Meaningfully Engaging Youth At Risk in Recreation and Leisure Contexts

by

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Abstract

The overall purpose of this dissertation research was to gain a better understanding of the meaningful engagement of youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts. To address this purpose, three studies were conducted. The first study completed explores how youth-led leisure opportunities can help young people caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, which often magnify inequities and hinder positive developmental outcomes. Through a critical review of the literature, and a reflection on the gaps identified within the examined literature, a conceptual model of mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement is presented for potential use in future research and practice. Overall, the paper suggests that simply because leisure programs for young people at risk are developed, the use of a top-down, prescriptive approach can be detrimental to them. Importantly the first study highlights the importance of youth-led/guided approaches to meaningful engagement of youth at risk and how leisure can provide an avenue for promoting meaning-making. Using a case study approach, the purpose of the second study was to explore how engaging youth at risk through a youth-led approach to recreation and leisure programming can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making. Seven women (four youth at risk [18- 22 years] and three adult recreation practitioners) participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Data were also generated via participant-observation and field notes. Elo and Kyngäs (2008) three-phase process of content analysis was used to analyze findings. Findings suggest that youth-led approaches to recreation and leisure programming can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making by: (a) supporting interests and endeavors; (b) connecting to community; (c) overcoming barriers, together; (d) co-creating safe spaces to be engaged; and (e) developing personal and collective positive outcomes. This research makes theoretical contributions to the leisure literature, and provides essential insights regarding

proactive engagement of youth at risk and meaning-making for practitioners and policy makers from a practical perspective. Finally, the purpose of the third study was to better understand the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk within the context of recreation and leisure. Data were generated via group interviews with 10 participants; one group interview included practitioners employed in youth targeted recreation contexts (three men and three women) and the second group interview included four youth at risk (two men and two women). Elo and Kyngäs's (2008) three-phase process of content analysis was used to analyze data. Findings highlight the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk through: (a) purposeful activity; (b) (re)writing stories; (c) balance and respect; (d) reflexivity; and (e) growth, transformation, and action. This research makes contributions to the recreation and leisure literature and provides essential insights regarding the proactive role relationships play in meaningfully engaging young people.

Preface

This dissertation is an original work by Tristan Hopper. Two of the studies that comprise this dissertation each received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics board (Pro00068079) and was approved on March 20, 2017.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation has been published as Hopper, T. & Iwasaki, Y. (2017). Engagement of youth at risk through meaningful leisure. *Journal of Parks and Recreation Administration, 35(1),* 20-33 (Special Issue on Youth Development). I conceptualized and designed the study and interpreted the data. Y. Iwasaki was the supervisory author and provided feedback on the study and contributed to the manuscript preparation and revisions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Chapter 3 has been submitted for publication as Hopper, T. D., Iwasaki, Y., Walker, G. J., & McHugh, T-L. F. (submitted/under review). "I feel like we finally matter": The role of youth-led approaches in enhancing leisure-induced meaning-making among youth at risk. I conceptualized and designed the study, generated, analyzed, and interpreted the data. I composed the first draft of the manuscript. Y. Iwasaki and T-L. F. McHugh were the supervisory authors and provided feedback on the study concept and design, interpretation of data and contributed to the manuscript preparation and revisions. G. J. Walker provided feedback on the study concept and design, including the contribution to the manuscript preparation and revisions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Chapter 4 of this dissertation has been submitted for publication as Hopper, T. D., Iwasaki, Y., Walker, G. J., & McHugh, T-L. F. (submitted/under review). "My mentors saved my life": The role of relationships in meaningfully engage youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts. I conceptualized and designed the study, generated, analyzed, and interpreted the data.

I composed the first draft of the manuscript. Y. Iwasaki and T-L. F. McHugh were the supervisory authors and provided feedback on the study concept and design, interpretation of data and contributed to the manuscript preparation and revisions. G. J. Walker provided feedback on the study concept and design, including the contribution to the manuscript preparation and revisions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of my Mom

M. Theresa Hopper (1958 – 2015)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

There is little understanding of how to effectively and actively engage youth at risk who are faced with poverty, homelessness/street-involved, or are experiencing abusive/addictive behaviors. As a result of these social issues, many of these young people experience discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion, which is a wide-spread community issue (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). There is a need for research examining engagement for youth faced with marginalization. Importantly, providing support for these young people is a significant challenge due to their distrust and lack of engagement in key decisions that directly influence their lives (Chou et al., 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2014). The youth engagement literature supports the role of using youth-led/centered approaches and the active engagement of youth to address these challenges (Chou et al., 2015; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). However, the study of meaningfully engaging youth at risk is an understudied area of investigation in the recreation and leisure scholarship (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017). The literature on marginalized young people suggests that they are often excluded from mainstream recreation. Further, it is notoriously hard to actively engage youth at risk in recreation, leisure, and sport settings (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017; McClelland & Giles, 2014).

Engaging youth at risk through utilizing a youth-led approach to recreation and leisure programming can lead to more meaningful experiences (Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014). Further to this, the literature points to how we, as research-practitioners, can better support young people caught in the dynamic of exclusion and marginalization to understand and mobilize their strengths and the meaning-making functions in leisure (Cammarota, 2011; McClelland & Giles, 2014). This dissertation is focused on the use of youth-led/centered meaningful engagement through leisure, as research suggests that such engagement

can promote positive relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and empowerment (Iwasaki et al., 2014; Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017). In turn, positive interpersonal relationships may provide an opportunity to support meaningful leisure within a safe, open, and non-judgmental space to co-learn (Cammarota, 2011).

Policy acts as a key guiding force for much of what occurs in recreation and leisure practice (Veal, 2017). For the duration of most of the 20th century, recreation and leisure was considered and valued as a "public good" (A Framework for Recreation in Canada, 2015). However, in the earliest part of the 1990's recreation departments were under increasing mandates to generate revenue and recover costs associated with offering services and moved away from advocating for marginalized people towards individuals who could pay (Veal, 2017). This dissertation research is motivated by what I see as fragmented social services and recreation and leisure practice as they relate to youth at risk. The social services and policy is fragmented as result of strong agency mandates that are primarily practitioner-led for these young people (McClelland & Giles, 2014). As a result, this creates difficulty in navigating and accessing services for youth (Iwasaki et al., 2014). Individually, many of these programs have reached some level of outcome, however, despite their best intention they do not actively engage the young people through youth-led/centered approaches. Through actively engaging young people through youth-led approaches to research and programming, the programs can strengthen the empirical and formal connections between youth at risk and youth-serving agencies.

Research has demonstrated that planning and facilitating programs targeted towards young people is challenging (McClelland & Giles, 2014). Within Canada, the National Framework for Recreation Canada (i.e., Pathways to Wellbeing, 2015) acts as the guiding document for publicly supported recreation. The framework has five goals that can act as

reflection points for practitioners as they begin facilitating programs with young people at risk. These five goals actively draw on the importance of meaning-centered policymaking as it relates to leisure programming (Steger, 2014). Specific to this dissertation are two goals. First, the goal of 'Inclusion and Access' outlines the need to "increase inclusion and access to recreation for populations that face constraints to participation" (A Framework for Recreation in Canada, 2015, p. 22). Specifically, this goal has priorities to make recreation spaces more safe and inclusionary (for ALL people). What the framework fails to do is to address *how* practitioners, policy makers, and educators should go about addressing the priorities. As the National framework on recreation outlines, access to and inclusion in recreation is a complex societal issue. Thus, further investigation is required on the priorities outlined in the framework through enacting a youth-driven approach aimed at addressing constraints to participation faced by youth and children. This bottom-up approach to addressing policy and planning would ensure the priorities are addressed in a meaningful and engaging way, ultimately building skills that would be easily transferable to other life domains (i.e., leadership and organization). This dissertation research, which is broadly focused on youth-led approaches, does not assume any program is offered *for* them, but rather is planned, implemented, facilitated, and evaluated *with* the people who are targeted to serve.

Second, within the goal of 'Creating Safe Environments'*,* the framework addresses the importance of creating both physical and social environments that foster safe and supporting places for people to engage in recreation (A Framework for Recreation in Canada, 2015). Particularly, when working with youth at risk, creating an environment that is safe and welcoming of individuals to be themselves is of utmost importance (Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007). In many cases, these young people have experienced marginalization and stigma associated with

their "status" that most public spaces (including that of recreation and leisure spaces) are not set up to support them in their endeavors (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). Further, the goal of Creating Safe Environments does not indicate the importance of also creating environments (physical, social, and emotional) where individuals feel supported and safe to be autonomous in their leisure pursuits. As it relates to youth at risk, creating safe spaces for youth to be engaged weighs heavily on adult-youth relationships and power relations. Recreation practitioners need to be attentive to the power-imbalances that exist between them as both adults and professionals. Creating safe spaces to engage in leisure has shown benefits in allowing marginalized peoples to feel connected to the community and a sense of normalcy in their leisure pursuits. According to Caldwell and Smith (2006), "with proper adult guidance and supervision, and with the opportunity for sustained engagement in high-yield activities, positive experiences are more likely to accrue" (p. 404). However, there is a need for research on the active engagement of youth in these key decisions. This dissertation research addresses these gaps in the research and policy by investigating what is required in order to create safe environments, and how recreation practitioners can provide opportunity to power-share and co-learn in their programming. This could include fostering a strengths-based approach where each youth comes with knowledge and experiences that should be shared. Learning alongside the young people, and being attentive to the youths' voice, as the programming is planned and facilitated is an example of power-sharing that can be initiated.

The use of deficit-based, structured leisure programming is not uncommon when attempting to engage youth. Yet, traditional leisure spaces that do not adequately acknowledge the youth's lived experiences and voices have been avenues to reinforce oppression and stigma (Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007). The national recreation framework outlines how 'Creating Safe

Environments' needs to be a coordination of services by key stakeholders (i.e., schools, social service groups, the arts community, community organizations and private sector). Each level of service needs to have policy and planning that is transparent and streamlined so that marginalized individuals feel safe and supported at each level of service. In order to address social issues that youth at risk are faced with, research is needed on how young people faced with significant life challenges find meaning through their recreation and leisure participation. This shift in focus better understands a more holistic approach to their core values, which makes key contributions to National policy and practice. The framework highlights in depth how recreation builds strong families and community, and how recreation enhances social wellbeing. More importantly, the framework highlights how communities make use of their increase sense of community to better their environment, all of which imply the centrality of meaning-making to make people's lives more enriching and meaningful from a holistic perspective.

There has been some discussion on youth's active role in the development, planning, and implementation of a leisure/recreation activity or program (e.g., Ellis & Caldwell, 2005). For example, Zeldin, Camino and Calvert (2007) concluded that if youth above the age of fifteen are given the opportunity to be engaged in governance decisions, they can be active contributors to policy decisions. However, because of frequent isolation from important decisions and engagement with adults in these settings, the youth historically have not been given meaningful chances/opportunities to be active community contributors (Zeldin et al., 2007). Given that youth voice is noticeably absent in key decisions, this dissertation research builds on previous literature (Zeldin et al., 2007) by providing space for the youth to have their voice heard and to be contributors to research that has implications for programming and policy.

Researchers have suggested that the use of a top-down, prescriptive approach can be detrimental to young people (Iwasaki et al., 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014). Rather than adults always leading engagement activities, it would be more desirable to share with and be guided by youth concerning the leadership and mentoring of engagement activities including both leisure and non-leisure pursuits in youth's lives (Zeldin et al., 2007). Because of leisure's unique characteristic of being much more intrinsically chosen and defined than other life domains (Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011), leisure is a very important tool in a bottom-up, youth-led/guided approach to meaningful engagement of "at-risk/high-risk" youth (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017). Through sharing experiences with youth and learning alongside of them, leisure can provide an avenue for youth to connect positively with their peers and communities, and to promote constructive meaning-making in their lives (Iwasaki, Messina, & Hopper, 2018). These insights have important implications for reframing leisure programs within social services and improving leisure policy and practice to make these more youth-oriented. Through enacting these youth-oriented changes, it may be possible to better support and inspire youth's passions for the pursuit of meaningful, fulfilling lives. While much is known about youth engagement, there is a noticeable need to address *how* youth-led leisure pursuits can contribute to meaning-making among youth at risk.

The role of leisure in meaning-making is a key conceptual focus throughout this dissertation, including its role in youth's identity formation; connectedness with others, nature, and world; stress-coping and healing; and empowerment (Iwasaki et al., 2018). This dissertation research also gives attention to what youth do with leisure, rather than what it does to them, in efforts to promote constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure. The former concept (i.e., what youth do with leisure) is more youth-driven than the latter concept (i.e., what

leisure does to youth), which is more prescriptive in nature. Also, positive interpersonal relationships between adults and youth are proposed to support meaningful leisure within a safe, open, and non-judgmental space to co-learn. It is important to respectfully and proactively engage youth by listening to what the youth's lived experiences are, and by emphasizing what role youth's voices play both in sharing these experiences with peer youth and adults, and in mobilizing youth into actions for changes. The narratives will highlight youths' and recreation practitioners' detailed insights that have implications for reframing leisure programs within social services and improving leisure policies, practices, and theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, given the relative infancy of investigating meaning-making functions with youth at risk in leisure contexts, there is a need to further examine the role of youth-lead approaches to programming and how this leads to more engaged and fulfilling lives for these young people.

Purpose and overview of studies

The active engagement of youth at risk is an important consideration for researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. To advance the literature, the connection between youth engagement and recreation and leisure is an important consideration (Iwasaki et al., 2014). The overall goal of this research was to gain a better understanding of the meaningful engagement of youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts. Three studies focusing on different facets of youth-led/centered approaches to recreation and leisure programming were conducted.

Study 1. The first study within this dissertation entitled "Engagement of youth at risk through meaningful leisure" addresses how leisure programs can be framed/reframed so that they are meaningful to youth at risk. The purpose of the study was to explore how youth-led leisure opportunities can help young people caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, which often magnify inequities and hinder positive developmental outcomes. Through both a

critical review of the literature and a reflection on the gaps identified within the examined literature, a conceptual model of mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement is presented for potential use in future research and practice. This study served as the impetus for the dissertation by providing a strong foundation of the common features of youth engagement in recreation and literature.

Study 2. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the purpose of the second study within this dissertation was to explore how engaging youth at risk through a youth-led approach to recreation and leisure programming can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making. Partnering with 'Challenge by Choice', a recreation program that aims at serving inner-city youth at risk in Edmonton, AB., the study involved qualitative case study methods, which included in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Study 3. Finally, the purpose of the third study within this dissertation was to better understand the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk within the context of recreation and leisure. Data was generated in this study using group interviews. One group interview included practitioners whose current work aims at serving youth at risk, and the second group interview included youth leaders who are currently involved in or have been involved in YOIUTH4YEG, a youth-led/guided research project that I have been involved in for over two years.

Overview of dissertation

This dissertation is presented in five chapters. Beginning with this introduction (Chapter 1), the three studies that comprise this dissertation are presented in manuscript styling. Study one (Chapter 2) is a conceptual manuscript, which examined the relevant literature on the topics of youth at risk and the role of meaningful engagement of youth in the recreation and leisure and

explored how youth-led leisure opportunities can help young people caught in the dynamics of

exclusion and marginalization, which often magnify inequities and hinder positive

developmental outcomes. This study has been published in the *Journal of Parks and Recreation*

Administration. Study two (Chapter 3) examined how a specific program (Challenge by Choice)

supported engaging youth at risk through a youth-led approach to recreation programming can

contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making and has been submitted for publication in *Leisure*

Sciences. Study three (Chapter 4) aimed to better understand the role of relationships in

meaningfully engaging youth at risk within the context of recreation and leisure and has been

submitted for publication in the *Journal of Leisure Research*. Finally, a general discussion

(Chapter 5) summarizes the overall findings, highlights strengths and limitations of this

dissertation, including future research directions, and practical implications for youth-

led/centered approaches to recreation and leisure.

