills, such as planning and problem-solving, to present the information as to why change is important in a way that is relatable to others. Once this is done, they evaluate the effectiveness of their work, and make improvements to the activity or intervention to ensure future success. The

implementation of these skills and this effort when obstacles are encountered are a strong example of concentration.

The final component that makes up initiative is that of the temporal arc; meaning intrinsic motivation and concentration must occur over a period of time, or multiple sessions. As can be seen from the summary characteristics of the 16 interviewed program participants, involvement in SYA occurs over a long period. For these discussions, the most recently enrolled SYA participant had been involved for approximately three months, and the longest standing member of the program had been involved for approximately five years. The average focus group participant had been involved with SYA for approximately 22 months. In the past six months, youth had on average participated approximately 11 times in SYA activities. These figures indicate that participation does tend to occur over a long period of time, and that members actively participate in program sessions approximately two times per month, thereby fulfilling the component of the temporal arc.

The literature indicates that structured leisure activities are ideal for the development of initiative because they are perceived as being desirable by youth, offer support, structure and freedom, and are designed to avoid negative influences such as bullying (Watts & Caldwell, 2008). It can be safely stated that the SYA program is considered to be desirable by the youth based on the positive comments regarding the program, and the fact that the youth participate in the activities of their free will. As was evidenced in the theme *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*, the participants describe the atmosphere as being supportive, safe and respectful. Youth are able to establish and maintain healthy relationships with other youth and adults, which provides participants access to new information, support and encouragement. In terms of structure and freedom, as was described in the adult-youth program leadership continuum, the involvement of the Program Co-ordinator provides structure to the program, where the Co-ordinator is responsible for dealing with logistics, scheduling and some aspects of programming. Participants, on the other hand, are responsible for facilitating many of the activities. In addition to this, participants are given not only the freedom to attend, but the option to provide input into the programming that will take place, and the opportunity to



facilitate said programming. This arrangement of roles and responsibilities for the two parties ensures that there is enough structure for the events and activities to be successful, while at the same time providing youth the freedom to ensure these events and activities will be desirable and enjoyable. Finally, programs focusing on the development of initiative are designed to avoid negative influences; the example being bullying (Watts & Caldwell, 2008). As has been stated, one of the themes discussed was that of *Respect*. Respect is manifested in the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance and belonging; which is an atmosphere that was used to describe the program throughout both focus group discussions.

According to Caldwell et al. (2004), programs that focus on initiative development help youth to learn how to restructure boring situations into more interesting experiences. Using this ability, youth are more likely to participate in new activities, be aware of community opportunities and have higher levels of decision-making skills. As was stated previously, the youth perceived themselves as being more likely to get involved in new activities as a result of the SYA program, and in fact, had gotten involved in new activities. While the youth did not indicate that they were more aware of community involvement opportunities, it can be assumed that their involvement in SYA and these new activities would provide them with more information regarding community opportunities. With respect to higher level decision-making skills, as outlined in the section *Lessons Learned*, Elle commented on how she learned to approach situations with a realistic outlook, and rather than give up when she encountered an obstacle, she was able to employ the skill of persistence. With respect to the concept of cause and effect, both Charlie and Ed indicated that they had begun to think of the consequences of their actions after participating in SYA.

SYA is an environment which encourages the development of initiative. Participants are intrinsically motivated to attend, and devote thought and effort to environmental action over a period of time. The environment provides support, structure and freedom, and avoids negative influences, such as bullying. As a result, the participants are more likely to get involved in new activities, are more aware of

community involvement opportunities, and develop higher levels of decision-making skills.

*Practicing physical, intellectual, social, and emotional skills.*

According to Eccles et al. (2003), structured leisure activities provide a context in which young people can practice and improve upon physical, intellectual, social and emotional skills. More specifically, youth who are engaged in activities that teach specific technical skills, such as leadership programs, are provided with an opportunity to practice physical and intellectual skills, and tend to improve in these technical areas (Larson et al., 2005).

With respect to the SYA program, as a result of the participants' abilities to attend sessions by choice, many of the physical and intellectual skills developed are specific to an individual. Therefore, if a youth were to attend a workshop that was based on Indian-dancing or No Trace Fire-Building, the youth would likely develop the physical and intellectual skills related to that topic. Since the many of the skills and concepts are taught using an experiential learning model, the youth are better able to practice, learn, internalize and reflect upon the information than if they had merely attended a lecture on the topic.

In addition to the physical and intellectual skills the youth choose to develop as a result of their freely chosen participation, they also begin to develop an understanding of environmental action and leadership, which are two of the four program foci. In terms of environmental awareness, information is relayed and taught to the SYA participants by program staff, Mentors and other SYA youth. The focus group participants provided both implicit and explicit examples stating that they had developed a better intellectual understanding of the environmental content that was being taught. Since many of the activities occur in an outdoor setting, these environmental messages are then reinforced by the setting in which they take place. With respect to the leadership focus, based on their responses, the SYA youth developed skills related to teaching and facilitating a range of audiences, which included children, their peers and adults. By teaching skills and concepts to others, the facilitators develop a better understanding of the content being

taught. One final intellectual skill that was explicitly identified by discussants was that of cause and effect. An example given was that of how an individual's water usage can impact the environment. By understanding the environmental concepts being taught, and employing intellectual skills related to cause and effect, the SYA youth began to understand how all their actions impacted the world around them.

Dworkin et al. (2003) concluded that structured leisure participation enables youth to learn different social skills, such as team work, responsibility, communication, and how to provide and receive constructive criticism. Based on the focus group discussions in this study, the youth appeared to have developed very similar skills. One of the concepts upon which the program is based is related to creating environmental awareness and engaging in environmental action through a team effort. By engaging in group-based activities, such as the community clean-up, the participants were able to see the benefit a team approach can have when addressing an issue. Furthermore, repeated engagement reinforced the importance of the team concept.

By participating in this structured leisure activity, the youth were also able to develop social skills related to the concept of respect. One youth indicated that she had learned to not judge others by their appearance, whereas another youth indicated that she had learned skills related to empathy. As was indicated earlier, one of the intellectual skills developed as a result of participation in the program was that of understanding cause and effect. While it was initially applied to concepts related to environmental awareness, it was also applied to social situations. Participation in the SYA program helped to teach the concept of cause and effect in social situations, more specifically how the act of telling a joke might impact or offend another person. Finally, the respectful youth-adult relationships modeled in the program helped to encourage the participants to interact with and be respectful of people of all ages.

By being involved in opportunities to provide feedback, the participants begin to understand the need for evaluation and feedback processes in order to improve programming and initiatives. Through these sessions, youth learned how to provide and receive feedback. While it is not explicitly stated, it can be assumed the presence of an

adult facilitator and moderator in these sessions provided youth with an opportunity to learn about and begin to distinguish between constructive and negative criticism.

The literature indicated that structured activity participation provided youth with opportunities to practice such skills as managing feelings, controlling impulses, specifically anger and anxiety, and reducing stress (Dworkin et al., 2003).

The youth indicated that they had learned two valuable emotional skills, which included approaching situations with a realistic outlook and reframing negative situations. By understanding that one may not have all of the necessary components to easily complete a task, the skill of persistence was learned. Furthermore, by reframing negative situations or outcomes, individuals can manage their emotions in stressful situations.

Interestingly, the concepts of controlling impulses such as anger or anxiety were not explicitly discussed. However, one discussant did state that as a result of her participation in the program, she had learned to not be afraid of people she did not know. This can be construed as learning to manage one's anxiety when interacting with new people. In addition, another discussant shared a personal example that focused on managing her feelings by thinking about the program concepts. By employing the strategies taught in the program, she had been able to reduce her frustration with a specific situation, and manage her feelings.

#### *Forming an identity.*

The discussants viewed the SYA program as being a safe place in which they were able to act in a manner that truly reflected their thoughts and feelings. This safe environment was created through the respectful actions and attitudes of SYA members and facilitators, as was described in the *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships* theme. Because the youth felt supported by both their peers and the program leaders, they indicated that they were more likely to engage in new activities and honestly express their beliefs and feelings without fear of reprisal. If one were to recall the *Building an Identity* theme, the SYA participants stated that they were able to practice new identities and choose who they wanted to be during the program. In other words, the youth acted

differently than they normally would in order to explore their identity. As a result of feeling safe and supported by individuals in the SYA program and practicing their new identities, some youth began to express themselves more honestly in the regular world.