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CHAPTER 2

Study 1

Engagement of 'At-Risk' Youth through Meaningful Leisure

A version of this chapter has been published. Hopper, T. D., Iwasaki, I. (2017). Engagement of

'at-risk' youth through meaningful leisure. *Journal of Parks and Recreation Administration*

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Abstract

Many young people today experience marginalization and exclusion. In particular, youth living with challenging conditions such as poverty, homelessness, abusive/addictive behaviors, and mental health issues, often have limited access to opportunities and resources. This paper focuses on the role of leisure as a meaningful way of youth engagement. Specifically, the paper explores how youth-led leisure opportunities can help young people caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, which often magnify inequities and hinder positive developmental outcomes. Through both a critical review of the literature and a reflection on the gaps identified within the examined literature, a conceptual model of mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement is presented for potential use in future research and practice. Described as circular relationships in the model, youth-led meaningful engagement through leisure is proposed to promote positive relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and empowerment. In turn, positive interpersonal relationships are proposed to support meaningful leisure within a safe, open, and non-judgmental space to co-learn. Furthermore, meaningful leisure is proposed to provide an avenue to reinforce positive relationships and learn/discover about self, others, and the world. Importantly, *what youth do with leisure*, rather than *what leisure does to youth*, should be emphasized to promote constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure. The former concept (i.e., what youth do with leisure) is more youth-driven than the latter concept (i.e., what leisure does to youth), which is more prescriptive in nature. Overall, this paper suggests that simply because we develop leisure programs for "at-risk/high-risk" young people, the use of a top-down, prescriptive approach can be detrimental to them. Rather than adults always leading engagement activities, it would be more desirable to share with and be guided by youth concerning the leadership and mentoring of engagement

activities including both leisure and non-leisure pursuits in youth's lives. Because of leisure's unique characteristic of being intrinsically chosen and defined, leisure is a very important tool in a bottom-up, youth-led/guided approach to meaningful engagement of "at-risk/high-risk" youth. Through sharing experiences with youth and learning alongside of them, leisure can provide an avenue for youth to connect positively with their peers and communities, and to promote constructive meaning-making in their lives. These insights have important implications for reframing leisure programs within social services, and improving leisure policy and practice to make these more youth-oriented. Through enacting these youth-oriented changes, programs can better support and inspire youth's passions for the pursuit of meaningful, fulfilling lives.

Introduction

"We hope for a safer, more positive existence for these young people, but wonder where

are the spaces to explore this more positive world on *their* terms, not the practices of

dominant society?" – Brett Lashua and Karen Fox (2006, p. 28

Young people today face a myriad of challenges such as changes in family support

structures, combined with unsettled social norms and marginalization by service providers and

policy makers (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). Youth having

difficulty to cope with the stressors of finding their way in the world experienced through this

marginalization often face low motivation, a lack of confidence, and poor self-esteem (Abela &

Hankin, 2008; Barrett & Bond, 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2014). Such feelings of alienation often

result in behaviors deemed "at-risk" or "high-risk" by society, including poor school

performance, sexual promiscuity, and substance abuse (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Kelly Pryor &

Outley, 2014). The terms "at-risk" or "high-risk" youth have many definitions; however, within

the context of this article, these terms refer to youth who are often socially excluded from

accessing opportunities and resources, and who are at high risk and vulnerable to poverty,

homelessness, abusive/addictive behaviors, mental health challenges, discrimination, stigma,

and/or compromised developmental outcomes (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Cammarota,

2011; Iwasaki et al., 2014).

Not only are "at-risk/high-risk" youth socially marginalized, but they often have limited

connections to community support (Cammarota, 2011; Barrett & Bond, 2015). Furthermore,

they are often not well engaged in meaningful relationships that provide support and

encouragement for what is often a difficult period of development (Iwasaki et al., 2014;

McClelland & Giles, 2014). Programs for "at-risk/high-risk" youth have traditionally been

operated by agency-based mandates and limited meaningful youth engagement at various service levels results in a disconnected service-delivery model that is difficult for them to navigate (Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007).   It can be argued that all youth can be considered at risk and that youth across the entire community are in need of services (Witt & Caldwell, 2010). Although we appreciate this inclusive insight, the focus of this paper is on better supporting often marginalized and more disadvantaged/high-risk youth because they are the ones who need greater attention in our community practice.

The purpose of this study is to explore how youth-led leisure opportunities can help young people caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, which often magnify inequities and hinder positive developmental outcomes. Through both a critical review of the literature and a reflection on the gaps found within the examined literature, a conceptual model of mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement is presented for potential use in future research and practice. The article strives to contribute to the youth at risk and leisure literature by offering new insights and critically conceptualizing the notions of youth engagement and leisure and its relationships.

Research has shown that leisure can be an effective tool to facilitate meaning-making from a strengths-based perspective, and reduce disaffiliation, marginalization, and other negative outcomes of being labeled as "at-risk" or "high-risk" youth (Cammarota, 2001; Kelly, Pryor & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007; Klitzing, 2004). Importantly, a youth-led approach can be highly beneficial for youth as recognized by research that incorporates youth-led initiatives through meaningfully engaging and mobilizing the youth themselves (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Cammarota, 2011; Iwasaki, 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2014). Increasingly, research has shown

that leisure can provide a meaningful space for this youth-led engagement process (Ersing, 2009;

Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2012).

Challenges with youth engagement and leisure

First, the discussion on youth at risk stretches across several scholarly disciplines.

According to Kelly (2001), these discourses are grounded in the notion that youth are

"supposed" to transition from a "normal" teenhood to a "normal" adulthood on a seamless

continuum. Quite obviously, this theory is problematic when we consider diverse cultural

orientations and lived experiences of youth at risk. Societal views of young people who do not

develop across the "normal" youth to adult continuum tend to automatically place these

individuals in the "at-risk" or "high-risk" category. As a result, there is a growing concern that

these youths need to be fixed and treated for their deficits. As a purposeful way to address this

concern from a more strengths-based perspective, it is important to first acknowledge and

address the notion of youth engagement. According to the Centre of Excellence for Children's

Well-being (2016), youth engagement can be defined as:

> The meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity,
>
> with a focus outside of him or herself. The kind of activity in which the youth is engaged
>
> can be almost anything — sports, the arts, music, volunteer work, politics, social activism
>
> — and it can occur in almost any kind of setting (p. 2).

Engaging youth can be either meaningful or meaningless, effective or ineffective,

positive or negative, and constructive or destructive, depending on how or in what ways youth

are engaged in an activity (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Cammarota, 2011). Indeed, leisure

can provide such engagement opportunities (e.g., again, either positive or negative) in a number

of different ways in various contexts (e.g., personal, social, spiritual, cultural; Barrett & Bond,

2015; Kelly, Pryor & Outley, 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014). Rather than just seeing youth's participation in a myriad of leisure activities from a behavioral perspective per se, it is important to consider the ways in which these leisure activities can be *meaningful*. These meanings can be personal (e.g., self-identity), spiritual (e.g., harmony, balance), social (e.g., connectedness), and/or cultural (e.g., youth culture) in nature, while leisure can provide opportunities for meaning-making in order to meet a personal need to maintain a purposeful, enriched, and fulfilling life (Armstrong & Manion, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Hegarty & Plucker, 2012; Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Iwasaki et al., 2015; Newman, Tay, & Diener, 2014). Consequently, the notion of youth engagement through leisure should acknowledge the diversity/multiplicity in the ways in which youth are engaged in leisure.

In this study we are most interested in conceptualizing the role of *meaningful* leisure in the process of youth engagement. Meaningful leisure can be defined as enriching forms of leisure engagement experienced in a number of different ways personally, socially, spiritually, and/or culturally — for example, through promoting: (a) personal and social identity, (b) creativity (e.g., self-expression through creative leisure), (c) connectedness (e.g., connections with people, religion, nature, and culture), (d) harmony and balance, (e) stress-coping and healing, and (f) growth and transformation (e.g., resilience, empowerment) (Heintzman, 2008; Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Iwasaki, 2008, 2016; Iwasaki, Coyle, Shank, Messina, & Porter, 2013; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002; Trussell & Shaw, 2009).

As noted earlier, the disconnect typical in existing service-delivery models often results in an increased experience of exclusion and marginalization and in poor developmental outcomes for youth who live with at-risk/high-risk conditions (Iwasaki et al., 2014; Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). For example, Theriault's (2014) study of lesbian, bi-sexual, gay,

transgendered and queer (LBTGQ) youth reported reinforced oppression and power-imbalance experienced by those youths in leisure programming that did not meaningfully engage youth. The lack of or limited youth engagement in both the planning and implementation of programming, along with limited opportunities for meaningful youth engagement, continues to silence the youth, leading to further social isolation and exclusion, and compromised developmental outcomes (Armstrong & Manion, 2013; Theriault, 2014). Indeed, the literature points to significant gaps regarding limited efforts devoted to the use of a youth-guided, bottom-up approach to meaningful engagement for "at-risk/high-risk" youth (Cammarota, 2011; Iwasaki, 2015).

The importance of youth engagement was accurately addressed by Gyamfi, Keens-Douglas, and Medin's (2007) research on youth involvement in systems of care. They found that communities do not consistently involve their youth community members in planning, delivery, and evaluation of community services. Within this given context of community-based mental health care, the youths' involvement ranged from adult-initiated, youth-guided, or youth-directed (Gyamfi et al., 2007). At the greatest level of engagement, the youth were heavily involved in decision making and goal setting for programming where adults foster and empower the youth using a strength-based approach. Zeldin, Camino and Calvert (2007) concluded that if youth above the age of fifteen are given the opportunity to be engaged in governance decisions, they can be active contributors to policy decisions. However, because of frequent isolation from important decisions and engagement with adults in these settings, the youth historically have not been given meaningful chances/opportunities to be active community contributors (Zeldin et al., 2007). Further, within the context of community governance, Zeldin and colleagues discussed the use of a positive youth development model as a tool for meaningfully engaging youth in

governance decisions. The results point to the importance of engaging youth in key decisions that contribute to building their communities, and of helping them feel more connected and valued.

Moreover, the idea of *youth-led* leisure engagement as a way to promote meaningful leisure experiences and related benefits among youth (especially for "high-risk/at-risk" youth) is missing even in Caldwell's (2016) recent chapter on youth and leisure. It is important to reiterate that we are concerned with the power and authority of decision-making and accountability in creating a program or doing research — if a professional or researcher ultimately decides what to do, this is called "top-down," whereas if youths are the ones who contribute to such decision-making and eventually own such decision and its consequences, that is called "bottom-up" (Sampson, 2014). In reality, however, we cannot ignore the complexity in top-down versus bottom-up approaches because youth-adult relationships should be considered, for example, through adults' involvement in supporting and empowering youth. More about such complexity in youth-adult relationships and different levels of engagement by youth and adults is described later in this literature review section.

'Top-down' leisure literature – where does it fit in?

Historically, the leisure literature that has addressed "at-risk" young people has tended to focus on dealing with problems/deficits such as delinquency and deviant behaviors, for example, through after-school truancy programs (Theriault, 2014). The use of deficit-based, structured leisure programming is not uncommon when attempting to engage youth at risk. Yet, traditional leisure spaces that do not adequately acknowledge the youth's lived experiences and voices have been avenues to reinforce oppression and stigma (Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Theriault, 2014).

According to Caldwell and Smith (2006), "with proper adult guidance and supervision, and with the opportunity for sustained engagement in high-yield activities, positive experiences are more likely to accrue" (p. 404). On the other hand, there has been some discussion on youth's active role in the development, planning, and implementation of a leisure/recreation activity or program (e.g., Ellis & Caldwell, 2005). Related to these roles of youth and adults, another issue concerns structured versus unstructured settings or contexts. Specifically, the question arises then, although leisure choices may be unstructured, if it is youth-led and provides meaningfulness, is it still detrimental to their community involvement and youth development? According to Larson (2000), unstructured leisure activities do not seem to adequately provide an opportunity for "at-risk" young people to exercise concentration, face challenge, and exert effort over time — these are arguably not the key components of leisure engagement. Consequently, the literature points to prescriptive top-down leisure intervention efforts as an important contributor to helping at-risk youth, although these efforts no longer always see youth as problems to be fixed from a deficit-based perspective (Caldwell et al., 2012; Green, Kleiber, & Tarrant, 2000; Morgan, Sibthorp, & Wells, 2014; Skalko, Williams, & Cooper, 2008).

Public recreation departments are also quick to point to the positive impacts of their programs for youth at risk (Green et al., 2000). Many still view these programs as simply "Band-Aid" approaches that are superficial and diversionary in nature (Caldwell, 2008; Green et al., 2000; McClelland & Giles, 2014). If the top-down, leisure programs are viewed as a "Band-Aid" approach to solving the youth's marginalization, the importance of collaboration and power-sharing with the youth and providing them with an opportunity to engage in the planning and implementation of the programs is evident. As reported by Caldwell and Smith (2006), the *Time Wise* program was first developed for combating substance abuse issues in youth — using a

top-down, prescriptive approach, the program taught the youth skills about using their leisure time in a constructive, positive way. The authors reflected on their findings, highlighting what appeared to be a shift in paradigm from their initial objectives of the program, including high levels of interest and low levels of boredom that resulted in increased property damage among the youth. It is entirely possible that the youth who engaged in property damage were experiencing leisure as supported by some scholars who point to 'deviant' or 'purple' leisure including property damage as a sensation-seeking activity or new adventure (Galloway, 2006; Rojek, 1999). This discussion, however, raises the question about what deviance, crime, and delinquency are, and who in fact defines these terms. This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but in Caldwell and Smith's (2006) study, the terms delinquency and deviance were defined by the researchers. Yet, through their reflection they realized that perhaps these activities, according to the youth, were not at all deviant or a form of delinquency. This reflection by Caldwell and Smith highlights the importance of allowing youth at risk to both define the terms being used from their perspectives, as well as to meaningfully engage them in the planning and implementation of leisure programming.

Although young people do indeed face challenges, such as educational failure and drug abuse, they are neither inherent to their existence, nor unproblematically and internally adopted from their environments (Cammarota, 2011). It is too simple to state that young people have problems because they come from a "bad" neighborhood, where as in many cases, systematic inequities and structures have resulted in failed attempts at service delivery for youth at risk (Mutere et al., 2014). Because of the youth's social context, learning behaviours that are maladaptive in nature are possible. These harmful behaviours are often learned from family and peer culture, but are socially constructed (Cammarota, 2011). Indeed, many of these problems

spawn from negative or unhealthy social, economic, and political conditions that shape the context in which they live (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). Cammarota (2011) discussed that although young people do have the strength and ability to possibly overcome these challenges, it is unfair to assume that possibilities are automatically apart of who the youth are. Youth at risk can acquire unique leisure skills, such as artistic creativity, but these possibilities must be harnessed and enacted by providing them with a positive, constructive space to be nurtured (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Cammarota, 2011). However, when we strictly focus on deficits of the youth using a prescriptive top-down approach, we are not providing the youth with the opportunity to nurture, harness, and work with their inner talents and strengths (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014).

Role of leisure as a meaningful way of youth engagement

Increasingly, the importance of positive and meaningful youth engagement is emphasized in the literature that addresses a bottom-up approach to leisure programming for youth (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010). For example, McClelland and Giles (2014) conducted semi-structured interviews with youth who identified themselves as living on the streets to learn about those street-involved youths' social lives and behaviors. Although McClelland and Giles did not facilitate or develop a leisure program using youth engagement, their findings point to the importance of listening to youth voices and sharing their experiences to empower them. These findings challenged two of the dominant discourses around street-involved youth — (a) street-involved youth are socially isolated, largely in part to participation in substance abuse and (b) the street-involved youth are disaffiliated with the mainstream society. Specifically, through listening to the youth and

allowing them to share their stories and experiences, the results emphasized the use of *unstructured* leisure activities as a method to create close bonds among those involved in these activities (McClelland & Giles, 2014). Those unstructured leisure activities ranged from casual pick-up sports games in city parks and artistic forms of leisure, to going for coffee, playing billiards, watching movies, playing chess and card games, dating, reading, listening to music, and being active in social activist groups. McClelland and Giles summarized,

> The results complicate our understanding of leisure as an avenue to connect street-involved individuals to the mainstream community, as well as how forms of leisure may unite street-involved individuals with one another. Regardless of the type of unstructured leisure in which the youth engaged, these activities were used by the youth to seek out and form crucial connections with others in order to survive very trying life circumstances. (p. 135)

Accordingly, through meaningful leisure engagement, it would be possible to assist youth at risk to connect with the mainstream society, as well as with a community outside the mainstream society (e.g., youth subculture). Through offering spaces where youth can spend self-directed leisure time and socialize in a safe and welcoming milieu is an avenue through which this meaningful engagement can occur. Also, through encouraging youth at risk to join social activist groups that align with their beliefs and values (as reported in McClelland & Giles, 2014) can be seen as a leisure-related tool to engage the youth in a cause that is meaningful to them.