In addition to the safe environment that was described, the SYA program provided youth with numerous opportunities to engage in new activities. Two identified themes that were unique opportunities for the participants were *Youth as Teachers or Mentors* and *Learning to Lead*. These themes resulted in developing a better understanding of what leadership is, and the traits associated with a strong leader, as well as developing senses of empowerment and satisfaction as a result of the work being done.

According to Dworkin and colleagues (2003), structured leisure activities provide youth with opportunities to try new things, gain self-knowledge and learn personal limits. By engaging in a variety of activities, youth begin to understand and identify their abilities and thresholds in different situations. As a result of their participation in the program, we see that the participants have engaged in new ways of expressing themselves and ways of viewing the world.

The reflection process is a key component of identity exploration and identity development (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss et al., 1997a). Numerous times during the course of the focus group discussions the youth indicated that as a result of the activities and feedback processes in which they engaged, they began to alter their thoughts and actions. This act of reflection and behavior change can be construed as identity development in action.

*Forging relationships with non-familial adults.*

The SYA youth identified multiple benefits related to their opportunity to forge relationships with non-familial adults. As has been discussed, in terms of program delivery adults assist in the organization, supervision and facilitation of activities. Not only do these adults help to create a comfortable and inviting atmosphere, but they also teach specific skills and program-focused content to the participants, as is consistent with the literature (Abbot & Barber, 2007; Larson et al., 2005). The discussants also recognized that as a result of participating in the program, they were able to identify and

connect with adult role models, more specifically the Program Co-ordinator. The Program Co-ordinator was described as being genuinely concerned for the participants, assisting in their development to become strong leaders, and creating expectations that focused on acting with maturity. In other words, their relationships with non-familial adults assisted them in strengthening various general life skills, which included intellectual, emotional and social skills.

In addition to the skills that had been strengthened by their relationships with non-familial adults, the SYA youth also identified the opportunity to seek confidential advice as a benefit of their participation in the program. While the type of advice (personal, academic or occupational) sought was not described, it can be assumed that the type of advice could include all three. Based on this assumption, this benefit also appears to be consistent with the existing literature (Barber et al., 2001; Dworkin et al., 2003; Jarrett et al., 2005).

*Creating social capital.*

Social capital is the result of being a member of a group where resources were pooled and shared voluntarily. These resources can be both tangible and intangible; intangible resources included access to skills or knowledge. The concept of creating social capital was described by the participants throughout the course of the focus group discussions. The youth indicated that as a result of participating in the program activities, they had learned a variety of skills and program-based content from adults and their peers. SYA program activities such as the Fisherman's Club are fundamental ways in which the youth began to share resources and build their social capital. These types of activities provided youth the opportunity to both contribute to the development of others by providing them with a forum in which to teach skills and knowledge, as well as enhance their own development by learning from others.

Jarrett and colleagues (2005) suggested that structured leisure activities are well suited to the development of youth social capital because they provide youth access to adult social networks and help to develop supportive relationships between the two groups. This access and support is well supported by the perceptions of the SYA youth,

as outlined in the *Youth-Adult Relationships* and the *Respect* themes. As a result of their supportive relationships with the SYA adults, the participants were able to identify role models and access skills and knowledge which they otherwise would not have been capable of doing.

Putnam (2000) further described social capital as being either bonding or bridging; the former promoting solidarity and reciprocity among members and the latter encouraging connection with outside communities to share diverse resources. In terms of bonding social capital, the discussants repeatedly spoke about their increased ability to make new friends with similar interests and views as a result of their participation. Many of the youth indicated that they had initially enrolled in the program in order to meet new people, and as a result made new friends. In the theme *Relationships with Other SYA Youth*, the participants described their relationships with the other program members as being like a family. Because of their participation, the youth felt a sense of belonging, which in turn provided them with emotional benefits related to feeling accepted, safe and supported.

With respect to bridging social capital, one of the program foci identified by both the Program Co-ordinator and the youth participants was that of Community Service. Underlying this focus area is the understanding that the SYA participants have resources that can be shared with the community. One example of a community activity that taps into these resources is that of the community cleanup, which utilized the youths' free time and physical ability. Another example of bridging social capital that was identified by the youth was described in the theme *Youth Acting as Teachers and Mentors*. The Reality Check Team provided a dramatic information presentation to a variety of youth and adult audiences. In this way the SYA participants provided bridging social capital by sharing their collective knowledge regarding environmental degradation and the necessary behavioural change with their audiences. In return, the SYA youth received senses of satisfaction, respect and empowerment. In addition, as described in the *Youth Affecting Change* theme, the participants perceived their actions as not only having an impact on individual current behavior, but affecting the future state of the environment.

Therefore, it can be stated that a perceived benefit of participation is the creation of bridging social capital with both current and future generations.

This chapter focuses on the perceptions of the SYA youth regarding the benefits they accrue as a result of their participation and the *Program Themes* that assisted in the accrual of said benefits. These themes included *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*, *Building an Identity* and *Unique Learning Opportunities*. After comparing the perceived benefits to the existing literature, it can be concluded that they are consistent with the outcomes and processes of participation.

Interestingly, similar to the concept of outcomes and processes of participation is the concept of protective factors, a term often found in health promotion literature. Protective factors are individual and environmental characteristics, conditions and behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events, increases a person's ability to avoid risk or harm, and promotes social and emotional competence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Hawkins and Weis (as cited in Brooke-Weiss, Haggerty, Fagan, Hawkins & Cady, 2008) indicated that there are five protective factors that promote positive development in young people. These protective factors include opportunities to be involved with positive adults and peers, opportunities to develop skills to be actively involved in social, school and civic settings, recognition for their efforts and accomplishments, strong social bonds and clear standards for behaviour. While a full review and comparison of protective factors and outcomes and processes of participation is beyond the scope of this study, one should recognize distinct similarities between the two.

### **Strengths of Current Research**

There are a number of strengths that can be ascribed to this research study. The first strength relates to the fact that this research provides an in-depth description of the SYA program, which includes the four focus areas and the program's location on the adult-youth program leadership continuum. This provides some insight into the complexity of a program, which goes beyond merely a description of the participating population and the activities in which they engage. This description is valuable as it will



allow individuals to determine how participants will benefit through similar programming. In addition, it will allow program facilitators to determine key programming elements to include when developing either future SYA programs or other programs through the description of the *Program Themes*. A characteristic to note is that while the focus on environmental education resonates with the youth in the focus group discussions, the *Program Themes* focus not on the content of the program, but on the relationships, opportunities for identity building and the teaching methods employed.

A second strength of this research is that it focuses on the perceptions of youth regarding the benefits they accrue as a result of their participation in a structured leisure activity. An identified gap in the existing literature stated that there is a lack of youth understanding as it relates to the perceptions of youth. Not only does this research help to fill that gap, but by focusing on the perceptions of youth, it also corroborates the conclusions found in the existing literature. The consistency between both researcher and participant perspectives provides greater legitimacy to the existing identified benefits resulting from youth structured leisure participation.

The third strength is also related to a gap that was identified in the literature, which is a focus on 'youth at-risk'. These youth can be described as individuals "who are in trouble at home or school, who may have been involved in substance abuse, and who may or may not have been brought into the juvenile justice system" (Cordes & Ibrahim, 2003, p. 87). Compared to the general population, 'youth at-risk' are a relatively small group and yet much of the current research focuses on this demographic. This study provides insight regarding the benefits of participation that occur as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity that can be accrued by a general youth population, meaning those youth that have not been involved in the juvenile justice system and participate in the structured leisure activity of their own free will.

The final strength of this research is related to my status as an emerging researcher. As I was conducting research for the first time, I was determined to ensure that it was performed in an effective and trustworthy manner. I referenced multiple qualitative research guides so that I fully understood the process of data collection and analysis. In order to ensure credibility, I engaged in prolonged engagement, peer-

debriefing, pre-testing the instrumentation, and member-checking. I was also diligent in immersing myself in the data, thereby ensuring that the conclusions I had drawn were reflective of the voices of the participants.

### **Limitations of Current Research**

While this study does have a number of strengths, it too has limitations. One limitation is that the perceptions of the youth are only understood as that of one large group of people, and not related to any one demographic variable. Initially the aim of the study was to provide an account of youth perceptions of the benefits of participation based on such factors as age, sex, ethnicity, urban versus rural location within the region, and experience with the program. The expectation was to create two focus groups that accurately reflected the demographic composition of the SYA program, but also allowed for unique demographic perspectives to be included. Due to issues with recruitment and focus group scheduling, the purposeful sampling technique was abandoned. While the focus groups closely reflected the entire demographic composition of the SYA group, they did not include the demographic variability, more specifically ethnicity, that was desired. In addition, while the entire SYA program involves an approximate equal distribution of male to female members, the focus group discussions involved a 1:4 male to female ratio. It is possible that the male members may not have provided as much information as they would have had more males been present. This is especially relevant for one of the focus group discussions, which included just one male participant.

Another limitation of this study is that the conclusions drawn are not necessarily generalizable to all youth, or the programs in which they are involved. Due to differences between programs, including but not limited to foci, facilitators, and locations, the perceptions of the youth members may vary. In addition, the youth who have enrolled in the SYA program may have specific skills, characteristics and backgrounds that would have drawn them to the program being studied. Therefore, a self-selection bias may exist in this study.

A third limitation of the study is that it solely focuses on the benefits SYA participation, and not the negative repercussions of involvement. The arrangement of the semi-structured interview guide was such that it focused on only the benefits of

participation. This study did not investigate the harm perceived by the youth. With this in mind, it is possible that the SYA youth have to give up or forgo other opportunities in order to participate in the program. However, since participation is voluntary, it can be assumed that had other opportunities been available which were either more desirable or provided a greater benefit, the youth would have made the choice to forgo their SYA participation.

Finally, one limitation that existed was due to a gap in the literature. After my review of the exiting literature, I had developed three research questions, which I had anticipated the youth would answer. What the literature led me to believe was not reflective of the data that I had collected, and I therefore needed to review and revise my initial questions. While it is possible that my inexperience as a researcher may have contributed to the development of inappropriate questions, the impact of this inexperience was lessened by the assistance and advice of my thesis supervisor. This overall severity of this limitation was lessened due to the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry and my ability to adjust the research questions to better reflect the emergent themes.

### **Future Research Plans**

In order to develop a more complete understanding of the perceptions youth have regarding the benefits they accrue as a result of their participation in a structured leisure activity, further research is required. As was identified in the literature review and suggested in the limitations section, determining how youth with varying characteristics, such as age, sex, ethnicity and experience in a program, perceive the benefits of their participation should be focused on in the future. This line of study would provide researchers and program developers a better understanding of the perceptions of specific target audiences. Understanding these perceptions would provide data to compare to the existing body of literature, thereby developing a better understanding of youth development as a whole.

Another future research study may include focusing on youth perceptions of the benefits of participation with a group of youth from a program is similar to but different from the SYA program. A comparison could then be made to better understand if the results may be more generalizable across programs. This would allow researchers to

determine how the outcomes and processes of participation differ across activities. It would also provide information about the specific causes of change that are common across participants.

As has been identified in the literature, one common concern among researchers is the lack of rigor found in studies. One way of addressing this is through the use of a longitudinal design (Larson et al., 2006). A longitudinal design would compare the perceptions of youth regarding their abilities, attitude towards the program, and the benefits of their participation at various times. This design would require the researcher to collect data when a youth first enrolls in the program, at intervals during their participation period, and when the youth discontinues participation.

This study has also provided some insight into the interactive relationships between the *Program Themes*. While a brief description of the impact that meaningful and supportive relationships have on the ability of a youth to engage in the process of identity development, further investigation into the relationships between all three of the *Program Themes* is required.

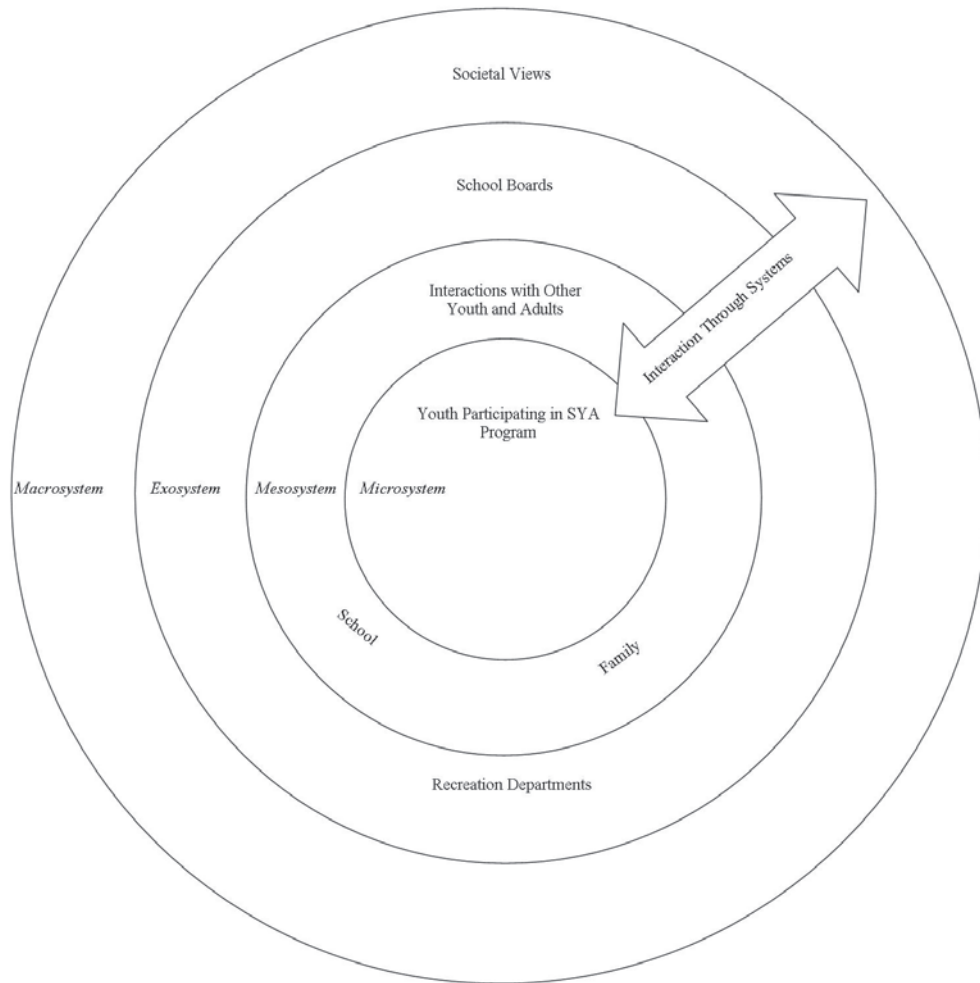
Finally, this study highlighted the need to conduct research within a school setting in order to better understand which *Program Themes* are absent. Throughout the course of the focus group discussions, the participants indicated that the SYA program was preferred to and differed from the regular world which they often identified as the school setting. At first glance, the two settings appear to be very similar. Both settings include supportive adults, opportunities to make personal connections with peers, relevant learning opportunities and concerted efforts to create respectful relationships, for example in the form of anti-bullying campaigns. However, from a youth perspective there appear to be vast differences. The youth-adult relationships should exist as peer to peer relationships, as opposed to reinforcing the hierarchical structure and power imbalance between the two groups. Youth need to be provided more opportunities to direct their own learning and investigate areas of personal interest, as opposed to following a standardized curriculum. Finally, youth must be provided with opportunities to learn content using an experiential methodology thereby allowing them to learn practice and

reflect upon concepts and skills. Therefore, future research must be conducted in order to better understand which *Program Themes*, as articulated in this study, are missing from the current education system. Research must then focus on how the *Program Themes* can be applied in order to make the current education system more applicable and beneficial for youth.