In addition, research has shown the use of cultural arts and social media as an effective tool for meaningful youth-led engagement (Ersing, 2009; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; Mutere et al., 2014). In particular, the use of peer to peer mentorship to facilitate

these leisure activities has been found to be beneficial for youth at risk as demonstrated by a quote from a street-involved youth in Mutere et al.'s (2014) study:

> I like to write raps. I like to draw. I'm really talented at it. Marijuana doesn't stop me from that. Those are things that I know I have a gift in. It's like everyone else… electronics, computers, whatever the case may be… A mentor can help them get past that problem and help them go somewhere in life… 'Cause that's what most people feel like they don't have… no life-meaning. You can't just directly say "no." You have to explain to them and encourage them to do better now (p. 282).

Helping "at-risk" young people become engaged with a meaningful, constructive activity in their community is an important component to youth development by providing them with safe, accessible, and enjoyable outlets to practice and demonstrate their skills and talents (McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014). Besides cultural arts and social media, Iwasaki et al. (2014) indicated the use of a talent show or art exhibit as a youth-engagement tool to get youth involved in their communities and to build meaningful relationships. With the use of youth-led engagement through leisure, youth can be empowered by involving them in decision making and navigating their own journey (i.e., bottom-up approach), for example, through promoting meaningful civic engagement and community connection (Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010).

In order to provide a constructive meaningful engagement, however, it is not entirely impossible to provide a hybrid approach to youth engagement, by combining both a bottom-up approach and a top-down approach to youth engagement, considering potential benefits of using this hybrid approach. Some research evidence alludes to the importance of an adult's role in facilitating meaningful dialogues or activities in a safe and secure space to share and be open to

the youth stories and interests being appreciated and mobilized (Caldwell & Smith, 2006; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Morgan et al., 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010). Those caring adults can be seen as youth allies, as long as mutual respect, co-learning, and meaningful engagement are involved.

More than 15 years ago, Shier (2001) discussed the use of Hart's (1992) 'ladder of participation' and offered an alternative model of participation where there are five levels of participation within the concept of youth engagement: (1) Children are listened to, (2) Children are supported in expressing their views, (3) Children's views are taken into account, (4) Children are involved in decision-making processes, and (5) Children share power and responsibility for decision-making. According to Shier, at each level of youth participation/engagement, organizations may have varying opportunities of commitment. Specifically, Shier noted three stages of commitment within this model: (a) openings, (b) opportunities, and (c) obligations that allow organizations to fit-in at each of the five levels of participation. However, what Shier's model does not discuss is how power and decision making between adults and youth may shift across a continuum, as pointed out by Kirby and Gibbs (2006). That is, at each level of planning and decision-making, there are some roles that adults may play, even in youth-led initiatives. In particular, Kirby and Gibbs discussed the importance of describing how the youth participants make the decisions and take actions, while considering the roles of adults. Specifically, Kirby and Gibbs described that Shier's model of participation misses the importance of adult fluidity throughout the process of supporting the youth at different times in a proactive manner to address their unique needs. For example, Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects that involve youth-led initiatives may require an ethics approval through a housing institution. The completion and submission of such tasks and decision making can be led by the facilitating adult,

while appreciating youth's insights. Consequently, considering potential benefits of using a flexible hybrid approach is necessary rather than strictly dichotomizing between top-down (adult-led) and bottom-up (youth-led) approaches.

Exemplary leisure program that addresses youth-led engagement

To further demonstrate a more detailed example of a bottom-up approach to youth engagement through a leisure pursuit and programming, the following is a highlight of a particular program based on urban First Nations youth's experiences with rap music and Hip-Hop culture.

As described by Travis (2013), rap music was born of an environment that is historically both oppressive and innovative. A key goal of the new paradigm of rap music and Hip-Hop culture includes facilitating empowerment for both individuals and communities (Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; Travis, 2013). This paradigm shift includes a transition from a focus on the "me" to an emphasis on the collective "we" (Travis, 2013). Reported in their 2006 and 2007 papers, Lashua and Fox engaged urban First Nations youth in the "Beat of Boyle Street," a music remix program designed and developed by young people through listening to and building on their stories and lived experiences. Put quite elegantly by Lashua and Fox (2007), "too often researchers have ignored the lived experiences of young people, focusing on what popular culture does to young people rather than what young people make and do with it" (p. 145).

Through youth-led creation of rap lyrics that often discuss young people's experiences with violence, substance abuse, poverty, and other youth's life issues, Lashua and Fox (2007) were able to provide an avenue for the youth to express their inner creativity. This research and leisure program engaged young people in ways that were celebratory and validating. This particular youth-engagement leisure program is of importance because it originated from the

interest and involvement of the "at-risk" young people in a popular cultural pursuit, and worked on their strengths, skills, and talents contextualized within their everyday lives (Lashua & Fox, 2007). The Beat of Boyle Street provided the researchers (and also practitioners) with an opportunity to learn and be engaged with young people about leisure, popular culture, and youth identity and empowerment. Within this type of youth-led leisure programming, researchers and practitioners respectfully incorporate youth views/voices, talents (e.g., creativity), and lived experiences by appreciating personal (e.g., identities), social (e.g., connectedness), and cultural (e.g., ethnic) meanings attached to these insights and experiences.

Conceptual mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement

The above review of the literature sets a stage to present a conceptual model shown in Figure 2.1 (see page 38) that visually illustrates proposed mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement. Specifically, these proposed mechanisms are supported by the reviewed literature that addresses youth-led engagement and leisure pursuits and programming, and describe the potential benefits of using a youth-led, bottom-up approach to engaging youth at risk through meaningful leisure. Overall, the cyclical nature of the model shows the reciprocal relationships between both the components of and benefits from youth-led engagement and leisure. The ability of youth-led engagement through leisure to provide opportunities to build positive relationships among youth and adults and co-learn from each other is at the forefront of the conceptual model.

Components of model

Specifically, three key concepts in the model include: (a) leisure, (b) youth-led engagement, and (c) relationship-building and co-learning. Each of these concepts is described as follows, in line with an illustration of the proposed model (Figure 2.1). First, leisure (labelled

1.0 in Figure) can be either personal or shared experience to reflect personal or collective

interest, which can take place in a structured (e.g., program) or unstructured (e.g., spontaneous)

setting. A key feature of leisure for youth at risk proposed in this model includes the use of a

youth-driven approach to meaning-making, which refers to the process by which a person gains

meanings from an activity. It has been documented that meanings or a meaning system represent

a broader, more holistic concept to one's core values and inspiration for life than personal

behaviours and experiences per se (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Frankl, 1985; Hicks & Routledge,

2013). Accordingly, meaning-focused leisure practice can help practitioners conceptualize

leisure more than just from an activity/behavioral or experience-based perspective. Rather, this

approach enables practitioners to focus on the meanings that leisure activities can promote,

which are appealing and important to their clients (Iwasaki, 2016).

Secondly, as another component of the proposed model, youth-led engagement (labelled

2.0 in Figure) provides youth with opportunities to promote meaning-making in life and

experience a positive, constructive involvement from a strengths-based perspective. Youth-led

engagement allows the youth to work alongside other youth/peers and adults towards an end goal

(e.g., positive youth development) in a more youth-guided way, as opposed to a top-down

manner (e.g., being told what to do in a prescriptive way). This youth-guided way may welcome

adults' roles in co-facilitating meaningful dialogues or activities in a safe and secure space as

youth allies, as long as mutual respect, co-learning, and meaningful engagement are involved, as

noted earlier.

Through this youth-oriented interaction with their peers and adults, in a manner often

unfamiliar to them, the youth are witnessed to an environment that fosters reciprocity and power

sharing where their stories can be heard and acknowledged respectfully. The ability for youth to

lead their own engagement allows the opportunity for them to build their skills in communication, team-work, and leadership (i.e., capacity-building). All of these skills cherished in a leisure domain are indeed transferable to other facets of their lives and communities (e.g., school, work, and family; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Iwasaki, 2015; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010).

In Figure 2.1, another key component, namely, relationship building and co-learning (labelled 3.0 in Figure), are direct descendants of both the leisure and the youth-led engagement components as described above. In turn, positive relationships and co-learning are assumed to lead to meaningful engagement with leisure pursuits. This relationship-building and co-learning process involves both youth and adults, which can be formed as adult-youth, youth-youth, or adult-adult relationships. While recognizing power issues that involve both youth and adults, the basic premise of this model includes mutual respect, power-sharing, and empowerment in a non-hierarchical way. Rather than adults always leading engagement activities, it would be more desirable to share with and be guided by youth concerning the leadership and mentoring of engagement activities including both leisure and non-leisure pursuits in youth's lives.

Nonetheless, caring adult supervision to foster supportive and safe relationships can lead to the development of an environment where youth are capable to have positive, constructive experiences and promote meaning-making through their leisure pursuits. Adult guidance and support within the relationship building component of the model points to the importance of having positive role models, including an opportunity to intervene if needed. Importantly, within a youth-to-youth relationship, co-learning and supporting with each other are key concepts,

including the essential contribution of youth's role models to inspiring and mentoring other youth as peers (i.e., peer mentorship).

In addition, the development of meaningful relationships among youth and adults (e.g., family members) is important for them through finding similar or congruent leisure interests. Research has shown that leisure activities offer the opportunity to engage socially with people who have similar interests, foster a sense of worth, and build positive social networks (Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010). Also, Caldwell (2016) discusses the importance of social leisure activities among youth to develop empathy and strong relationships with peers and adults alike, by facilitating both differentiation (e.g., respect for differences) and integration (e.g., mutual learning and co-participation). Furthermore, leisure helps build resilience when youth are invited to share what leisure and resilience mean to them as shown by Brooks, Daschuk, Poudrier, and Almond's (2015) study with First Nations youth, drawing on their artistic productions of 'Thug Life' and hip-hop. Building positive adult-youth and youth-youth relationships seems to assist in reducing sense of stigmatization and stress by creating a safe, secure, and meaningful environment for youth's leisure engagement (Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Theriault, 2014).

Interrelationships and mechanisms

Described as circular relationships in the model, youth-led meaningful engagement through leisure is proposed to promote constructive relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and empowerment. In turn, positive interpersonal relationships are proposed to support meaningful leisure within a safe, open, and non-judgmental space to co-learn. Furthermore, meaningful leisure is proposed to provide an avenue to reinforce positive relationships and

learn/discover about self, others, and the world. Importantly, *what youth do with leisure*, rather than *what leisure does to youth*, should be emphasized to promote constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure (Brooks et al., 2015; Lashua & Fox, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014). The former concept (i.e., what youth do with leisure) is more youth-driven than the latter concept (i.e., what leisure does to youth), which is more prescriptive in nature.

Structured, top-down leisure programs are common, and the reviewed literature did point to positive developmental outcomes as a result of top-down leisure programming. However, there are certainly repercussions of conducting programs that are prescriptive in nature by focusing on *fixing* at-risk youth's deficits (again, from a perspective of what leisure does to youth; Barrett & Bond, 2015; Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014). Rather, it is important to proactively engage youth by respectfully listening to what the youth's lived experiences are, and by emphasizing what role youth's voices play both in sharing these experiences and perspectives with peer youth and adults, and in mobilizing youth into actions for changes. As emphasized by Witt and Caldwell (2010), "adolescents do not need adults to do thing 'to' or 'for' them, rather adolescents need to be involved in the learning and growing process — they need to have opportunities to 'develop themselves,' and they need adults to serve as enablers in this process" (p. 3).

Purposefully, a bottom-up approach highlights the importance of taking a youth-led/guided approach to youth engagement. Shown by the reviewed literature, there are many potential benefits of youth-led engagement strategies both through meaningful leisure pursuits and through engaging the youth in research projects. For many youth at risk, they have tended to spend much of their lives being told what they ought to do, and what the "right" way to live is. One key component of bottom-up youth engagement, particularly when speaking about leisure

practice, is the notion of power-sharing. The literature that focuses on structured, top-down leisure programming often mentions adult supervision and prescribed youth development. On the other hand, the youth-led engagement research suggests the importance of sharing power with youth and allowing the youth to work alongside the adults in a mutually respectful way that can promote empowerment, positive relationship-building, and meaningful community involvement (Brooks et al., 2015; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010).

The proposed conceptual model would be of benefit to practitioners interested in incorporating meaningful youth-led engagement through leisure into their practices. The parsimony of information presented in the model allows the practitioners to easily incorporate the key components of both youth-led engagement and leisure to begin on building positive relationships and co-learning opportunities into their programming. The arrows indicating directional, circular relationships among the model components would be useful for the practitioners to use as reflecting points. For example, these reflections can involve beginning to think about ways in which a program space allows for youth to participate in the programming and planning of ideas, and how this collaborative process can lead to positive relationships between the youth and adults involved. These can be done through co-developing a space that is safe, trust/respectful, and non-judgemental from a strengths-based perspective. Furthermore, this conceptual model is intended to provide a literature-informed visual representation for the role of youth-led engagement through leisure and its proposed mechanisms since there is the need for future research in this area. The components and its interrelationships described in the model highlight the importance of better understanding the benefits and power of constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure.

Applying the model to practice

The components and its interrelationships as described in Figure 2.1 provide a visual representation of the model supported by the reviewed literature. As noted above, this model and its explanation provided in this paper can be incorporated into practice. Below, we offer a hypothetical example of how a leisure-related practitioner may begin incorporating this conceptual model into leisure service delivery. Such example is intended to illustrate how a practitioner could use the model to design a new program or refine an existing program to better serve youth.

Often a recreation practitioner is in charge of developing and facilitating a drop-in program for youth at risk in an urban city centre. One group of the practitioner's clientele is homeless youth who experience difficulty finding employment and safe housing, creating healthy relationships, and finding meaning in their lives. The practitioner has realized that for the most part, their programming involves simple drop-in programs, for example, through sports and occasional guest speakers. Yet, more importantly, the practitioner has recently realized the importance of engaging the youth in a programming that involves the bottom-up approach so that the programs offered do not merely provide diversion, but rather facilitate opportunities for engagement, meaning-making, development, and empowerment. Using the model, the practitioner can begin incorporating bottom-up programming, youth engagement, and meaning-making opportunities to her/his role by:

a) Involving the youth in the development and facilitation of leisure opportunities.
   o This could include youth-led initiatives such as a talent show by engaging youth in sharing ideas and talents, planning and decision making, and promoting sense of empowerment in a safe, open, and non-judgmental space.
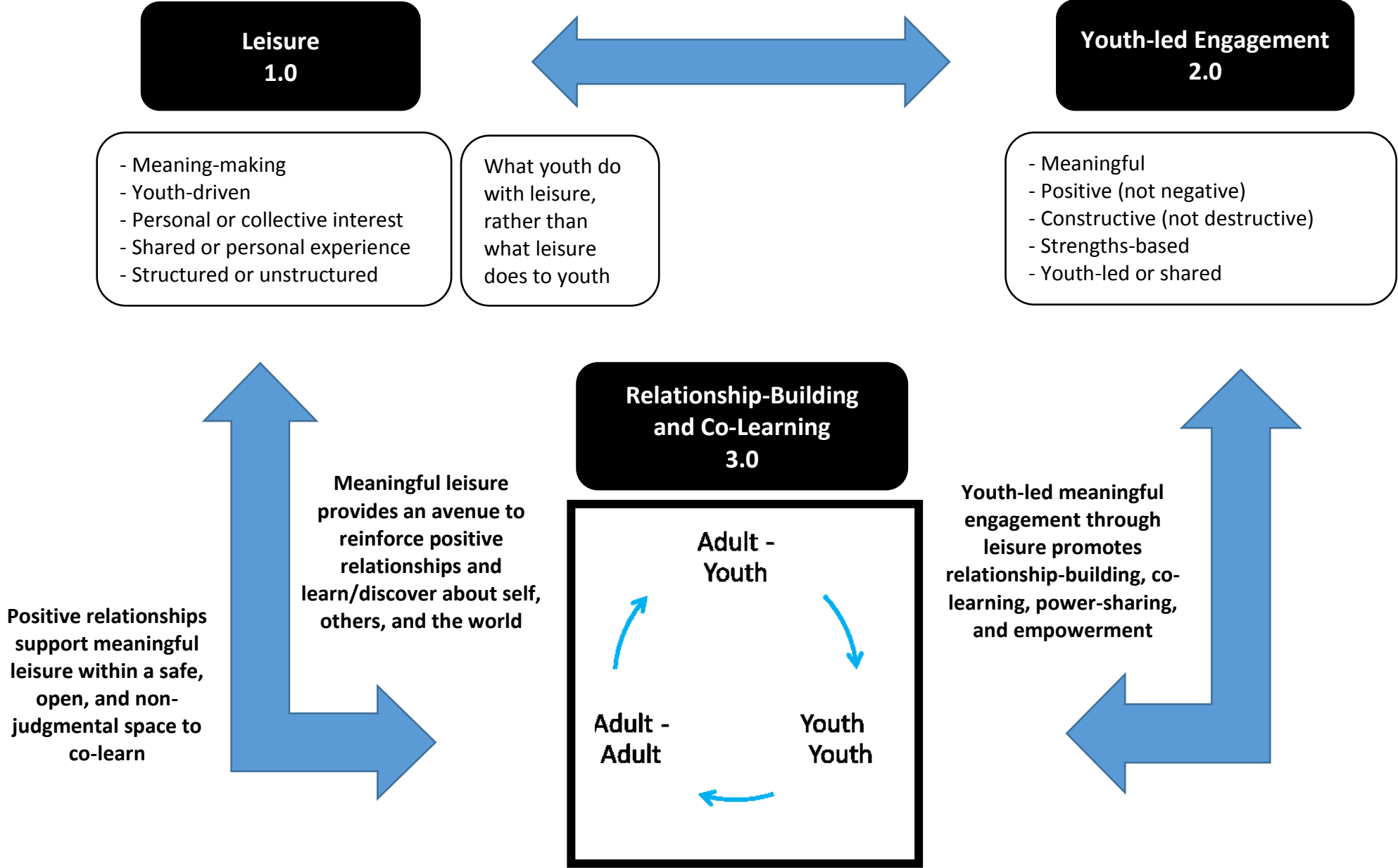
o These youth-led leisure initiatives can involve a wide range of leisure activities that have an element of youth engagement to meaningfully meet the needs of diverse youth populations.