### **The SYA Program and Ecological Theory**

Ecological theory suggests that the developing person is a dynamic entity that is impacted upon by the environment in which it resides, and at the same time creates an impact on said environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This includes both the immediate setting, as well as larger surroundings.

Relating ecological theory to the experiences of the SYA participants, one will recognize that each individual youth is a dynamic entity who resides in the SYA program environment, or the microsystem. Over time the youth will make an impact on and be impacted by various settings in the other systems (see Figure 10, p. 137). The mesosystem, for example will include interactions with other youth and adults in such settings as school or the family. The exosystem will include settings that the youth does not actively participate in, however events that occur in these settings will be affected by and affect the youth. These settings may include School boards or recreation departments. Finally, the macrosystem refers to the cultural and societal forces and beliefs that impact human development. This system refers to those societal views that are ascribed to the youth population.



*Figure 10.* SYA programs in the context of ecological theory.

Understanding how youth participation in structured leisure activities relates to other settings is important because it provides much needed justification for continued research into and the funding of these programs. The following will provide two scenarios that more fully explain the impact of structured leisure activities for youth through each of the nested systems. The first scenario begins with a youth, in this example named Doug, who is a participant in the SYA program; this is currently Doug's microsystem. Much like the participants in this study, over time Doug will begin to perceive the accumulation of benefits as a result of his participation. These benefits will come in the form of positive changes and lessons learned. As Doug begins to learn, grow, develop skills and become more confident, he will begin to interact and impact other

people. It can be assumed that if Doug has been encouraged to develop in a positive manner, the impact that he has on others will also be positive. Interestingly, his impact will not only be felt by individuals within his microsystem, but by people in other settings in which he interacts (i.e., the mesosystem).

One setting in the mesosystem in which Doug will interact, is that of school. Should Doug use the knowledge, skills and positive behaviour he developed within the SYA program and apply them in the school setting, Doug will impact other individuals. These individuals will include both students and adults within the school; for example, teachers and principals. With respect to teachers, Doug's actions could positively impact an adult's view of youth and encourage that adult to apply the methods used in the SYA program to their own work. This change in perspective could significantly and positively impact future interactions the teacher has with both youth and adults. It is also likely that some of these positive interactions with other adults could take place at the level of a school board, which is a setting within Doug's exosystem.

As stated, existing within the exosystem are settings that an individual does not directly engage in, but does have an impact on and is impacted by said individual. Decisions made within the school board setting directly impact the students attending educational institutions. An adult in this setting with a thorough understanding of the themes used within the SYA program may have the opportunity to influence other decision-makers in embracing the same methods. Should these methods be widely applied to multiple school settings, it is possible that a much more broad cross-section of youth will begin to accumulate similar benefits to that of Doug. This wide-ranging accumulation of benefits will then have an impact on Doug's macrosystem.

The macrosystem exists at the level of culture, and can include societal views and beliefs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Should a large group of youth begin to accumulate similar benefits to that of Doug as a result of changes to school board policies and procedures, the youth will begin to have a positive influence and impact on a vast array of individuals. This array of individuals will then begin to positively alter their views of youth and embrace the concept of PYD. This is could then be deemed a shift in society's

view of youth from a problem to be solved to that of active participants in the community and leaders in social change initiatives (HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, n.d.).

The second scenario involves the adoption of a PYD philosophy by society as a whole (i.e., change within the macrosystem). This adoption will create the belief that youth have the ability to direct their own development, and will recognize the benefits youth accumulate as a result of their participation in structured leisure activities. The belief and recognition could then inform public policy which would allow for increased resources and funding for recreation departments.

Existing at the level of an individual youth's exosystem, recreation departments often impact youth through policy and decision-making processes. Should these departments receive increased resources and the mandate to direct these resources towards youth programming, service providers would be able to develop intentional programming that employs the *Program Themes* similar to those used in the SYA program. These resources could be used to communicate the value or benefit of youth participation to appropriate groups of adults. These adults would include, but would not be limited to, teachers, coaches, and family members. By sharing this information, these adults will be better able to communicate the value of program participation to youth they interact with, which would occur in a youth's mesosystem.

Interactions taking place in the mesosystem with adults who understand and communicate the value of structured leisure participation will influence a youth to participate. This participation would then be deemed the youth's microsystem. If the program is informed by the philosophy of PYD and has been developed using the SYA *Program Themes* as a guide, it is likely that the youth will have opportunities for development that they may not have had in the past. Based on the conclusions of this study, this positive development will be in the form of positive changes as a result of participation and lessons learned.

As these two scenarios suggest, the application of the SYA *Program Themes* and the adoption of the PYD philosophy to youth programming as it relates to ecological



theory can have vast implications. The final section will discuss some of the implications of the current study as they relate to the more practical aspects of program development, as well as some of the more broad implications as they relate to ecological theory.

### **Implications of Current Results**

The conclusions drawn from this study have multiple implications for a youth program development audience. The study provides a better understanding of the aspects of youth programs which youth perceive to be most important, and therefore deserve the most attention. These key characteristics include building meaningful and respectful relationships between and among youth participants and adult mentors, providing opportunities for youth to try new things in order to assist in identity development, and providing unique learning opportunities that are experiential in nature and allow youth to act as leaders and mentors. Using these characteristics as building blocks, program developers should be able to create programs that are perceived by youth to be beneficial, regardless of the program theme or focus.

This study also supports the concept that youth can direct their own development. As has been suggested by Larson and colleagues (2005) and was evidenced in this study, youth have the ability and desire to determine areas in which they would like to develop and identify concepts that they would like to learn. Recognizing this, programmers have the opportunity to intentionally design programs that encourage this development to occur. This intentional design could encompass program activities such as the Fisherman's Club, as employed by SYA. A secondary program design would involve the use of youth input from the initial program session. Program developers could gather together a group of youth, ask them for their desired areas of interest, and then develop a program based on these suggestions. A third option in which to support this self-directed development would be through the use of a program structure in which the program leader acts as more of a link to opportunities to learn, as opposed to acting as a program facilitator. In this circumstance, the youth would identify an area or project of interest, and the program leader would connect the youth to a mentor who has expertise in this specific field. The mentor would then assist the youth in gaining area specific expertise. In this scenario, the program leader's role changes from being a support and mentor for

the youth participants to that of an educator and trainer for the adult mentor. The program leader would be required to train the mentors in the concept of PYD and provide ongoing support in order to minimize any problems or issues that may arise. While all different, all three of these suggestions take into account that youth can identify areas of interest, and employ the use of an adult program leader to assist in youth development.

The implications of this study extend further than that of just a youth population. Much like youth, adults have the ability to identify areas for and play an active role in their own development. When looking at an adult-learner population (more specifically in a college or university setting), it is reasonable to assume that adults would desire similar learning environments as youth. Therefore the program themes, *Meaningful and Supportive Relationships*, *Building an Identity and Unique Learning Opportunities*, and sub-themes identified in this study, could be applied to adult programming. Program developers in both recreation and education contexts can apply this information to develop learning opportunities that are more relevant for their audiences.

Beyond the more practical program design implications of this study, and its impact on program development, is that of both the individual and societal implications. As was identified in the two scenarios relating the SYA program to ecological theory, the findings from this research can have a positive impact on a wide range of people. From an individual perspective, the findings in this study provide insight into the positive development that can occur as a result of structured leisure participation. The impact of participation could lead to the development of youth who are confident, respectful of themselves and others, emotionally well-adjusted, altruistic and motivated to succeed. From a societal perspective, this research could inform the public and policy-makers, and encourage them to place a greater value on the impact that structured leisure participation has on youth development. This sense of value could then come in the form of increased funding for youth service providers or a shift in thinking of youth as positive contributors to their communities and society as a whole.