b) Educating staff and youth about the importance of building positive relationships that involve co-learning and power sharing.

o This could include the youth-guided development of a co-operative program where roles are shared, and the use of strengths-based approaches where everyone is encouraged to reinforce positive relationships and to learn/discover about self, others, and the world.

c) Using the model as a key reflection point as the practitioner and organization begin thinking about how a youth-led, bottom-up approach would fit well into their programming.

o Examples include reflection on how staff interact with the youth, how the programming offers opportunities for youth to be engaged respectfully, and how relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and meaning-making are reinforced, modeled, and incorporated into programming.

o Such reflection should include the emphasis on *what youth do with leisure* (i.e., youth-driven), rather than *what leisure does to youth* (i.e., prescriptive in nature, being told what to do), to promote constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that simply because we develop leisure programs for "at-risk/high-risk" young people, the use of a top-down, prescriptive approach can be detrimental to

them. Certainly, the above-given review of literature is not exhaustive of all youth at risk literature that discusses leisure as an engagement tool; however, it does point to leisure's unique role in engaging youth in a meaningful way. It is suggested then, that because of leisure's unique characteristic of being intrinsically chosen and defined, leisure can be an important tool in a bottom-up, youth-led/guided approach to meaningful engagement of youth at risk. Through sharing experiences *with* youth and learning alongside of them, leisure can provide an avenue for youth to connect positively with their peers and communities, and to promote constructive meaning-making in their lives. These insights have important implications for reframing leisure programs within social services, and improving leisure policy and practice to make these more youth-oriented. Through enacting these youth-oriented changes, programs can better support and inspire youth's passions for the pursuit of meaningful, fulfilling lives. Finally, future research should address the specifics of meaning-making processes among youth at risk in specific leisure contexts. In particular, research should examine the role of youth-adult relationships using the bottom-up, youth-led approach in meaning making through a wide range of leisure opportunities.

**Leisure
1.0**

- Meaning-making
- Youth-driven
- Personal or collective interest
- Shared or personal experience
- Structured or unstructured

What youth do with leisure, rather than what leisure does to youth

**Youth-led Engagement
2.0**

- Meaningful
- Positive (not negative)
- Constructive (not destructive)
- Strengths-based
- Youth-led or shared

**Relationship-Building
and Co-Learning
3.0**

Adult –
Youth

Adult –
Adult

Youth
Youth

Meaningful leisure provides an avenue to reinforce positive relationships and learn/discover about self, others, and the world

Youth-led meaningful engagement through leisure promotes relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and empowerment

Positive relationships support meaningful leisure within a safe, open, and non-judgmental space to co-learn

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CHAPTER 3

Study 2

The role of youth-led approaches in enhancing leisure-induced meaning-making among youth at risk

A version of this chapter has been submitted for publication to *Leisure Sciences* as Hopper, T. D., Iwasaki, Y., Walker, G. J., & McHugh, T-L. F. "I feel like we finally matter": The role of youth-led approaches in enhancing leisure-induced meaning-making among youth at risk.

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how engaging youth at risk through a youth-led approach to recreation and leisure programming can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making. Seven women (four youth at risk [18- 22 years] and three adult recreation practitioners) participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Data were also generated via observation and field notes. Elo and Kyngäs (2008) three-phase process of content analysis was used to analyze findings. Findings suggest that youth-led approaches to recreation and leisure programming can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making by: (a) supporting interests and endeavours; (b) connection to community; (c) overcoming barriers, together; (d) co-creating safe spaces to be engaged; and (e) developing personal and collective positive outcomes. This research makes theoretical contributions to the leisure literature and provides essential insights regarding proactive engagement of youth at risk and meaning-making for practitioners and policy makers from a practical perspective.

Introduction

There is an increasing body of literature that seeks to address the meaningful engagement of youth at risk,[1] which highlights the importance of youth-led approaches to recreation and leisure programming (Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017; Iwasaki, Springett, Dashora, McLaughlin, McHugh & YOUTH 4 YEG Team, 2014; Lashua & Fox 2006; 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014). The study of youth at risk stretches across several academic disciplines, in which these discourses are grounded in the notion that these young people are supposed to transition from "normal" teenhood to "normal" adulthood on a seamless continuum (Kelly, 2001). Within the extensive literature that addresses servicing youth at risk, the leisure studies field has focused primarily on top-down and adult-led approaches for those young people (Caldwell et al., 2012; Green, Kleiber, & Tarrant, 2000; Morgan, Sibthorp, & Wells, 2014). Individually, many of these programs have reached positive outcomes such as better school attendance and more secure housing. However, despite best intentions, the programs are often *prescriptive* in nature and simply act as temporary and surface level approaches to 'curing' or 'fixing' youth at risk mostly from a deficit-based perspective (Caldwell, 2006; Green, Kleiber & Tarrant, 2000; McClelland & Giles, 2014)

There have been relatively few studies that have focused specifically on the positive benefits of a youth engagement approach, and how the pursuit of meaningful leisure engagement can provide opportunities for youth at risk to feel empowered and flourish in their life (Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017). For the purpose of this study, youth at risk refers to youth who are often socially

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[1] We recognize the need to de-stigmatize youth who are at risk of a multitude of challenges in life such as poverty, homelessness, addictions, and mental health issues. Accordingly, this paper uses a person-first language with the term, *youth at risk,* to refer to those youths who seem to experience challenging life conditions. See later in this introduction section for more details about this terminology.

excluded from accessing opportunities and resources, and who are at high risk and vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, abusive/addictive behaviours, mental health challenges, discrimination, stigma, and/or compromised developmental outcomes (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). The authors recognize that the use of "at-risk" or "high-risk" are contested terms. It is not our intention to further label and stigmatize these youth, who are often at high chance of experiencing marginalized experiences, but rather a way of defining the youth's current life situations which include marginalization and exclusion. Considering leisure's characteristics as being intrinsically motivated, meaningful, and non-obligated/unrestricted (Kleiber, Walker & Mannell, 2011) and may provide a unique opportunity for a bottom-up, youth-led/guided approach to meaningful engagement of youth at risk (Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017). Such unique characteristics may provide positive, constructive opportunities for youth at risk to develop and find meaning in their lives and help them better deal with the negative experiences that youth at risk are frequently faced with (e.g., homelessness, substance abuse, poverty and mental health challenges).

The examination of meaning-making is an emerging area of focus in the leisure studies field (Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Iwasaki, Messina, & Hopper, 2018). Meaning-making is a process by which individuals find meanings from a leisure activity that assists them in finding a purpose in life. The conceptual focus of leisure-induced meaning-making is an important aspect of this study. In recent years, the field of recreation and leisure studies has played a role in shaping the broader body of knowledge of positive psychology as it relates to understanding subjective wellbeing and living a meaningful life (Iwasaki, et al., 2018; Iwasaki, 2016; Mock, Mannell, Guttentag, 2016). Because of leisure's unique characteristics of being intrinsically motivated, meaningful, and non-obligated/unrestricted, the experiences sought through leisure

can have strong contributions to living an engaged and meaningful life (Iwasaki, 2016). Further, leisure's role in finding meaning in life is closely tied to positive psychology theories as it relates to understanding factors contributing to well-being, personal growth, and development (Mock et al., 2016). Moreover, as a unique life domain, leisure has the potential to assist individuals in realizing three facets of meaning in life; significance, coherence, and purpose as discussed by Martela and Steger (2016).

There has been an increased body of knowledge examining leisure's connection to meaning-making and meaningful lives among, for example, older adults (e.g., Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012) and individuals experiencing a disability, exclusion, and marginalization (e.g., Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017). However, the very notion of leisure induced meaning-making as it is directly associated with youth at risk has not been described in the published literature. Iwasaki et al.'s (2015) in-depth qualitative study highlighting the contributions of leisure to meaning-making with individuals faced with mental illness suggested that leisure can provide an avenue for people to be actively engaged in life and are inspired to achieve their goals. Further, one additional key factor in providing more meaningful leisure opportunities is the importance of allowing participants the choice to proactively lead and engage them in the process, using a bottom-up approach to programming, as opposed to a top-down, prescriptive approach (Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017; Iwasaki, 2016).

The use of youth-led programming and its possible connection to leisure induced meaning-making was discussed by Hopper and Iwasaki (2017). They argued that as research-practitioner, it is important to address *what youth do with leisure*, rather than *what leisure does to youth*. Such a shift in focus could promote constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure. The former concept (i.e., what youth do with leisure) is more youth-driven

than the latter concept (i.e., what leisure does to youth), which is more prescriptive in nature. With the immense pressure from agency-based mandates when programming for and with youth at risk, shifting the focus from a top-down, prescriptive approach to leisure and recreation has no doubt been challenging (Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). However, to support and empower young people in flourishing in all aspects of their lives on their own terms, it is important to acknowledge the role of youth-led meaningful engagement in their recreation and leisure pursuits (Lashua & Fox 2006; Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017).

Increased attention has been given to the role of a youth-engagement approach to leisure programming (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Kelly, Pryor & Outley, 2014). For example, Iwasaki et al. (2014) described a youth-engagement framework that was developed through partnerships with youth leaders, and explained how this framework has been instrumental in the way practitioners, researchers, and educators work with youth at risk. Gyamfi, Keens-Douglas, and Medin's (2007) investigated a community-based mental health program that involved a physical activity component and a drop-in sports program from a youth engagement perspective. Their work suggested the need for youth involvement in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of community services. Such examples provide exemplars of youth engagement studies; however, *how* youth-led leisure pursuits can contribute to meaning-making among youth at risk is not well understood. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the purpose of this study was to explore how engaging youth at risk through a youth-led approach to recreation programming can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making.

Theoretical Framework

Theory can be used in qualitative research to provide sensitizing context, to guide data collection and analysis, or to support the interpretation of findings (Sandelowski, 1993). For this study, Iwasaki et al.'s (2018) theoretical framework of leisure-induced meaning-making was used to guide the development of the interview guides and to support the interpretation of findings. Iwasaki et al. (2018) described five key themes of leisure-induced meaning-making including: *(a) a joyful life, (b) a connected life, (c) a discovered life, (d) a composed life,* and *(e) an empowered life.* They argued that through meaningful leisure engagement, one can live a *joyful life* that involves the regulation of emotions through increasing positive emotions or suppressing negative emotions. *A connected life* refers to a life with a holistic sense of meanings, including social, spiritual, and cultural connectedness. *A discovered life* refers to a life demonstrating the unique talents and characteristics of the person to facilitate self and collective identity. Meaningful leisure engagement seems to facilitate one's ability to live a *composed life*, and the ability to be collected and in control, and maintain more harmony and balance in life, considering leisure's unique characteristics. Finally, another key benefit of leisure-induced meaning-making is its role in promoting an *empowered life*. The five components served as the theoretical framework for the current research.

Methods

Case Study

A qualitative case study approach was used to explore how engaging youth at risk through a youth-led approach to recreation programming can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making. Stake (1995) described case study as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within the important

circumstances" (p. xi). Case study has been conceptualized in a variety of ways (e.g., intrinsic, instrumental, collective; Stake, 1995), and this current case study is best understood as an instrumental case. According to Stake, instrumental cases involve the examination of a specific case to provide insight into an issue or phenomenon. Within this case study, the phenomenon of leisure-induced meaning-making will be examined within the context of a specific community-based recreation program (i.e., "Challenge by Choice").

The Case: Challenge by Choice

Program structure

The Challenge by Choice program began in 2010 and, at the time of the current study, had approximately 100 youth between the ages of 16 to 24 that participated on average once per week. Challenge by Choice operates five days per week and offers programming that addresses physical, spiritual, social, and emotional wellbeing through leisure and recreation programming. Challenge by Choice is a program that seeks to improve the conditions of youth at risk who are caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization. The program is a wellness-oriented, recovery-focused, social recreation program for young adults and is offered through young adult services; as part of the Addiction and Mental Health program in Alberta Health Services. For ten years, Challenge by Choice has engaged young people at risk of exclusion and marginalization predominately from the Edmonton area, as well as young adults who participate from surrounding areas.

Staff

The staff of the Challenge by Choice program includes Recreation Practitioners, Social workers, Occupational Therapists, Recovery workers, and Employment Counsellors. The staffing model of Challenge by Choice is coordinated by a Recreation Therapist and the programming staff are Addiction & Mental Health Recovery workers. The practitioners have

experience that includes clinical expertise, and professional judgement of working with "at-risk" young people. Not only are the leisure needs being addressed through Challenge by Choice's youth engagement model, which includes youths' active involvement in program planning and evaluation, the youths' voices are listened to and acknowledged. Further, all life domains are supported and resources are provided when identified, as well. For example, if the young adults need to be connected to a mental health therapist, housing, employment or income support, this can and will be provided.

Participants

Seven women, including four youth who participated in Challenge by Choice (ages 18 – 22) and three Challenge by Choice recreation practitioners (ages 24 – 54), participated in semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The four Challenge by Choice youth participants all had a high school diploma or alternative diploma such as a GED, and none of the youth were employed at the time of the study. The three Challenge by Choice practitioners had either a University Bachelor's degree or Community College diploma, and were all employed fulltime with Challenge by Choice.

As part of the interview process, each participant was provided the opportunity to provide a participant description, including their own personal experiences of leisure-induced meaning-making. *Amanda*[2] has been a participant of Challenge by Choice since 2010 and she described her own meaningful leisure of reading as "an escape from everyday stressors and meditative-like." *Tamara*, a Challenge by Choice participant for over a year, explained that her leisure-induced meaning-making was a way to "build new skills and learn new things (about herself and others)." *Hannah* has been involved in Challenge by Choice for "3-ish years" and finds meaning

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[2] Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the identity of participants.

through her leisure by "feeling connected and active with my family." Finally, *Chantel,* a Challenge by Choice participant, emphasized that meaning-making in her leisure, which included writing in her journal, allowed her to "remember who I am during tough times when I felt lost, and where I fit in the world.*" Kelly,* a Challenge by Choice practitioner, discussed how her participation in volleyball allowed her to remain connected with social networks. She said, "I get to see friends I have had from high school, we've always played together and that reminds me of why volleyball is so important to me.*" Barb,* also a practitioner*,* described how her engagement in leisure helps her find meaning. She explained how "snowboarding is everything to me, I feel like I'm reborn." *Heather*, the third Challenge by Choice practitioner, articulated how she felt that through her meaning-making in leisure she could develop a "self-care plan to help that helps me feel in-check."

Data Generation

Prior to data generation, ethical approval was granted by the lead authors' *University Research Ethics Board* and each participant provided informed consent to participate. Data generation in case study research often involves several different methods (i.e., triangulation of methods; Stake, 1995). For this research, participant observation, field notes, and one-on-one semi structured interviews were used to generate data.

Participant-Observation and Field Notes. The use of participant observation is imperative to understanding the case (Stake, 1995). The use of direct participant observation over the course of a *sixth-month* period allowed the lead author to ensure that participants' behaviours, interactions, and expressions that have occurred during the program are captured (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Patton, 2002). The lead author is a Euro-Canadian PhD candidate whose program of research is focused on engaging youth at risk and leisure-induced meaning-

making. According to Patton (2002), a unique feature of participant observation is that the researcher is essentially a participant and the degree of participation can change over time. As an active participant in the program, the lead author was able to build rapport and demonstrate a commitment to a genuine interest in the "at-risk" young participants. He attended the Challenge by Choice program one to two times per week, and detailed field notes were taken during and immediately following attendance at the program. The field notes consisted of date and time of note, description of the behaviours and social interactions that occurred, the physical environment, and specifics of the program that day (Cushion & Jones, 2006).

One-on-one Semi-Structured Interviews. The use of one-on-one interviews is the most common approach to data generation in case-study research (Hodge & Sharp, 2016; Stake, 1995). One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with Challenge by Choice participants and recreation practitioners in a private setting that was convenient for participants. The semi-structured interview guide was developed using Iwasaki et al.'s (2017) theoretical framework as a guide, and consisted of questions pertaining to experiences of meaning-making, leisure, and working with or being labeled an "at-risk" youth. For example, to address living a *connected life*, participants were asked "How does your leisure allow you to be connected, both personally and collectively?" With the consent of participants, each interview was audio recorded and lasted approximately 45 – 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Thematic content analysis is used as a method of categorizing field notes and interview transcript data into common themes for analysis, and the use of thematic content analysis in qualitative case study is common (e.g., Hodge & Sharp, 2016; Hodge, Henry & Smith, 2014). Content

analysis, as described by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), is a method of interpreting meaning from text data through classification into categories and themes and involves three stages: preparation, organizing, and reporting. Within the preparation phase of analysis, the lead author became increasingly immersed in the data by reading interview transcripts several times, and reviewing field notes and documents. Organizing the data involved open coding, following a similar approach as discussed by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). The coding of potential themes and commonalities were recorded in the margins of the interview transcripts. Finally, the phase of reporting involved describing themes that are supported by specific direct quotes from interview transcripts and field notes that were coded under the same themes as the interview transcripts.

Verification of data included specific approaches as discussed by Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson and Spiers (2002). Although Morse et al. noted that post-hoc verification of data may pose challenges as it can in fact devaluate already collected data, they discussed the importance of incorporating validation mechanisms throughout every step of the inquiry. For instance, this study was *methodologically coherent, whereby the* research question matched the method, which in turn matched the analytic procedure. As well, additional continual verification strategies were conducted (a) ensuring the sample is appropriate to the research question; (b) data were analyzed and collected simultaneously and throughout the process to ensure congruency; and (c) analyzed data are supported by new and emerging theories about newly analyzed data (Morse et al., 2002). These verification mechanisms interactively worked together to build reliability and validity of this qualitative case study.

Results

Findings from this research suggest that engaging youth at risk through youth-led approaches to recreation programming can contribute to leisure induced meaning-making by: (a) supporting interests and endeavors; (b) connecting to community; (c) overcoming barriers, together; (d) co-creating safe spaces to be engaged; and (e) developing personal and collective positive outcomes.

Supporting interests and endeavors

The words of the participants suggest that through Challenge by Choice's approach to youth-led programming, youth participants' interests and endeavors are supported. By working alongside the youth to realize past and present leisure interest and endeavors, the practitioners can help support the youth to be engaged and to find meaning. Tamara, a youth participant described her past interest in hiking as "not possible without the help of the staff." For Tamara, a recent hike in a local ravine park brought back important memories of when she used to hike regularly. In her description about why participating in a past interest was particularly important, she said, "I was getting some recreation and exercise while having some nice talks with the staff and other people there." As Tamara explained, the hike was an opportunity for her to feel connected to other members of the group. Through the practitioners' support of the youth participants' interests and endeavors, youth participants can discover new skills. In her continued discussion about the recent hike, Tamara learned that she could use "those poles to help you walk up hills and keep your balance." For Tamara, the development of a new skill during the hike was a "cool" moment for her and the practitioner.

As participants described the importance of feeling supported in their leisure pursuits, one youth participant described her discovery of physical activity, Chantel said:

I wasn't a very physical, physically active person. In Challenge by Choice they have a gym thingy that we go to on Thursdays. So, I was trying to get myself you know to get more into the gym and you know getting kind of like a training schedule and stuff like that so when I came to Challenge by Choice, the staff helped me with a training schedule that fit my needs.

Chantel spoke about her new interest and endeavor as a motivator to be more active and she explained the importance of the gym to not only her personally, but now to her family as well. After she spoke about the importance of physical fitness, her mom "agreed to open a family YMCA pass." Chantel spoke about this connection to her family and explained how it is "awesome to go to the gym with my sister and mom."

Many of the Challenge by Choice practitioners spoke to the importance of supporting the interests of the youths' interests and endeavors as "foundational to what we [Challenge by Choice] do." For instance, one practitioner participant described how the support provided to youth to try new things allows "them [youth] to be able to explore and discover themselves in many different areas." Kelly further described how using a youth-led approach to programming allows the youth to "feel amazed with themselves that they were able to do that." Through the youths' involvement and engagement, the youth are supported in their interests and endeavors. As Amanda remarked, it is important for her to be involved and to have her voice heard in the program planning as "kind of motivating to discuss it [the planning] and to hear other people share their ideas." As Amanda explained, there is pride and connection stemming from the youths' accomplishments in feeling supported to discover interests and endeavors.

Connecting to community

Participants shared stories to suggest that through youth-led approaches participants are provided with opportunities to connect with communities and to find meaning in their leisure. Participants described how through the involvement in Challenge by Choice, they got to "meet new friends" in community settings and began seeing their new friends regularly through their participation. As stated by one youth, "It's nice to be able to be with other people like yourself in a [normal] place" (Chantel). To this participant, "people like herself" were other youth, who share similar lived experiences. An adult participant shared a similar explanation regarding the importance of connecting youth to their community. She said,

> We see a lot of people that come in with no friends or haven't made connections
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> elsewhere and then, those one or two people that they just make that connection with and,
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> they're going for coffee after program, they're hanging out, they're going to movies, and
>
> that kind of stuff (Heather).

To Heather, the importance of the youth feeling connected to their community socially, was how Challenge by Choice ensures the youth get the opportunity to make meaningful friendships in their recreation and leisure participation. Often, Challenge by Choice participated in community programs of other youth-serving agencies. According to a practitioner participant who described how the youth were often witnessed to other youth who had current life situations, similar and perhaps worse than theirs. She said, "Engaging in the planning and implementation of a program with youth from the eating disorder clinic is a really empowering moment for the [Challenge by Choice] youth" (Barb).

All the youth who participated described how Challenge by Choice is part of, and connects them to, their community. To promote positive change, Amanda felt Challenge by

Choice "brings us together to be involved" in community events and initiatives that she would

not typically participate in. Another youth explained how through her engagement and

connection to community through her participation in Challenge by Choice helped her realize

that she really cares about "helping other people who are in the same position as me" (Chantel).

In addition to feeling motivated to help others, Amanda discussed how she was motivated to

learn what important issues were going on in her own community by engaging and working

collectively through youth-led approaches and the opportunity to be connected in her

community. Her new interest in social justice and advocacy came from her involvement in the

community programs. She said,

> How we are treating animals, and how are we treating the environment we have to live in,
> as well. I see the underlying attitudes that lead to these, that lead to these issues or to the
> problems involved in these issues. I see them as sharing an underlying current I guess. So
> that's something, hopefully one day I can feel confident enough to articulate and share
> and maybe you know coordinate people [for change] in a different way.

To all participants, connection to community and its ability to provide social connectedness and

shared purpose was central to Challenge by Choice. For Chantel, a youth participant, Challenge

by Choice "helps me to grow and you know, respect others and that acceptance and tolerance for

people from all walks of life."

Overcoming barriers, together

Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that through a youth-led approach,

Challenge by Choice was working together with the youth participants to overcome barriers. For

Kelly, it was important that she could work alongside the youth to overcome initial barriers of

participation that included "how to sign up, who to ask for help, and you know, just getting them

there." Kelly spoke to the importance of helping the youth overcome barriers holistically. She said, "help them [the youth] in every holistic manner they need to be successful." For the participants, this included addressing program costs, transportation, and personal barriers that may impede their ability to find meaning. "Sometimes that involves taking the bus with them for the first time," Heather said.

The youth interviewed also expressed similar sentiments that Challenge by Choice had helped them overcome barriers together with their peers and the practitioners. One youth expressed,

> We get to learn about how much things [programs] cost and get to participate in activities we wouldn't normally because maybe we could afford it or couldn't get to it. Challenge by Choice helps us learn how to access stuff (Hannah).

For Hannah, Challenge by Choice's approach to teaching them not only about what is involved in participating in programs but also to learn effective ways to overcome barriers together was meaningful. Similarly, another youth echoed Hannah's comments. Tamara said, "They [the staff] don't make me feel dumb for not having the money to go…they help me figure out the cost and how to get there." For most of these youth, finances and transportation are major barriers to meaningful participation.

In addition, the practitioners described in some sense that there were stigmas associated with being "at-risk." Chantel described her experience of being labelled "at-risk" by saying "I don't like labels, but when society sees you as different, you automatically fall in that box, you know, of being troublesome. I never go anywhere and not feel like I am being looked at differently." The words of Chantel were echoed by a practitioner who also saw labelling and stigma associated with being a youth experiencing challenges. Kelly said,

Many of these youths have a sense of stigma around who they are and who they ought to

be…we try and work with them overcome this barrier. This involves me to be reflexive

on how I perceive and view youth in both my work and everyday encounters.

Kelly and Barb both explained that being labelled "at-risk" is a big perceived barrier to the

youth. The feeling of being labelled and stigmas associated results in a lack of feeling supported

and disconnected delivery models. Working with the youth to overcome the barriers and involve

them in key decisions allows them to then find meaning in their leisure. "Then, and only then,

will they realize their potential" Barb emphasized. With a youth-led approach, the youth

participants of Challenge by Choice work alongside practitioners to power-share knowledge

about what barriers exist and how to overcome them, together.

Co-creating safe spaces to be engaged

The practitioner participants spoke about how to co-create a safe space for the youth to be

engaged, stressing that they must "meet them where they are at." For the practitioners, this meant

both physically and supportively. Heather, discussed in depth the importance of "creating an

open line of communication right from the beginning." For Heather, this approach started with

communicating with the youth at a level they were comfortable with. She said, "Most of the

youth won't talk on the phone with me, so I text them." As voiced, there are very different ways

of communicating with the youth to ensure both trust and open line of communication. For

Kelly, she had similar thoughts but spoke to physically meeting the youth where they are at. She

said, "These buildings can be intimidating for youth, I try and meet them at a location that is

comfortable for them." To these participants, meeting the youth where they are at, both

physically and supportively, are connected to the development of co-creating safe spaces. The

youth-led approach brings a sense of belonging to the larger Challenge by Choice community

and allows the opportunity for the youth to be engaged in their recreation and leisure pursuits in a safe, non-judgmental space.

Through a youth-led approach, the youth are involved in the co-creation of a safe, non-judgmental space to be engaged. In describing the Challenge by Choice space and the 'culture' of the group, youth participants spoke about how they felt "more comfortable here [Challenge by Choice] than I do at home," while other youth explained that there is "something cool about it [Challenge by Choice], we never make fun of others for what they do or say." There was a consensus among youth and practitioner participants that this culture "begins from the top" where adults set the tone for the group. The process of co-creation facilitated this supportive culture which included ground rules, judgement-free space, and the security of youth feeling comfortable to be engaged in any way they felt fit.

Various participants, including youth, also spoke of the respect they experience through their involvement in Challenge by Choice. Hannah, a youth participant, stated, "they [practitioners] treat us like humans." Underlying these words was a sense that the youth felt like they belonged and were involved in co-developing the 'safe' space where they engage in leisure. Important in the co-creation of a safe space was the sense that practitioners were there for the youth and open minded about allowing the youth to lead the way.

Several participants spoke about how through the co-creation of safe spaces, where they felt involved and free of judgement, could realize what a "healthy friendship" looked like in their recreation and leisure pursuits. Kelly, a practitioner participant also recognized that such relationships are often missing in the lives of youth and bottom-up approaches. She said, "many of them [youth] come in and do not have any healthy or trusting relationships with either peers or adults." Tamara, a youth participant, shared stories to explain how before her participation in

Challenge by Choice, she would spend time with friends "smoking weed and drinking and stuff like that." However, she attested to how she now has new friends through her involvement in Challenge by Choice and in her own words described them as "healthy." The development of healthy relationships with peers and adults alike was supportive through youth-led approaches in order for the youth to develop meaningful relationships.

Developing personal and collective positive outcomes

Participants described how the youth led approaches help the youth to develop personal and collective positive outcomes such as belonging, realizing potential (both personally and collectively), and capacity building. Through the youth-led approaches offered by Challenge by Choice, the development of these personal and collective positive outcomes subsequently enhances the youths' ability to find meaning in their leisure. Hannah described how the practitioners made them feel a sense of belonging. She said, "I feel like we finally matter here" [at Challenge by Choice]. Echoing this sense of belonging, another youth explained, "you can come and know that it is okay to be different" (Chantel). Chantel, further explained, "I think it's important for us to know that you know it's okay to be different and the world doesn't have to you don't have to change to fit in the world. The world has enough space for all of us and they [the practitioners] help us realize that." In addition to realizing that it is okay to be different, another youth explained how realizing her potential came when through her Challenge by Choice participation, Amanda said, "seeing myself as a good enough reason to do these programs, you know, when they ask us for our input and ideas." For Amanda, her personal realization that she was worth engaging in meaningful leisure was a result of her involvement in key decisions and Challenge by Choice participation.

Participants' voices were clear about how realizing potential, both personally and collectively, was facilitated within Challenge by Choice. When describing how potential was realized collectively, one practitioner said, "We often do activities that are outside everyone's comfort zone and it isn't until afterwards we realize that each of us can in fact do it." Similarly, another practitioner participant said, "Collectively we help each other reach as high as we can to achieve the best outcome." Further to this, Kelly explained,

I think that the supportive environment that they have and with their peers they're able to discover that and do it in unity per se versus something that they would maybe just do on their own.

To these practitioners, the interactions among the group places emphasis on working together, to achieve collective potential. Through Challenge by Choice's youth-led approach, the youth can realize their potential, not only within the program, but in other life domains as well. This stems from their development of decision making, team-work, and leadership skills. Amanda described how she was able to resolve a recent issue with her landlord through skills she learned in Challenge by Choice. She said, "I would've never dealt with this before. But, Challenge by Choice helped me realize I had the confidence to do it."

Capacity building was also a common thread through the discussion on developing personal and collective characteristics. Practitioners discussed the "strategic use of a strengths based approach" (Barb) where they worked with the youth on "what skills they do have, not what they don't." This participant described how she moved away from a deficit-based approach and shifted her focus to building the youths' strengths rather than attempting to "fix" them. The various stories shared by the participants suggest that through its youth-led approach, Challenge

by Choice can help youth participants realize both personal and collective characteristics, which includes a sense of belonging, realizing potential, and capacity building.