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## **APPENDIX A      Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Guide**

Dalhousie University - School of Health and Human Performance

Youth Perceptions of the Benefits Received from Participating in a Structured Leisure Activity

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Questions

### Introduction

- My name is Mathew Maguire and I am a student in the Leisure Studies MA program at Dalhousie University.
- As part of my degree I am conducting research in the area of the benefits youth feel they receive as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity.
- To do this, I am leading focus group discussions with members of SYA to better understand what they get out of their participation.
- In order to obtain the most useful information, I will need to learn a bit more about you. I have a form that asks a few questions about you, your involvement with SYA and your activity patterns. After the focus group I will change all of the names on the forms so that no one can later link your personal information to any of the forms or any quotes used in the report.
- I would like to thank everyone for agreeing to participate in this focus group, but before going any further I would like to play a game to help us get a bit more familiar and comfortable with each other.

### Icebreaker Activity

- King Frog.

### Housekeeping Items

- This group discussion will remain confidential. It is very important that we do not share what is discussed in this room with anyone else. In addition to this, no forms or information that can be linked to you will show up in either the transcripts or the final report.

- I expect this discussion to last anywhere between 60 and 90 minutes.
- There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose of this discussion is to get at what you think and feel, so we can better understand the benefits of leisure participation.
- I am using a tape recorder to make sure that I can properly capture everything that is said. When we are done, a secretary will listen to the recorded discussion and type it out. I will then use this information to study and analyze our discussion. I ask that you try to speak clearly, loudly, and one at a time, so that it is easier to type out our discussion. Also, if you are uncomfortable with being recorded you can withdraw at any time.
- Should you feel any negative emotions about participating I encourage you to speak with me, the Program Co-ordinator or connect with the Kids Help Phone.
- If you are uncomfortable with answering any of the questions, you are more than welcome to not provide an answer.
- Should you reveal any information regarding abuse, or risk of harm to yourself or others, I will contact child protective services as part of my adherence to provincial statutes.
- Finally, I wanted to take some notes during the discussion to help me analyze the information later on. Is anyone uncomfortable with this? May I take these notes?

### Discussion Questions

1. In your own words, please briefly describe the purpose of the program.
  - What types of activities do you participate in?
  - Where do activities take place?
  - How often do you participate in activities?
  - Who organizes the activities (participants, adults, Program Co-ordinator)?
  - Which specific activities are your most/least preferred?
  - Why did you join?
  - How did you find out about SYA?
  
2. What have you have gained from participation?
  - What does SYA mean to you?
  - Probes:
    - According to the Program Co-ordinator, SYA focuses on the areas of:

1. Personal Skills Development (learning skills from peers and adults)
  2. Leadership Skills and Opportunities (sharing skills with other people and organizations)
  3. Community Service and Environmental Action
  4. Social Involvement (holiday socials, movie nights)
- Does SYA address all of these areas?
  - Should more or less focus be placed on these areas?
  - Is there a focus area that is missing from the list?
  - What is the most important focus area to you? Why?
3. Tell me how you have benefited from your participation in SYA. Use specific stories if possible.
- Prompts for both outcome and process benefits
    - Outcome:
      - Have your grades improved?
      - Have you got a job as a result of participating?
      - Different educational aspirations? Career aspirations?
      - Are you more likely to become involved in different school/community volunteering?
    - Process:
      - Are you more motivated to try and achieve new things?
      - How you become more skilled (physical, emotional, social, and intellectual)?
      - Have you learned about yourself (strengths, limits)?
      - Have you created new relationships with adults you are not related to?
      - Have you been able to forge relationships that have somehow benefited or taught you something?
  - What benefits do you feel are the most important?
  - What have you learned from participating in SYA that you may not have learned elsewhere?
  - What has happened in other settings as a result of participating in SYA?
  - How can you take what you have learned in SYA and use it in other settings?
  - What stops you from participating in SYA?
  - Who has encouraged you to participate in SYA?
  - Why do you stay involved?
  - Prompts include:
    - Parents and other family
    - Friends/Peers
    - Cost
    - Transportation
    - Time
    - Other activities

- How much of an impact does this have?
  - What impact does program staff have (Co-ordinator, adults, other staff)?
    - What specifically does the Program Co-ordinator do to make SYA a worthwhile activity?
    - What characteristics make a good SYA program staff?
    - What can the Program Co-ordinator do to improve SYA?
4. Do you feel that other youth could benefit from SYA participation? If so, why?
- Does awareness need to be created among uninvolved youth about the benefits received from participating in SYA?
  - What is the best method of informing youth about these benefits?

#### Additional Questions

1. What would you recommend to the SYA staff regarding the SYA program?
2. What would you change in the SYA program?
3. Do you feel you have control of the activities of the SYA program?
4. Would you like to have more control in deciding SYA:
  - Activities
  - Program direction
  - Program schedules
  - If so, what do you need in order to take more control?
    - Do you feel you require permission?
    - More ideas?
    - Training in how to plan these things?
    - More time?

#### Generic Probes

- Tell me more about...
- Is there anything you would like to add?
- Can you give an example of that?

#### Conclusion

- Upon completion, ask participants if they are still comfortable with the use of direct quotes in the final report
- Thank participants for attending and remind them that you will be contacting them for a follow-up meeting once the initial conclusions have been determined

## **APPENDIX B      Socio-Demographic Form**

### Youth Perceptions of the Benefits Received from Participating in a Structured Leisure Activity

Hello SYA members,

Thank-you for your interest in participating in this study. The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions youth have regarding the benefits they receive as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity. This focus group will last approximately 60-90 minutes, and will take place at the municipal recreation centre.

The purpose of this form will be to provide information to the researcher such as participant age, sex, cultural/ethnic background, length of time enrolled in SYA, and the specific type of activities you choose to participate in. This information will be later linked to specific quotes used by you and will provide information that can be analyzed to better understand the different perceptions and thoughts you have regarding SYA. All socio-demographic forms will be given an alias, which will ensure that your name will not appear in either the transcripts or final report.

It should be noted that the socio-demographic forms will then be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the research supervisor's office, and in no way will anyone be able to link either your personal information or quotes with your name.

Please try to be as accurate as possible when answering questions.

Once you have completed this form, please give it to Matt:

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Gender (circle one): Male / Female

3. Number of months enrolled in SYA: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Number of SYA activities participated in the past 6 months: \_\_\_\_\_

5. 5 Most recent SYA activities participated in (if you have been involved in less than 5 please include as many as possible) :

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_

6. Area in Canada where you live (i.e., specific name of location): \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity/Cultural background: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Number of years living in Canada: \_\_\_\_\_

8. Days and times that are most convenient to meet for a focus group interview:

a. Weekdays – Days: \_\_\_\_\_ Times: \_\_\_\_\_

b. Weekends – Days: \_\_\_\_\_ Times: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank-you for this information,

Matthew Maguire  
MA Leisure Studies Candidate  
Dalhousie University  
[msmaguir@dal.ca](mailto:msmaguir@dal.ca)

## APPENDIX C      Research Study Protocol

	Activity	Description
Step 1. May, 2010	Creation of reflective journal	As the researcher, I documented my assumptions regarding what I thought I would find prior to the research process. I included information regarding how and why the study design choices were made. In addition, I included information that appeared to be significant or relevant during the different data collection and analysis stages, including the interview guide pre-testing, both focus group discussions and the different stages of analysis.
Step 2. May, 2010	Participation in a SYA activity	Prior to data collection, I attended a SYA activity in order to gain a more complete understanding of the group as a whole, the activities in which they participate, and introduce myself to potential participants. I was also able to briefly introduce the study to the youth and begin building a relationship with them. This relationship served two functions; it helped to build interest in participating in the focus group discussions and it aided in creating a more comfortable atmosphere among the researcher and study participants during data collection. After participating in the activity, I documented my thoughts and observations in the reflective journal.
Step 3. April – July, 2010	Gained Ethics Approval	I was required to gain ethics approval from the Dalhousie University Social Sciences and Humanities Human Research Ethics Board. Unfortunately, this process required more time than was initially anticipated. This delay was caused by a need to revise the consent and assent forms that could be understood by the applicable age groups (e.g. youth under the age of 16 years).
Step 4. July, 2010	Pilot interview guide	The children of both the Program Co-ordinator and the Program Co-ordinator’s supervisor were asked to respond to the semi-structure interview guide questions in order to ensure the questions were understandable and relevant. Slight adjustments were made to the guide.
Step 5. August – October, 2010	Contacted SYA participants through the Program Co-ordinator to recruit for focus group interviews	Email notices were sent to each eligible SYA participant informing them of the study through the Program Co-ordinator on my behalf. Attached to the email was a document containing information regarding the study purpose, consent forms, and my contact information. Individuals were also informed that they would not receive any tangible or financial compensation for their participation, but could have indirectly benefited through such means as an improved program. Recruitment proved to be difficult and required an additional three contact attempts.



Step 6. August – October, 2010	Mailed interested participants information packages	For those individuals that indicated that they were interested in participating in the focus group discussions, information packages, which included a recruitment letter, a consent form and, when applicable, an assent form were sent via mail.
Step 7. August – October, 2010	Enrolled participants in focus group discussions	Based on their preferred times and dates, participants were enrolled in one of two focus group discussions.
Step 8. November, 2010	Follow-up telephone calls made	Telephone calls were made to those participants who had enrolled in the study to remind them of the scheduled time and location.
Step 9. November 19 & 20, 2010	Conducted focus groups	<p>Two focus groups, which shared the same format, were conducted on November 19 and November 20, 2010.</p> <p>Interviews began with an icebreaker activity designed to create a comfortable atmosphere and encourage participation and discussion.</p> <p>A discussion surrounding the study purpose, the rights of the participants, the importance of honesty, anonymity and confidentiality, and other ethical considerations then occurred.</p> <p>The use of an audio recorder was explained, stating that the device that would be used to obtain accurate and credible information.</p> <p>The semi-structured interview guide was followed, but conversation was also allowed to drift to subject areas that had not previously been considered. Prompting questions were asked when the conversation began to drift too far off topic or stall.</p> <p>After each interview, I wrote my thoughts and observations in my reflective journal.</p>
Step 10. November, 2010	Transcription of audio recordings	An Administrative Assistant was hired to transcribe the audio recordings. This individual was required to sign a confidentiality form.

Step 11. December, 2010 – October, 2011	Data analysis	<p>Data was imported to the qualitative research software program Atlas.ti.</p> <p>Using the words and phrases, as well as the notes from the interviews, patterns were identified, and then combined to create sub-themes and themes. Participant quotes were linked to the themes and a conceptual model was created.</p> <p>During this process I met with my supervisor in order to verify the interpretations of my findings. Revisions were made as required.</p>
Step 12. July, 2011 – April, 2012	Wrote Findings and Conclusion	Using the adjusted conceptual model and my reflective journal, I linked my findings to the structured youth leisure body of literature. I then included my final thoughts.
Step 13. April, 2012	Member-checking	Once the data had been analyzed and a conceptual model had been created, I developed an Executive Summary of my findings. This summary was then mailed to each participant with instructions asking them to review the themes drawn from the research study. Participants were then asked to contact me via email should they disagree with the themes, or observe any errors.
Step 14. June, 2012	Defended and submitted thesis	Adjustments were made to the thesis as required.
Step 15. July, 2012	Wrote executive summary and submitted it to stakeholders	A synopsis of my findings was written and was submitted to interested stakeholders, such as SYA staff, participants, parents and Mentors.

## **APPENDIX D      Consent Form for Older Adolescents**

### **CONSENT FORM FOR OLDER ADOLESCENTS**

Dalhousie University – School of Health and Human Performance

Youth Perceptions of the Benefits Received from Participating in a Structured Leisure  
Activity

June, 2010

Principal Investigator:      Matthew Maguire, MA (Candidate)  
School of Health and Human Performance  
Dalhousie University  
6230 South Street  
Halifax, NS  
B3H 3J6  
Email: [msmaguir@dal.ca](mailto:msmaguir@dal.ca)

Advisor:      Laurene Rehman, Ph.D.  
School of Health and Human Performance  
Dalhousie University  
6230 South Street  
Halifax, NS  
Email: [laurene.rehman@dal.ca](mailto:laurene.rehman@dal.ca)

Contact Person:      Matthew Maguire  
(902) 444-3737  
Email: [msmaguir@dal.ca](mailto:msmaguir@dal.ca)

## **Introduction**

We invite you to take part in a research study being conducted by Matthew Maguire who is a graduate student at Dalhousie University, as a part of his Leisure Studies Master's Thesis. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. The study is described below. This description tells you about the risks, inconvenience, or discomfort which you might experience. Participating in this study might not benefit you, but we might learn things that will benefit others. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with Matthew Maguire.

## **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to understand (a) what benefits youth feel they receive as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity; (b) how these benefits can be carried over to other settings; (c) if active youth feel the need to create awareness among inactive youth about the benefits received from participation; and (d) how the SYA program can be improved. By better understanding participant perspectives, I hope to offer suggestions for improving the program for future participants.

## **Study design**

Matthew Maguire will conduct 2 or 3 separate focus group interviews with approximately 8 to 10 SYA program participants in each group, for a total of 16 to 30 participants being interviewed. You will be asked to give about 60 to 90 minutes of your time, depending on how much you and the other group members wish to share. We are asking for your consent to audio-record the interview. This is done to help make sure we correctly report your comments. A secretary will type what is said on the tapes. S/he will sign a confidentiality contract. The tapes and typed copies of the interviews will be confidential and will only be heard/read by those directly involved in the study (Matthew Maguire, Dr. Rehman, and the secretary).

## **Who can participate?**

You may participate in this study if you are an SYA participant:

- between the ages of 12 and 17, and
- who has participated in at least 3 activities in the past 6 months

### **Who cannot participate?**

You may not participate in this study if you:

- not an SYA participant
- younger than 12 or older than 17
- directly related to program staff

### **Who will be conducting the research?**

This study is being conducted by Matthew Maguire, a graduate student at Dalhousie University, under the supervision of Laurene Rehman, Ph.D., a faculty member at the School of Health and Human Performance, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. This study will also use the skills of a secretary who has not yet been hired.

### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to meet at the [municipal recreation centre] to take part in one of the group discussions that will focus on your experiences with the SYA program. Group discussions will also involve other SYA participants, which will provide you a chance to discuss the topics raised with fellow SYA members. Interviews will most likely take place on the weekend, but effort will be made to make the interview times as convenient as possible for all participants. Group discussions will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Once we have had time to study the group discussions, we will come to initial conclusions. These conclusions will involve our ideas of the benefits SYA members receive from their participation in the program. In order to make sure we have formed correct conclusions, your help will be needed. Therefore, we will hold a follow-up meeting where Matthew Maguire will present the ideas. The purpose of this meeting will be to see if group discussion participants agree or disagree with the conclusions. Only those that had participated in one of the focus groups will be invited to attend. Changes will be made to the conclusions based on your feedback.

You may take part in the follow-up meeting if you choose, but it is NOT required. The follow-up meeting will also take place at the [municipal recreation centre] at a time that is most convenient for focus group participants. The meeting will give you a chance to comment on how we understood the focus group discussions. You will also have a chance to discuss the ideas raised in the discussions in more detail with other SYA participants. This follow-up meeting will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

In addition to this, once the study has been completed you and your guardians will be invited to a presentation of the findings. The time and place of this meeting will be decided at a later time. You will also be sent an executive summary of the study findings. Finally a copy of the thesis manuscript will be given to the [municipal recreation centre] for interested individuals to read at the own convenience.

### **Possible risks and discomforts**

Participating in this study could raise some personal issues for you that may cause some distress. For example, you might experience some anxiety or embarrassment if you are asked to discuss some of the challenges you face as a result of your involvement with the SYA program. You will only be asked to answer those questions that you are comfortable talking about. Please note, if you reveal any information about child abuse, or risk of harm to yourself or others, I [the principal investigator, Matthew Maguire] am required by law, to report this information and your identity to the appropriate authorities.

Being involved in this study will not affect your treatment by program staff. However, a risk of participation is that you may experience concern about these issues.

If participation in this study raises any personal issues that you would like to discuss with someone, you will be encouraged to talk to Matthew Maguire or the SYA Program Co-ordinator. You may also choose to call the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

### **Possible benefits**

While there are no direct personal benefits from participating in this study, it is possible that talking about and reflecting upon your experiences in SYA will make these experiences more meaningful to you. Your participation in the study may also provide information which will allow the Program Co-ordinator to make positive changes to the program.