Discussion

Given the absence of a research base in the recreation and leisure literature that explores how youth-led approaches to recreation programming led to leisure-induced meaning-making for marginalized young people (Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017; Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007), this research makes a significant contribution to the recreation and leisure literature. Specifically, participants identified the importance of using a youth-led approach to programming when actively and meaningfully engaging youth. The participants' perspective helped identify *how* youth-led programming can contribute to making one's life more meaningful among youth at risk, and why bottom-up approaches to programming are important. The findings suggest that a youth-led approach to recreation and leisure programming can provide opportunity for youth caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization to be actively engaged in finding meaning in their lives. Such findings may have important implications for those looking to develop youth-led approaches in community-based recreation settings for youth at risk.

The findings from this study are consistent with research on youth-led approaches to leisure programming. For example, Gyamfi et al. (2007) noted the need for youth experiencing mental-health challenges to be engaged in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of a drop-in sports program. Similarly, within this study, findings suggest the importance of youth having their voice involved in key decisions around the program. Further, Lashua and Fox's (2006; 2007) pivotal "Beat of Boyle Street" research worked to engage urban Aboriginal youth in a music remix program, and identified the importance of working alongside the youth to mobilize their voices and lived experiences. The current study further emphasizes the importance of

working with youth, not for, to realize their potential. The current study adds to the literature on working with youth at risk to realize their potential, and specifically addresses the potential meaning-making functions that arise from actively engaging youth.

In addition to supporting the literature on youth-led approaches, the current research is also in line with the literature on meaning-making through leisure. Iwasaki et al. (2015) discussed how leisure can provide an avenue for individuals faced with mental illness to be actively engaged in life and are inspired to achieve fulfillment of their goals. As supported in the current research, youth were able to realize their potential and to strive for goals by the support experienced through Challenge by Choice. A key finding from this research was that youth were able to experience enjoyment and joy in their life, as demonstrated by engaging in new leisure activities and making new friends. This finding is supported by Hutchinson and Nimrod (2012), who identified leisure's role in older adults living with chronic conditions finding enjoyment in life. Importantly, findings from the current study provide a unique contribution to the connection between bottom-up approaches to programming and leisure-induced meaning-making, as highlighted as separate areas of investigation above and identified by past studies (Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017; Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017).

This research highlighted the significance of youth-led approaches in supporting the interests and endeavours of the youth, which is also prevalent in other leisure and recreation research. For example, McClelland and Giles study (2014) discussed the role of youth-led approaches in engaging street-involved youth. The authors found that it is possible to reinforce stigma and oppression when the youth are not actively engaged in the support of their recreation and leisure interests and endeavours. The words of the youth participants in this study suggest that their participation in Challenge by Choice was a starting point for their interest and

endeavours to be fostered and supported, primarily because of their ability to work alongside the practitioners to realize potential. This finding may have important implications for those looking to incorporate a youth-led approach to their programming.

Importantly, the possibility of power-sharing was evident in the current research. As discussed in Hopper and Iwasaki (2017), the importance of adults' power-sharing with youth at risk may support the development of more meaningful life experiences. This was also echoed in the ability for youth-led approaches to discuss overcoming barriers, together. Past studies (e.g., Cammarota, 2011) indicated the importance of working with marginalized youth to remove barriers, helping them flourish in all aspects of their lives. However, the willingness of the Challenge by Choice practitioners to work closely *with* the youth, not simply *for,* is a unique contribution of this research and has important implications for the way programming is framed and reframed. Importantly to the theme of overcoming barriers, together, is the theoretical advancement the findings of this research contribute. Uniquely, this study identifies the importance of practitioners and participants working cooperatively to overcome barriers, and seems to be overlooked when using both leisure constraints theory and leisure facilitation theory (see Stodolska, Sharaievska, Tainsky, & Ryan, 2014). Each of these prominent leisure theories identifies how the individual and/or external actors overcome barriers *individually*, often overlooking the strength in working cooperatively to overcome barriers to participation. Through working together to realize and support leisure interests and endeavours, this opportunity provides a context where both the youth and practitioners feel a sense of leisure-induced meaning making.

Also in line with the discussion on power-sharing and creating supportive and meaningful relationships, was the importance on co-creation of spaces for youth to be engaged. Like the

literature on the creation of safe spaces, the youth in the present study discussed the importance

of having a comfortable space for them to participate in. This involved the positive examples set

by the practitioners and the development of ground-rules that everyone is expected to obey. A

special issue of *Leisure/Loisir* on the topic of "leisure, space and change" (Trussell, Sharpe &

Mair, 2011) depicted the role of space in reinforcing marginalization, oppression and stigma. In

particular, spaces that do not safely and proactively listen to marginalized populations' voice

potentially reinforce social stressors, including that of oppression and marginalization. More

recently, Iwasaki et al. (2014) discussed the importance of providing a "growth-oriented enabling

space … where youths feel free to express themselves and where there is no judgement" (p. 326).

Within these spaces, youth can feel free to try out various positive, constructive activities.

Findings from this research also suggest that youth-led approaches provide opportunities

for the youth to feel connected to their community. For the youth in this study, the term

community was used to refer to the broader community of Edmonton and the Challenge by

Choice community. McHugh et al. (2015) discussed the importance of youth being given

opportunities to make connections in their communities through sport and recreation

participation. This current study further supports the notion of connection to community and the

development of a sense of connectedness as outlined in Iwasaki et al. (2018) meaning-making

framework. Participants of Challenge by Choice spoke to the importance of making connections

with "like-minded" people and realizing the potential for healthy, trustful, relationships with

their peers.

Connection to community supported youth in realizing the potential to be connected to

wider community and social issues. Through youth-led approaches to programming, it is

possible for the youth to learn about wider issues that impact their communities and the

possibility for engagement in social justice related activities and to mobilize their talents into action for change (Iwasaki et al., 2014). Cammarota (2011) discusses the use of Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) as a way of empowering youth faced with marginalization and exclusion to become educated about injustices that their communities are faced with. Through SJYD, the youth learn key skills through empowering each other to make change and develop positive outcomes. Furthermore, a recent special issue of *Leisure Sciences* emphasized the key role that leisure can play in addressing social justice issues, such as power relations and marginalization (Stewart, 2014). This growing attention to social justice awareness and change through leisure could potentially act as a meaning-making activity. For example, through connecting youth at risk to their communities, as described in the current study.

Findings from this research also make significant theoretical contributions. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has incorporated a newly developed meaning-making framework (Iwasaki et al., 2018) as a method to guide leisure science research. Findings from this research suggest that the meaning-making framework outlined by Iwasaki et al. (2018) can serve as a useful framework for conceptualizing and understanding leisure-induced meaning-making in life. Although this study was primarily focused on how youth-led approaches lead to meaningful leisure among youth at risk, the participants' words resonated with many of the framework's components, such as living a more joyful life and feeling more connected, both personally and collectively. Further, the possibility of a particular leisure activity to provide multiple meanings, or an interconnectedness between the components, as endorsed within Iwasaki et al.'s framework, is evident. The participant-led, or in this case, the youth-led approach is a central piece to this model. That is, the individual feeling in control of and having the ability to self-direct their own leisure pursuits is important step in meaning-making through leisure. The

leisure-induced meaning-making research is an emerging, underdeveloped area of scholarly investigation. Our findings support the continued use of the meaning-making framework as a tool to better understand how this may occur, particularly among marginalized populations using a participant-led approach, as illustrated in the current research.

Conclusion

This study adds to the literature on leisure and meaning-making and how youth-led approaches lead to more meaningful leisure of youth at risk. Despite the strengths of this research, it also has limitations. For instance, at the time of the study there were no male recreation practitioners on staff at the Challenge by Choice program and all participants who volunteered to participate in this study were women. As such, future research should attempt to include male participants, as well. This research was focused on exploring leisure-induced meaning-making through a specific case (Challenge by Choice), which may be limited in terms of the transferability of findings to other cases. However, by providing an in-depth description of the case and sharing the detailed experiences of participants, it is our hope that our findings may be transferable to broad audiences.

Future research should continue to explore the notion of leisure-induced meaning-making. Given the importance of leisure in meaning-making for those marginalized from mainstream programming (Iwasaki et al., 2015), further research is needed to connect how bottom-up approaches to recreation and leisure programming lead to leisure-induced meaning-making. Particularly, the empirical use of the conceptual framework for guiding research questions and practical perspectives, such as recreation programming. This would potentially lead to models of practice and should be explored.

Another important area of study should involve scale development, namely, a rigorous measure of leisure-induced meaning-making, which can build on earlier scale development work by Porter, Iwasaki, and Shank (2013). Furthermore, studies should continue to actively engage youth at risk in research projects, particularly through participatory approaches, such as Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR; Ozer, 2016). YPAR may also provide a unique opportunity for other forms of youth-led inquiry, such as arts-based and creative forms of research, where the youth engage their peers to learn key research skills and take the lead on developing meaningful research questions and strategies.

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CHAPTER 4

Study 3

**The role of relationships
in meaningfully engaging youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts**

A version of this chapter has been submitted for publication to *Journal of Leisure Research* as

Hopper, T. D., Iwasaki, Y., Walker, G. J., & McHugh, T-L. F. "My mentors saved my life": The

role of relationships in meaningfully engage youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts.

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative description study was to better understand the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk within the context of recreation and leisure. Two separate group interviews were held. One group interview included practitioners employed in youth targeted recreation contexts (three men and three women). The second group interview included four youth at risk (two men and two women). Elo and Kyngäs's (2008) three-phase process of content analysis was used to analyze data. Findings highlight the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk through: (a) purposeful activity; (b) (re)writing stories; (c) balance and respect; (d) reflexivity; and (e) growth, transformation, and action. This research makes contributions to the recreation and leisure literature and provides essential insights regarding the proactive role relationships play in meaningfully engaging young people.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, there has been an increase in recreation and leisure

research focused on working with and addressing the needs of young people who are faced with

challenges in family support, healthy relationships, and marginalization (Blanchet-Cohen &

Salzar, 2009; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007). There has also been

a recent increase in research focused on meaningfully engaging youth at risk[3] through bottom-up

and youth-led approaches (Chou et al., 2015; Gomez & Ryan, 2016; Kornbluh et al., 2016; Ozer,

2017). Meaningfully engaging youth at risk through leisure can be dependent upon many key

factors, with the relationships between youth and adults being a particularly important

consideration (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017). Leisure provides

unique opportunity for youth at risk to be actively engaged in activity that is both purposeful and

meaningful to their lives. For youth at risk, disconnection from, and exclusion in, society often

results in dis-trust, particularly as it relates to relationships with adults (Smyth, 2017). These

youth-adult relationships are often rooted in a position of power, where the adult is viewed as an

authoritative figure (Chou et al., 2015; Smyth, 2017). Contextualized within such power-based

relationships, it is important for youth at risk to feel a sense of safety and trust within these

relationships. In particular, having someone to turn to in times of need and during times of stress

help youth feel better connected to peers, mentors, and their community (Smyth & Eaton-

Erickson, 2009).

Meaningful relationships are typically co-constructed, which results in all parties feeling

safe, supported, and trusted (Fogel, 2004; Smyth, 2017). These meaningful relationships are

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[3] We recognize the need to de-stigmatize youth who are at risk of a multitude of challenges in life such as poverty, homelessness, addictions, and mental health issues. Accordingly, this paper uses a person-first language with the term, *youth at risk*, to refer to those youths who seem to experience challenging life conditions. See later in this introduction section for more details about this terminology.

typically developed on a foundation of mutually respectful communication and positive

interactions between two or more people, and building healthy, engaged, and meaningful

relationships helps individuals feel encouraged to thrive and flourish (Iwasaki et al., 2014).

Trust, bonds, and a sense of connection can be developed through these meaningful, positive

interactions that are co-created and co-operated in a judgement free, safe way (Fogel, 2004;

Laurensen & Birmingham, 2003). Understanding the role of relationships may provide important

insights for how youth at risk are meaningfully engaged in various contexts (Hopper & Iwasaki;

2017; Fogel, 2004).

Relationships involving youth and adults have been explored in a variety of scholarly

fields including, for example, nursing, education, child and youth studies, and social work (e.g.,

Reeve, 2009; Shier, 2001; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). For instance, Bergum and

Dossetor's (2005) work within the field of nursing described how there is a need for increased

attention to be given to the relational ethics between practitioners and the individuals that they

work with. Importantly for the present study, Bergum and Dossetor stated that when thinking

about the relations between practitioners and the people with whom they work, one must ask

how we position ourselves within the relation as a "practitioner" and as a "participant." By

becoming increasingly attentive to what role the individual plays in that moment, and by power-

sharing and co-creating relations, it may be possible to develop more authentic and organic

relationships.

Similarly, Smyth and Eaton-Erickson (2009) called for change in how practitioners co-

create relationships with young people. They discussed how challenging the norm and "being

available" for youth outside the traditional nine-to-five routine work schedule can help prevent

the youth from feeling in distress during times of need. That is, the traditional nine-to-five

schedule does not fit youth's lifestyle. Smyth and Eaton-Erickson described, from a health-care practitioner standpoint, the importance of co-creating relationships *with* (rather than just *for*) youth. Moreover, they discussed the importance of practitioners becoming increasingly reflexive about their interactions with youth and how these shape youth's engagement and success as thriving community members. This increased attention on relationship-building demonstrates commitment to providing opportunities for youth to be engaged in a way that is on their own terms and in a space/location where they are at developmentally (Iwasaki et al., 2014; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009)

The above literature has highlighted an interdisciplinary inquiry into youth-adult relations, yet within the context of the current study, it is important to further understand the role of relationships for meaningfully engaging youth at risk within recreation and leisure settings. Within the recreation and leisure literature, Hopper and Iwasaki (2017) described how the development of meaningful relationships among youth and adults (e.g., family members; practitioners) is important for youth and adults in creating healthy spaces for individuals to feel connected. By identifying similar or congruent leisure interests, it is possible for youth and adults to have commonalities and build meaningful relationships grounded in their leisure pursuits. Research has shown that leisure activities offer the opportunity for individuals to engage socially with those who have similar interests, and that leisure activities can foster a sense of worth through building positive social networks (Kelly Pryor, & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007). Meaningful relationships can lead to the development of an environment where youth can have positive and constructive experiences through their leisure pursuits (Iwasaki et al., 2014).

Despite some evidence indicating the importance of establishing supportive relationships among youth at risk and adults, there are still significant gaps in the literature that discuss the role of "relationships" in meaningfully engaging youth at risk within recreation and leisure contexts. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk within the context of recreation and leisure.

Methods

This study is guided by "qualitative description," as explained by Sandelowski (2000). Qualitative description provides a rigorous method to which straight descriptions of happenings are shared in every day terms (Sandelwoski, 2000). The study of meaningful relationships is a relatively under studied area of research within recreation and leisure domains. As such, the use of qualitative description was ideal as this approach supports the researcher in staying close to the data and at the surface of the words (Sandelowski, 2000), resulting in thematic analyses that are detailed, nuanced, and presented in their natural state. These aspects made qualitative description ideal for the present study.

Participants

Ten participants included six adult practitioners (A; 3 men and 3 women) currently employed in a professional area aimed at working with youth at risk (group one), and four youth at risk (Y; 2 men and 2 women between the ages of 18-24) who were either currently living in or have previously lived in high-risk conditions (e.g., poverty, homelessness, abusive/addictive behaviors). At the time of the study, the youth participants were either presently or have previously experienced marginalization because of their cultural background, homelessness, substance abuse, mental health challenges, and/or poverty.

Participants were purposefully sampled and recruited by a known sponsor to participate in this study. Purposeful sampling includes the selection of participants based on their ability to purposefully inform specific details about the research questions (Creswell, 2013). A known sponsor is someone who has a legitimate relationship with the group of interest (Patton, 2002) and, for this study, the known sponsor was the first author. Participants were purposefully identified as those individuals who could share in-depth insights about the key issues under exploration. Youth and adult participants were recruited from youth-serving community agencies and YOUTH4YEG, an Edmonton youth-led/guided research program that the first author has been involved in for over three years.

Data Generation

In qualitative description, data generation is focused on exploring the who, what, and where of issues (Sandelowski, 2000). According to Fogel (2004), group interviews are an appropriate method for generating a broad range of information about the issues at hand. Generating data through group interviews is a unique, distinct method that involves co-composing information among a group of participants and a researcher (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The interaction among multiple people creates a "happening" that cannot be replicated (Fogel, 2004; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This "happening" allows the participants to co-create a story based on the responses and reactions of the group to the prompts. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) described group interviews as a useful method to generate exploratory data about specific topics that are typically under-studied such as, in this case, the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts. Furthermore, group interviews have been used to engage and build relationships with marginalized populations who

are often fearful and hesitant to engage in research (Cartmel & Casley, 2014; Kitznger, 1994), which was imperative for the present study that included youth at risk.

Prior to data generation, ethical approval was granted through the authors' *University Research Ethics Board.* The group interviews used a semi-structured interview guide. The questions in the interview guide for the practitioner group interview included, for example, "How do you juggle your role as a practitioner/adult when supporting the youth?". The questions asked within the youth at risk interview were similar in nature and included, "Who usually initiates the interactions you presently have with recreation staff?" and "Provide an example of what the interactions look like?". The group interviews were conducted in a downtown University campus classroom. Upon written consent of participants, the group interviews were audio recorded and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Data was analyzed using inductive content analysis, as recommended by Sandelowski (2000) and described in detail by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). Content analysis is a process for interpreting meaning from text data, and involves three stages of preparation, organizing, and reporting (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Within the preparation phase of analysis, the researcher became increasingly immersed in the data by reading interview transcripts several times, and reviewing field notes and documents. Organizing the data involved open coding, which is the process by which categories and themes are developed using a codebook. Further, potential themes were recorded in the margins. Finally, the phase of reporting involved describing themes with the use of direct quotes from interview transcripts were coded under the same themes as the interview transcripts.

Consistent with the leisure literature that has utilized group interviews (e.g., Yeun, 2004), verification of data included continuous member checking (Creswell, 2013) throughout the group process. The member checking provided the opportunity for the researcher to continuously validate the findings to ensure credibility and trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). During the follow-up email, phone call, or in-person meeting with study participants, the participants were asked intentional questions regarding the initial themes. All participants were in support of the developed themes and their content. In addition to member-checking, several strategies of self-verification were employed throughout the research process. These further verification strategies as outlined by Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) included, (a) ensuring the sample is appropriate to the research question; (b) data are analyzed and collected simultaneously and throughout the process to ensure congruency; and (c) analyzed data are supported by new and emerging theories about newly analyzed data in an iterative way (Morse et al., 2002).

Results

Findings from this research suggest that relationships play a role in meaningfully engaging youth through: (a) purposeful activity; (b) (re)writing stories; (c) balance and respect; (d) reflexivity; and (e) growth, transformation, and action.

Purposeful activity

Purposeful activity was a way of, or context for, relationships between youth and adults to flourish, which subsequently supported youth to become meaningfully engaged. For example, culturally based activities, visiting a local music store, and meeting for coffee in the community were a few of the purposeful ways that youth were meaningfully engaged. One of the

practitioner participants, Darrell[4], described the importance of purposeful activity as "this [purposeful activity] is the starting point for all of my interactions." For Darrell, and the other participating practitioners, engaging the youth in purposeful activity was a "level playing field" for them to begin co-creating meaningful relationships. In Darrell's description of a recent purposeful activity, he noted:

> I met a young man quite early this morning to do a practice job interview, he has a job interview this morning and he's a young man who for the last number of years has experienced quite severe mental health and other challenges. In my role, specifically around engagement, he identified quite clearly in all our interactions with him that employment is very important. He's very task-oriented and he *definitely* builds meaning out of purposeful leisure activity.

Darrell spoke about his interaction with this youth as a strong starting point for helping him find meaning and to build rapport. He concluded by poignantly saying, "if you can engage them in what they identify as meaningful the results are often, you know, amazing and this is another great example of that."

When asked about methods for co-developing purposeful activity, the youth participants spoke with importance about using a bottom-up approach to engaging youth. Sam, a youth, described feeling "disengaged" in a recent program he participated in. Sam said, "I feel like they (the staff) were just skirting me along, I already felt like I didn't fit in, and not once was I asked what was important to me, I left and never went back." As Sam remarked, it is important when developing purposeful activity to involve the youth, a method for creating meaning and

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[4] Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the identity of participants.

mutuality. Further to this, Mandy, a youth described how in her experience, "feeling in control of my own path" and through her involvement in a cultural program was,

> Personally, I would say it was just like learning different skills, so for example, one of the sessions we had was like on improvisation. So, I wasn't a very like kind of outgoing or like actressy person and like even if you weren't into acting or improv or that sort of thing, you were still able to participate and it just helped you to like open-up and really express yourself.

Importantly for Mandy was feeling in control of her participation, but also being pushed out of her comfort zone to learn new skills was a meaningful experience. Feeling a sense of control was also emphasized by a practitioner participant. Melanie described her approach to engaging youth as, "they [youth] feel like they're in control and they also have that choice to speak out and you know ask for things that they may need or hey I really like this or I saw this, can we get this in the program, and we have that flexibility."

For both the youth and adult participants, the importance of finding common interests through leisure was a critical path to co-developing meaningful, supportive relationships. As described by Stephanie, a practitioner, "we [youth and practitioners] learn a lot about each other's recreation interests through participating together in our daily programming." Through this exploration of common leisure interest and other interests through leisure, the youth are witnessed to commonalities with adults, leading to mentorship and the co-development of meaningful, supportive leisure interests.

(Re)writing Stories

When asked about the role of meaningful relationships, the participants described the importance of allowing youth to (re)write their own stories about their experiences with

marginalization. Stephanie, a practitioner, spoke about her dedication to letting the youth be heard. She said, "from the first moment I meet them, I am attentive to what they want their story to be… Right off the bat, I am there to walk alongside them when they're ready." Stephanie was attentive to her role in the young peoples' lives, and was adamant that she didn't "force anything on them" by allowing them to tell her what they want their story to be. Melanie, another practitioner, echoed this discussion by saying:

> So, I think that really helps them feel comfortable to coming to our program and being able to discuss what's going on because they're each going through something different and just the environment that we create and how we communicate with them really allows them to feel that they can be open with us and I think that takes time to develop a program with their help. But it goes a long way.

Additionally, the sharing included youth feeling comfortable enough to have their voice heard about their challenges and some of their future aspirations. This included a discussion by Sam, a youth participant, who described the importance of "having a space where I can find that power to make [better] decisions." The participants spoke about the importance of co-creating spaces (physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually) where the youth (and practitioners) felt safe to have their stories (re)written. One practitioner spoke about a recent interaction with a youth where the youth shared her experiences with sexual abuse — Mike said, "she kind of felt really comfortable to share some of her experiences and that kind of showed me that she was open to sharing those things with us and kind of sharing some intimate experiences and it just kind of revealed to us a bit more about her." Importantly for Mike in this interaction was the "sense of empowerment I felt afterwards" and that "we [the staff] have co-created a space with them to share those hard times."

All of the youth who participated described the importance of having their voice heard both in recreation and leisure programming, but also on other important decisions that influence their lives. Carmen, a youth participant, spoke of a recent interaction with a youth-serving agency employee after the death of a family member. She said,

> Just the staff were so mean, they said something rude to me and then made me cry and like not like understanding of my situation like whatsoever and they just like pushed me, like kicked me out of the building

According to Westley, another youth participant who shared similar experiences as Carmen, Westley said, "people who work with youth need to come down to our [youths'] level." For Westley, the simple act of listening to the challenges the youth are faced with goes "a long way." This discussion was echoed by the practitioners when they each spoke about allowing the youth to be the leaders of their own life. For example, Stephanie said,

> I work in a lot of it is around substance use so like if they're using the hard drugs, you feel scared for them cause the fear of the unknown, like what could happen? But if that's the choice they're wanting to make, we need to walk alongside them in that, trying to make sure that they're safe, we need to work with them in those moments.

Stephanie spoke about the importance of creating relationships with the youth that involves being understanding of their current life challenges and working with them to ensure they are safe.

Balance and respect

Participants suggested that relationships play a key role in meaningfully engaging youth through balance and respect. Youth participants described the fine balance between authoritative and mentorship figures in their lives. Westley, a youth participant described the importance of

adults working in youth-serving recreation settings to "just put themselves out there as people."

For Westley, the sense he got from interacting with practitioners who portrayed understanding

and compassionate towards people went a long way in forming a relationship. Westley's words

were echoed by another youth participant when Mandy said:

> I would say mutual respect is really important so they don't exactly treat you like a child,
>
> like a young person or like a youth, and you can tell that they're being authentic. So, like
>
> they're treating you like another human being and how they talk to you is pretty similar
>
> to how they would talk to their parents. And what I really liked too is that they sort of
>
> held us to the same responsibilities.

Mandy suggested the importance of mutual respect as an important facet in the development of

meaningful and supportive relationships. She went on to say, "so I guess sometimes I find with

adults or like older people, they kind of, they're easier on you in a way, like they don't give you

as many responsibilities and things that you can deal with on your own. Mutual respect I would

say for sure yah."

Through this sense of balance and respect, both the practitioner and youth participants

spoke about the opportunity for reciprocal learning to occur. Susan, a practitioner participant,

spoke about the importance of finding the "proper balance between friendship and

professionalism" but emphasized the importance of that proper balance to reciprocal learning

"you know, friends with [professional] barriers." Darrell, a practitioner recalled a recent

interaction with a youth participant where reciprocal learning occurred. They visited a local

guitar shop and he said,

> Going to the music shop and checking out guitars was important because it involves
>
> choice. And through that process, through you know the trip over or afterwards suddenly

you know this conversation happens and it's, wouldn't have happened I don't believe in

as organic and as meaningful way without that choice and without the freedom to often

they're leaving unsafe places and so it's giving them that break and that relief and so that

they can get to a place where they can open and connect with you more.

For Darrell in this moment, the opportunity to learn more about himself and the youth was

shared through exploring and walking through a music store. Further to this, Melanie, a

practitioner participant spoke about how she finds the opportunity to engage in reciprocal

learning with youth through having "some of those more difficult conversations that involve

tough choices, and often, not the outcome one of the parties wanted."

Generally, there was consensus from the practitioner participants about the importance of

balance and respect in forming meaningful relationships with youth. In some form, each

practitioner indicated the role they play in setting a "good tone for programming" and "they

[youth] really watch us, so the positive interactions we show between our peers and other youth,

they [youth] pick up on that." Mike, a practitioner participant, summed up this modelling as

creating "sustainable, professional relationships with our colleagues and with the youth."

Reflexivity

Participants described that to form relationships between adults and youth, each party

needs to be reflective, both personally and professionally. Participants' voices were clear about

how working youth faced with at risk situations, comes with a stigma. When describing what

this stigma involves, one youth said,

I think there is a certain fear or stigma associated with working with "at-risk" youth. Each

of them presents different cases. One kid could be from a good home but struggles with

school and one kid could be addicted to drugs and living on the streets. It is hard to work

on such a different case-to-case basis (Westley).

Susan described the responses she received from family and friends when she first began her job,

she said, "when I first started, my family and friends used to ask me why the kids don't just

smarten up. It took me some time to get over that mindset and to begin listening to their [the

youth's] stories. It really hit home for me then, it wasn't just a matter of 'smartening up'."

Further to this, Carmen, a youth participant described how working with youth at risk is hard

because "there are a lot of labels thrown at these kids." With this, the participants suggested the

need for more reflexivity both "inward and outward".

Through this increased attentiveness to reflexivity subsequently leads to organic,

naturally occurring meaningful relationships. Mandy, a youth participant, described how her

increased sense of reflection led to more meaningful interactions with adults in a youth

leadership academy. She said, "at first, I didn't want to be there, at all, but when I thought about

it more, they [camp counsellors] were just like me [in some way], and that made me feel better

about interacting with them." Similarly, another youth furthered Mandy's comments. Sam said,

"I found it best when they [adult practitioners] have lived experiences like mine, and if they

don't, at least are aware of peoples' different circumstances." For Sam, the importance of being

reflective about people's different lived experiences was evident.

Importantly, the words of friendship were echoed by each of the youth participants when

they described the sense that the adult was a mentor, not a professional. Carmen, a youth

participant described vulnerability as "checking your privilege at the door." Which includes

practitioners being attentive to the power and privilege that they hold and leaving such "at the

door" in order to more organically work with the youth. Each of the youth participants felt it

was important that adult practitioners are attentive about their privilege and "checking their privilege" leads to more meaningful and supportive relationships grounded in mentorship. Westley described his relationship with a practitioner who "had an unorthodox rule book and was flexible in his schedule to support me when I most needed it." Similarly, the practitioner participants discussed how "letting their guard down" was important in forming relationships and as Melanie, a practitioner described, "that reflective practice to grow, individuals [the youth] need that as well, so providing the space for that reflection is crucial." Westley, a youth participant, questioned the idea of vulnerability by asking "can you really be vulnerable if you're in a position of authority?" In support of vulnerability, Darrell a practitioner, mentioned:

> One of my mentors on the professional side said something to me that has always stuck is the recognition that that person that you're working with could be you because we have a shared human experience and I think it's the genuine curiosity of getting to know them as a person and that kind of diffuses that power differential and allows them the opportunity to be able to empower themselves. I don't know that any of us are not guilty of occasionally bringing that power back without intending to but it's always good to reflect on.

Darrell's professional (and personal) reflection was directed both inwardly (on himself) and outwardly (towards his career with the youth).

Growth, transformation, and action

Participants described how relationships support the meaningful engagement of youth through growth, transformation, and action. Sam, a youth participant, described how a sense of growth as a young adult contributed to supportive relationships with adults. In his description, he said "youth don't need handouts, they need hand-ups, to get them back on their feet and to step

up to the plate." Echoing this sense of growth, Susan, a practitioner participant described her relationship with youth involving being a witness to their growth. She said,

> Well, for example, this was our original room and yah the youth were asked about the colors of the paint, that's their artwork, they were very involved in designing this room. It was really fulfilling to see them [grow] through the process and when things start to go awry they'll still come back and they always think of this place as where they can come and be safe.

For Susan, experiencing the youth grow through the process of re-developing their programming space collectively was an opportunity for the youth to grow and stepping up to the plate, in a safe space.

Both practitioner and youth participants also spoke to meaningful engagement, coupled with supportive relationships, in providing the opportunity for youth to experience transformation and action-oriented change. Darrell, a practitioner participant, spoke to this transformation and action-oriented change in relation to the "positive and negative binary that practitioners place on their interactions with youth." Darrell further explained, "like it's either this or that. But really like when it comes to people, it's very natural to have negative and positive experiences, so I don't really see it as a bad thing. It really depends on how we handle the situation and we kind of give what they sort of are looking or need at the time." For Darrell, using challenging situations as opportunity for transformation and action was an important outcome from his interactions with youth. The youth also spoke about their experiences of transformation and action in relation to their interactions with caring adults as mentors. Carmen, a youth participant, spoke about her involvement in a youth-serving agency that involved her in "Theatre of the Oppressed." Carmen said, "I was involved with the uncensored program where I

learned Theatre of the Oppressed. That was a really important skill, that program saved my life."

Theatre of the Oppressed is a transformative, action-oriented method of engaging marginalized young people in sharing their stories through theatre. Carmen described her mentorship at the uncensored program as "lifesaving" and that "my mentors taught me to be good mentors now, too." Other youth participants also shared their experience with relationships through mentorship as transformative and leading to their involvement in action orientated initiatives. Mandy, described her experience at a youth camp,

> I would say yah about the mentors and like the people that we worked with, it was great
> because they were successful in the fields that they were in and they were willing to give
> back to the community and help people, the young people kind of follow in their
> footsteps and like mentor them and give advice and hey this is what I did, this is where I
> screwed up, that sort of thing, so.

Mandy concluded her discussion on mentorship and its leading to her interest in transformative, action orientated initiatives by saying "my mentors provided me the opportunity to grow and to work with me to learn how to lead, now through YOUTH4YEG."

Discussion

The lack of empirical research on the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk within the recreation and leisure literature is evident (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017). Therefore, this research makes a significant contribution to the recreation and leisure literature by providing in-depth insights into the role that relationships between adults and youth play in meaningfully engaging youth faced with at risk life experiences. Our findings have important implications for those looking to better understand

their role as a youth-serving practitioner in co-developing meaningful relationships, and the role of co-creating safe spaces for youth to be meaningfully engaged.