### **Compensation/Reimbursement**

Juice and snacks will be provided during the focus group discussions. Should you require bus fare to attend the sessions, it will be provided to you.

### **Confidentiality**

#### Anonymity

Data will be gathered through focus group interviews. Therefore, there will be no way to keep your answers anonymous from the researcher or the group. However, all participants will be reminded about the importance of keeping the focus group

discussions confidential. Any identifying information (such as your name or age) will not be present in any reports or papers on this study.

Any major themes that are reported in the interviews will be reported and quotes used as illustrations of those themes, but no names will be included.

### Confidentiality

All of the information you share will be kept confidential. All of the socio demographic forms, recordings and transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the School of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University until five years after post-publication of the study, at which time they will be destroyed.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me (Matthew Maguire) by phoning 444-3727, or by e-mail at [msmaguir@dal.ca](mailto:msmaguir@dal.ca). If you decide to participate, I will provide you with any new information that might affect your decision to participate.

If you would like a copy of the results of this study, please feel free to contact me at the above telephone number. A copy of the study will also be available at the [municipal recreation centre] once the research is complete.

### **Problems or concerns**

If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, you may contact Patricia Lindley, Director of Dalhousie University's Office of Human Research Ethics Administration, for assistance at (902) 494-1462, [patricia.lindley@dal.ca](mailto:patricia.lindley@dal.ca).

Youth Perceptions of the Benefits Received from Participating in a Structured  
Leisure Activity

Please return this form to Matthew Maguire, the principal investigator, on the day of your focus group. Please note participants without a form signed by a legal guardian will not be able to participate in the focus group.

1. I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent to take part in this study. However I realize that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participant Full Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

2. I understand that the researcher will audio- record the interview and I agree to have my responses recorded. I realize that the tapes will later be transcribed and the original tapes will be destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_

(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

3. I grant the researcher permission to include any of my quotes or responses in the future publications/presentations on this research. I understand that there will be no identifying information included in any quotes used and that there will be no way to link my responses back to me.

\_\_\_\_\_

(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

4. I wish to take part in the follow-up meeting on the results of this study. I will provide the researcher with my home phone number and give him permission to contact me in this way.

\_\_\_\_\_

(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Researcher Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)



## **APPENDIX E    Assent Form for Younger Adolescents**

### **ASSENT FORM FOR YOUNGER ADOLESCENTS**

Dalhousie University – School of Health and Human Performance  
Youth Perceptions of the Benefits Received from Participating in a Structured Leisure  
Activity  
June, 2010

Principal Investigator:        Matthew Maguire, MA (Candidate)  
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Contact Person:                     Matthew Maguire  
   (902) 444-3737  
   Email: [msmaguir@dal.ca](mailto:msmaguir@dal.ca)

## **Introduction**

We are asking you to volunteer your time and take part in a research study being done by Matthew Maguire, who is a student at Dalhousie University. This study is being done so that he can complete his Master's of Arts degree. It is your choice to take part in this study. You can change your mind at anytime and choose to stop. If you choose to not take part or choose to stop, you will not be punished for it. The study is explained below. This will tell you about anything bad that might happen if you take part. You will not earn anything for being in this study, but the answers you give might help to make the SYA program better for others. If you have any questions you can ask Matthew Maguire.

## **Purpose of the study**

We are doing this study to find out what young people think about being in programs like SYA. We also want to know if you think other young people like you would benefit from a program like SYA, and how SYA can be made better.

## **Study design**

Focus groups interviews are discussions where a group of people answer questions about a specific topic. Matthew Maguire will lead 2 or 3 focus group interviews with about 8 to 10 SYA members in each group. Each focus group will run about 60 to 90 minutes depending on how much you and the other group members have to say. We are asking for your permission (assent) to record the interview using a tape recorder. We want to make sure we don't make a mistake about what was said. Later, a secretary will type what is said on the tapes. S/he will sign a contract making sure that anything said on the tapes is kept private. The tapes and typed copies of the interviews will be kept private and will only be heard or read by Matthew Maguire, Dr. Rehman, and the secretary.

## **Who can participate?**

You may take part in this study if you are an SYA member:

- between the ages of 12 and 17, and
- who has participated in at least 3 activities in the past 6 months

## **Who cannot participate?**

You may not take part in this study if you:

- not a SYA participant
- younger than 12 or older than 17
- a family member of an employee of the recreation centre

### **Who will be doing the research?**

This study is being done by Matthew Maguire, a graduate student at Dalhousie University. His supervisor is Dr. Laurene Rehman, Ph.D. Dr. Rehman is a member at the School of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. A secretary will also be used during this study.

### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you choose to take part in this study, you will need to meet at the [municipal recreation centre] for one of the focus group interviews. Other SYA participants will also be in these interviews, so you will be able to share your ideas with them. Interviews will probably take place on the weekend, but we will try to make the interview times as easy as possible for everyone. Focus group interviews will run about 60 to 90 minutes.

Once we have had time to study the group interviews, we will form some ideas about what SYA members think about the program. To make sure what we think is correct, we will need your help. So, we will hold a follow-up meeting where Matthew Maguire will present the ideas. The purpose of this meeting will be to see if people in the focus group interviews agree or disagree with the ideas. Only people that were in the focus groups will be invited to the follow-up meeting. We will make changes to our ideas based on what you think about our ideas. You can take part in the follow-up meeting if you choose, but it is NOT required. The follow-up meeting will take place at the [municipal recreation centre] at a time that is easiest for you. This follow-up meeting will run about 60 to 90 minutes.

Once the study has been completed you and your guardians will be invited to a presentation about the study. The time and place of this meeting will be decided at a later time. You will also be sent a short overview of the study findings. A copy of the final document will also be given to the [municipal recreation centre] for those people that would like to read it.

### **Possible risks and discomforts**

It is possible that you might feel worry or embarrassment during the focus group interviews. For example, you might be embarrassed sharing some of the difficulties you have had as a member of SYA. You do not have to answer all of the questions. You can choose to answer those questions that you want to answer. If you share any information about child abuse, or harming yourself or others, I [the principal investigator, Matthew Maguire] am required by law, to report this information and your name to the proper authorities.

You will not be treated any differently by the SYA staff if you choose to not take part in this study. However, you may worry about this.

If you want to share some of your worries, you can talk to Matthew Maguire or the SYA Program Co-ordinator. You can also call the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

### **Possible benefits**

You will not earn or receive anything for taking part in this study. But, talking about your thoughts and feelings about SYA will make it more special for you. Taking part in this study might also add information that will help to improve SYA.

### **Compensation/Reimbursement**

Juice and snacks will be given during the focus group interviews. If you need bus fare to get to the focus group interviews, it will also be given to you.

### **Confidentiality**

#### Anonymity

Information will be gathered during the focus group interviews. So, there will be no way to keep your answers private from the researcher or the rest of the group. Everyone will be reminded about keeping the focus group discussions private. Your name and age will not be included in any reports or papers on this study.

We will be using word for word comments that are made during the focus group interviews. These comments will be used as examples of what the focus group interview members think of programs like SYA. Names will not be included in the examples.

#### Confidentiality

All of the information you share will be kept private. All of the information forms, tape recordings and word for word scripts of the recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at Dalhousie University. The information forms, tape recordings and word for word scripts will be destroyed five years after the study has been published.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me (Matthew Maguire) by phoning 444-3727, or by e-mail at [msmaguir@dal.ca](mailto:msmaguir@dal.ca). If the study changes at all I will tell you about the changes.

If you would like a copy of the results of this study, please contact me. A copy of the study will also be available at the [municipal recreation centre] once the study is complete.

**Problems or concerns**

If you have any problems or wish to speak with someone about this study, you can contact Patricia Lindley, Director of Dalhousie University's Office of Human Research Ethics Administration, for assistance at (902) 494-1462, [patricia.lindley@dal.ca](mailto:patricia.lindley@dal.ca).

Youth Perceptions of the Benefits Received from Participating in a Structured  
Leisure Activity

Please return this form to Matthew Maguire, on the day of your focus group interview. You need to have **both** a consent form signed by a legal guardian and a signed assent form, or you will not be able to take part in the focus group interview.

1. I have read about this study. I have been allowed to ask questions about it and my questions have been answered. I agree (assent) to take part in this study. I understand that I am volunteering for this study and I am able to stop at any time.

Participant Full Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

2. I understand that the researcher will audiotape the interview. I agree to have my responses recorded. I know that the tapes will later be written out word for word, and the original tapes will be destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_

(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

3. I will allow the researcher to include my quotes or answers in future publications and presentations of this study. I understand that there will be no information that can identify me in any quotes used. There will be no way to connect my answers back to me.

\_\_\_\_\_

(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

4. I wish to take part in the follow-up meeting. I will give the researcher my home phone number and give him permission to contact me in this way.

\_\_\_\_\_

(Participant Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Researcher Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Date)

## **APPENDIX F     Guardian Consent Form**

### **GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM**

Dalhousie University – School of Health and Human Performance

Youth Perceptions of the Benefits Received from Participating in a Structured Leisure  
Activity

June, 2010

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Contact Person:                 Matthew Maguire  
   (902) 444-3737  
   Email: [msmaguir@dal.ca](mailto:msmaguir@dal.ca)

## **Introduction**

We invite your child to take part in a research study being conducted by Matthew Maguire who is a graduate student at Dalhousie University, as a part of his Leisure Studies Master's Thesis. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary and your child may withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. The study is described below. This description tells you about the risks, inconvenience, or discomfort which your child might experience. Participating in this study might not benefit your child, but we might learn things that will benefit others. You should discuss any questions you have about this study with Matthew Maguire.

## **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to understand (a) what benefits youth feel they receive as a result of participating in a structured leisure activity; (b) how these benefits can be carried over to other settings; (c) if active youth feel the need to create awareness among inactive youth about the benefits received from participation; and (d) how the SYA program can be improved. By better understanding participant perspectives, I hope to offer suggestions for improving the program for future participants.

## **Study design**

Matthew Maguire will conduct 2 or 3 separate focus group interviews with approximately 8 to 10 SYA program participants in each group, for a total of 16 to 30 participants being interviewed. Your child will be asked to give about 60 to 90 minutes of their time, depending on how much group members wish to share. We are asking for your consent to audio-record the interview. This is done to help make sure we correctly report the focus group participants' comments. A secretary will type what is said on the tapes. S/he will sign a confidentiality contract. The tapes and typed copies of the interviews will be confidential and will only be heard/read by those directly involved in the study (Matthew Maguire, Dr. Rehman, and the secretary).

## **Who can participate?**

Individuals may participate in this study if they are an SYA participant and are:

- between the ages of 12 and 17
- have participated in at least 3 activities in the past 6 months

## **Who cannot participate?**

Individuals may not participate in this study if they are:

- not an SYA participant
- younger than 12 or older than 17



- directly related to an employee of the recreation centre

### **Who will be conducting the research?**

This study is being conducted by Matthew Maguire, a graduate student at Dalhousie University, under the supervision of Laurene Rehman, Ph.D., a faculty member at the School of Health and Human Performance, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. This study will also use the skills of a secretary who has not yet been hired.

### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you decide to allow your child participate in this study your child will be asked to meet at the [municipal recreation centre] to take part in one of the group discussions that will focus on the participant experiences with the SYA program. Group discussions will also involve other SYA participants, which will provide your child a chance to discuss the topics raised with fellow SYA members. Interviews will most likely take place on the weekend, but effort will be made to make the interview times as convenient as possible for all participants. Group discussions will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Once we have had time to study the group discussions, we will come to initial conclusions. These conclusions will involve our ideas of the benefits SYA members receive from their participation in the program. In order to make sure we have formed correct conclusions, further help will be needed. Therefore, we will hold a follow-up meeting where Matthew Maguire will present the ideas to interested focus group participants. The purpose of this meeting will be to see if group discussion participants agree or disagree with the conclusions. Only those that had participated in one of the focus groups will be invited to attend. Changes will be made to the conclusions based on participant feedback.

Your child may take part in the follow-up meeting if you both choose, but it is NOT required. The follow-up meeting will also take place at the [municipal recreation centre] at a time that is most convenient for focus group participants. The meeting will give your child a chance to comment on how we understood the focus group discussions. Your child will also have a chance to discuss the ideas raised in the discussions in more detail with other SYA participants. This follow-up meeting will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

In addition to this, once the study has been completed you and your child will be invited to a presentation of the findings. The time and place of this meeting will be decided at a later time. You will also be sent an executive summary of the study findings. Finally a

copy of the thesis manuscript will be given to the [municipal recreation centre] for interested individuals to read at their own convenience.

### **Possible risks and discomforts**

Participating in this study could raise some personal issues for your child that may cause some distress. For example, your child might experience some anxiety or embarrassment if your child is asked to discuss some of the challenges s/he has faced as a result of their involvement with the SYA program. Your child will only be asked to answer those questions that s/he are comfortable talking about. Please note, if your child reveals any information about child abuse, or risk of harm to him/herself or others, I [the principal investigator, Matthew Maguire] am required by law, to report this information and his/her identity to the appropriate authorities.

Being involved in this study will not affect your child's treatment by program staff. However, a risk of participation is that your child may experience concern about these issues.

If participation in this study raises any personal issues that your child would like to discuss with someone, you will be encouraged to talk to Matthew Maguire or the SYA Program Co-ordinator. Your child may also choose to call the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

### **Possible benefits**

While there are no direct personal benefits from participating in this study, it is possible that by talking about and reflecting upon his/her experiences in SYA will make these experiences more meaningful to your child. Your child's participation in the study may also provide information which will allow the Program Co-ordinator to make positive changes to the program.

### **Compensation/Reimbursement**

Juice and snacks will be provided during the focus group discussions. Should your child require bus fare to attend the sessions, it will be provided.

### **Confidentiality**

#### Anonymity

Data will be gathered through focus group interviews. Therefore, there will be no way to keep your child's answers anonymous from the researcher or the group. However, all participants will be reminded about the importance of keeping the focus group

discussions confidential. Any identifying information (such as your child's name or age) will not be present in any reports or papers on this study.

Any major themes that are reported in the interviews will be reported and quotes used as illustrations of those themes, but no names will be included.

### Confidentiality

All of the information your child shares will be kept confidential. All of the socio demographic forms, recordings and transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the School of Health and Human Performance at Dalhousie University until five years after post-publication of the study, at which time they will be destroyed.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me (Matthew Maguire) by phoning 444-3727, or by e-mail at [msmaguir@dal.ca](mailto:msmaguir@dal.ca). If you consent to your child participating, I will provide you with any new information that might affect your decision to consent to your child's participation.

If you would like a copy of the results of this study, please feel free to contact me at the above telephone number. A copy of the study will also be available at the Outdoor [municipal recreation centre] once the research is complete.

### **Problems or concerns**

If you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your child's participation in this study, you may contact Patricia Lindley, Director of Dalhousie University's Office of Human Research Ethics Administration, for assistance at (902) 494-1462, [patricia.lindley@dal.ca](mailto:patricia.lindley@dal.ca).

Youth Perceptions of the Benefits Received from Participating in a Structured  
Leisure Activity

Please return this form to Matthew Maguire, the principal investigator, on the day of your child's focus group. Please note participants without **both** a consent form signed by a legal guardian and an assent form signed by the participant will not be able to participate in the focus group.

1. I have read the explanation about this study. I have been given the opportunity to discuss it and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby consent to give my child the option to participate in this study. However I realize that my child's participation is voluntary and that s/he is free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participant Full Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Guardian Full Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Guardian Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

2. I understand that the researcher will audio- record the interview and I agree to have my child's responses recorded. I realize that the tapes will later be transcribed and the original tapes will be destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Guardian Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

3. I grant the researcher permission to include any of my child's quotes or responses in the future publications/presentations on this research. I understand that there will be no identifying information included in any quotes used and that there will be no way to link my child's responses back to him/her.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Guardian Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

4. I consent to give my child the option to take part in the follow-up meeting on the results of this study. I consent to give my child permission to provide the researcher with my child's home phone number and give the researcher permission to contact my child in this way.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Guardian Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Researcher Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)