The use of purposeful activity to meaningfully engage youth at risk was consistent with other literature that discussed the use of bottom-up, strengths-based approaches to engaging youth at risk in recreation, leisure, and sports. For example, Hopper and Iwasaki (2017) noted the importance for youth faced with marginalization to be involved as co-programmers in the development of purposeful, meaningful recreation and leisure opportunities. Similarly, our participants described purposeful activity as a starting point for which all interactions between the adults and youth begin. As described by Lashua and Fox (2006), through the youth's involvement in developing purposeful activity, youth can learn skills that involve teamwork, communication, and problem solving. The current study participants described purposeful activity as an opportunity to be pushed out of their comfort zone, together, and to learn about each other in a non-judgemental way. The current study further demonstrates the importance of a bottom-up approach to purposeful activity as a tool for meaningfully engaging youth at risk.

Findings from this research are also consistent with literature that has described the importance of supporting youth at risk to have their voice heard, namely (re)writing stories. Smyth and Eaton-Erickson (2009) discussed the importance of supporting opportunities for youth at risk to have their voices heard and to share their stories of marginalization. Youths' voice and stories have commonly been suppressed by top-down, authoritative interactions with adults. A key finding from this study was that the youth participants spoke about feeling comfortable enough in the physical space and in the relationship with the adult to have their voice heard. This finding is supported by Hopper and Iwasaki (2017) who identified the importance of creating space and relationships *with* youth, not just *for*, which involves working

together, collectively, to create a space and relationships that are supported by mutuality and trust. A unique finding for the current research, is the sense of trust that both the practitioner and youth participants included in their discussion about the role of active (re)writing of stories in meaningfully engaging youth at risk. This finding is unique as it actively demonstrates the role of power-sharing and co-learning through enabling youth to share their stories.

Together with a sense of balance and respect, this research highlighted the significance of an increased dedication to reflexivity. This reflection included both personally and professionally (inwardly and outwardly). The findings from the current study, which highlight the importance of balance and respect, are congruent with other literature, in both the area of recreation and leisure and other youth-centred research. For example, Smyth (2017) discussed the role of practitioners in acting like mentors, not necessarily authoritative figures, when working with marginalized youth. Also alluded to by Smyth (2017), the participants in this study suggest that practitioners need to be flexible, which includes an "unorthodox rule book" and being available outside of the standard 9am to 5pm work schedule in order to be available when youth most need help. This, as discussed by Smyth and the current study's participants, increases a sense of trust and balance within the relationship between the youth and the adult, which can lead to more meaningful opportunities for youth to flourish in all aspects of their lives.

The importance of practitioners and youth being reflexive, both personally and professionally, was discussed by the study participants. This finding is in line with Bergum and Dossetor's (2005) work in the field of nursing when they described a need for increased attention to relational ethics between practitioners and the individuals they work with. Similar to the current study, Bergum and Dossetor discussed the importance of positioning ourselves within our relationships both as a "practitioner" and a "participant." This reflection involves becoming

attentive to the role each individual plays in power-sharing and co-creating relationships. A unique finding of the current study was a common thread of power-sharing where both youth and adults played an active role in being attentive to power-imbalances. This included practitioners being increasingly aware of their power "and checking it at the door." Power-sharing through reflection was similarly discussed in Hopper and Iwasaki (2017) who developed a conceptual model of their findings, which included reflection points, indicating the importance of adults' power-sharing with youth to maintain more meaningful/trustful relationships.

The findings from the current study contribute to the literature that has described the importance of co-creating safe spaces for youth to realize potential for action and transformation. Iwasaki et al. (2014) discussed the importance of co-creating spaces where youths feel free to express themselves, free of judgment. The participants in the current study discussed the role that safe spaces to be created play in youth realizing their potential. A unique, important finding of the current research was the youth realizing their potential to be agents of change through the development of meaningful relationships with adult mentors. In line with Cammarota's (2011) discussion on Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD), where youth are empowered to be more aware and proactive about injustices their communities face, youth in the current study expressed the importance of mentors and safe spaces for them to become agents of change. Within these constructs, the participants spoke about the development of youth feeling a sense of change and transformation through their engagement toward growth. Combined with the sense of transformation, the participants described seeing youth (and themselves as youth participants) being agents of change. For example, as described earlier, one youth participant's involvement in "Theatre of the Oppressed" was transformative and "lifesaving," which led her to become mentors of other youth through her continued involvement in action orientated initiatives. The

increased notions of leisure research and its role in social justice issues (Mowatt, 2018; Stewart, 2014) speak to the current research findings, as the youth participants indicated the role they now play in YOUTH4YEG, a social justice action-orientated youth group.

Conclusion

This study adds to the literature on the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk within recreation and leisure settings. There are limitations to this qualitative study. For instance, given the participants were youth purposefully selected from a specific group, their unique experiences will be different than those from other youth groups. However, given our study has provided important insights into the role of relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts, it is our hope that the findings from our research are transferable to broad audiences. In particular, the findings have potentially important implications for practitioners and policymakers interested in incorporating more meaningful engagement approaches to their programming.

Several future research directions are recommended when exploring the role of relationships in the meaningful engagement of youth at risk. Given the importance of relationships to youth faced with marginalization, future research is needed to explore what the idea of relationships means to both adult and youth participants. Relationships can be quite complex and include various constructs not explored in this study. Particularly, the use of phenomenological methods should be employed to better understand the nature and phenomenon of relationships in recreation and leisure contexts. This would potentially lead to evidence that could influence the way practitioners more successfully incorporate relationship building into their work.

Another important area of study should involve actively engaging youth and their communities in research, particularly through participatory approaches. As indicated in the discussion section, the recent call by leisure scholars to consider the role leisure research plays in social justice issues (see Mowatt, 2018) highlights the importance of Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR; Ozer, 2017). In recreation and leisure contexts, YPAR would provide opportunity for youth and their communities to work together in order to collaboratively address social justice issues with which they may be faced.

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CHAPTER 5

GENERAL DISCUSSION

General Discussion

The overall purpose of this dissertation was to gain a better understanding of the meaningful engagement of youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts. In order to address this purpose three studies focusing on different aspects of the role of meaningful engagement in recreation and leisure contexts were completed. Study one was a conceptual paper that explored the relevant literatures on the topics of youth-led approaches to engagement and their role in meaning-making within recreation and leisure contexts. The purpose of study two was to explore how engaging youth at risk through a youth-led approach to recreation programming can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making. Finally, the purpose of study three was to explore the role of relationships in the meaningful engagement of youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts.

The results of the first study revealed the role of leisure as a meaningful way of youth engagement. Specifically, the results of the paper outlined how youth-led leisure opportunities can help young people caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, which often magnify inequities and hinder positive developmental outcomes. Through a critical review of the literature, a conceptual model of mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement was developed for use in future research and practice. Described as circular relationships in the model, youth-led meaningful engagement through leisure is proposed to promote positive relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and empowerment. Previous research has largely focused on deficit-based, top-down programming for youth at risk (Caldwell & Smith, 2006; Ellis & Caldwell, 2005; Larson, 2000), and this model makes a significant contribution to the literature by focusing on bottom-up, strengths-based approaches. The results highlighted the noticeable absence of youth-led approaches in recreation and leisure. This study adds to the

literature (Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Travis, 2013) that focused on youth-led approaches to recreation and leisure programming. Finally, this study adds to the literature both practically and theoretically through the presentation of a conceptual model. The conceptual model outlines reflective and practical considerations for programmers, policy makers, and researchers who are interested in incorporating youth-led approaches.

Utilizing a qualitative case study on 'Challenge by Choice,' the findings from the second study contribute to the literature by identifying how youth-led approaches can contribute to leisure-induced meaning-making for youth at risk. Using Iwasaki, Messina, and Hopper's (2018) meaning-making framework as a theoretical framework, the results indicated that youth at risk could experience leisure-induced meaning-making. To my knowledge, this is the first published study to specifically use Iwasaki, Messina, and Hopper's meaning-making framework to further understand leisure-induced meaning-making. Furthermore, findings suggest that meaning-making is an appropriate approach for understanding how one's core values are being addressed through leisure. Overall, the youths' involvement provided opportunity for them to live more meaningful lives through feeling connected to their community; overcoming barriers, together; developing personal collective positive outcomes; supporting interest and endeavors; and co-creating safe spaces to be engaged. This study demonstrates the value of using youth-led approaches to recreation and leisure programming and its role in meaningful engagement of youth at risk.

The findings from the third study demonstrated the critical role of relationships between adult practitioners and youth at risk in the meaningful engagement of youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts. Relationships appeared to play a key role in the meaningful engagement of youth at risk through purposeful activity; (re)writing stories; balance and respect; reflexivity; and

growth, transformation, and action. This study makes an important contribution to the literature by purposefully addressing the critical role relationships between adults and youth at risk play in the meaningful engagement of youth. These findings have important implications for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers on how their relationships influence the meaningful engagement with the young people their services target. Furthermore, the findings from this study indicate the importance of actively engaging youth in purposeful activity and to be agents of change for societal injustices.

The threads of these three studies indicate the inherently complex nature of meaningfully engaging youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts. The complex nature of meaningfully engaging youth has not been widely addressed in the literature; however, the current dissertation research builds on the emerging body of literature which address the use of meaningful engagement of youth at risk. (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017; Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007). The studies highlight both practical and theoretical considerations for practitioners and policy makers to develop and/or improve youth-led, meaningful engagement strategies targeted for youth faced with marginalization. Specifically, findings from these three studies outline considerations for developing, for example, the co-creation of safe spaces and open, trusting relationships between practitioners and adults (Chou et al., 2015; Smyth, 2017). This purposeful and meaningful engagement through recreation and leisure has demonstrated the increased sense of meaning and purpose in life, leading to positive outcomes, which contributes to previous literature on meaning-making with marginalized youth (Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017).

Findings from this dissertation research also has implications for recreation policy and practice. In particular, the use of youth-led/centered approaches to programming provides an important consideration in the implementation of the National Recreation Framework "Pathways

to Wellbeing." For example, within the Framework the goal of 'Inclusion and Access' outlines how "recreation should be of equal access to all Canadians through increasing inclusion and access to recreation for populations that face constraints to participation" (A Framework for Recreation in Canada, 2015, p. 22). The findings from this dissertation research provide valuable tools for practitioners who wish to make their programs more inclusive and for youth faced with marginalization. Specifically, findings from this research highlight the importance of incorporating youth-led approaches, mobilizing youth voice into action, and the co-creation of spaces for youth to be actively engaged.

The manner in which youth were engaged in studies two and three of this dissertation also makes an important methodological contribution to the recreation and leisure literature. Specifically, the incorporation of marginalized youths' voice is a unique and significant contribution to the recreation and leisure literature. Youth voice is noticeably absent in the recreation and leisure literature (Cammarota, 2011; Iwasaki & Hopper, 2017), and this dissertation makes contributions to the literature in that it provided opportunity for youth to share and to have their voice heard. There is a wide body of recreation, leisure, and sport literature that includes the study of youth, however, their involvement as active participants and the sharing of their voice is absent (Chou et al., 2015; Messner & Musto, 2014).

Findings from all three studies highlight the importance of mobilizing research to practice. An important contribution of this dissertation is this mobilization of research to act for change. This mobilization of research is evident through each of the three studies' practical implications, which include specific findings that are transferable into practice. The importance of connecting theory, research, and practice has been addressed in the recreation and leisure

related literature, specifically the importance of closing the "gap" between research and practice by mobilizing research into practice (Bertram, 2016; Glover, 2015).

Mobilization of conceptual model

A unique and important contribution of this dissertation was the initial mobilization of a literature-informed model developed in study one (i.e., Hopper &Iwasaki, 2017; Figure 2.1), and described in detail within Chapter 2. While not included as part of the specific findings for this dissertation, following the group interviews conducted in study three there was a unique opportunity to seek practitioners' feedback about the model. Practitioners shared their ideas regarding the model's potential adoption into practice. Practitioners received a 10-minute presentation and description on the model by the lead author, and were then asked purposeful questions regarding the model, including "What are your initial thoughts on this conceptual model?" and "As a recreation practitioner, how feasible do you think this model would be in your practice?". Generally, practitioners described the model as a good visual representation of the use of youth-centred approaches to programming. For example, Darrell said "I think you've done a really good job incorporating everything we read about when we think about this [youth-centred] approach to practice. Especially for those people who aren't familiar with this way [of practice]." Additionally, Stephanie stated "as practitioners, I don't think we often take time to think about how each of these things [leisure, youth engagement, and relationships] play a role in the meaning the youth find through our programs. This is important, I think." Stephanie included her thoughts about the over idealization that the model may present, "I think sometimes we hope that each of these things occur in this uniform fashion. Realistically, my day takes different paths depending on the youth." Mike agreed and said "I can see some of these things occurring on the

daily, but often none of them do. I don't think we can expect each to happen this way. Each day and client are different."

The overall feasibility for practice was also discussed in relation to the model and the practitioners' work. Mike explained, "for me, I already do many of these things so could easily incorporate these specifics. But, for those who don't already do some of these things, I think, you know, they would need coaching around where to start. It's a lot." Darrell echoed these comments and said "I have never really thought about the relationship piece, but already do many of these other things. This [youth-centred] approach takes time to wrap your head around. Getting people to adopt this would take time, but could maybe worth it?" Finally, Melanie said "as recreation practitioners, we are stretched *really* thin, if you don't work in a program that supports this style, this may not be possible. It should start from the top. Management needs to buy in." The words of the practitioner participants suggest that Hopper and Iwasaki's (2017) model [Figure 2.1] may play a pivotal role in the future development of youth-led approaches and engagement to recreation and leisure programming. Ultimately, this initial mobilization of the model through practitioner feedback provided important insight for further research that should include empirical testing of the model, as well as implementing Hopper and Iwasaki's (2017) model in a practice setting.

Future research

This dissertation research also highlights areas for future research. Although two of the studies comprising this dissertation used some forms of collaborative research efforts, future research directions are suggested. In fact, given leisure's unique characteristics of being more intrinsically motivated, meaningful, and unrestricted (Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011) than other life domains, the connection between leisure studies and the future use of engaged,

community-participatory scholarship should be considered. The scholarship of engagement typically requires academic researchers to be respectful, and work in reciprocal manners with the community through co-learning and power-sharing (Boyer, 1996; Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012). Such collaborative and reciprocal relationships allow for researchers and community stakeholders to work together to exchange and mobilize knowledge and resources that transcend the boundaries of disciplines, organizations, and communities. The scholarship of engagement understands research as a more democratic, active way of advancing the public good through community-university partnerships (Arnstein, 1969). Critical to future research directions as they relate to this dissertation is the mobilization of abilities, wisdoms, and lived experiences from varying sources. Including from cross-sectoral partners, in this case, youth and other non-academic stakeholders.

Together with the broader connection between leisure studies and the scholarship of engagement, studies that address youth at risk should continue to consider the incorporation of youths' active voice in their research and knowledge mobilization. The use of youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) incorporates a youth-centred approach to engagement based on the principles of mutual respect, relationship-building, power-sharing, capacity-building, and collective forces to address social injustices (Cammarota, 2011; Chou et al., 2015; Gomez & Ryan, 2016). YPAR as described by Ozer (2016) is "a specialized form of community-based participatory research where youth are trained to identify major concerns in their communities and are trained to research the nature of the problem" (p. 263). Increasingly, the use of YPAR has shown benefits in effectively and meaningfully addressing societal issues and challenge that youth at risk face (Chou et al., 2015; Gomez & Ryan, 2016; Kornbluh et al., 2016; Ozer, 2016). Future youth-focused recreation and leisure-related scholarship should

consider the use of YPAR within recreation and leisure-related contexts. The use of YPAR may create unique opportunities for youth-led programming and meaningful, purposeful research. That is, engaging in recreation and leisure related activities (e.g., sports, the arts) are common practice among youth, and as demonstrated through this dissertation, pose a different set of challenges and barriers. Leading youth through YPAR on recreation and leisure platforms could support youths' voice in advocating for social and systemic changes. Together, these two participatory frameworks/methods (i.e., the scholarship of engagement and YPAR) provide the field of recreation and leisure studies an opportunity to continue working to facilitate capacity building, empowerment, and social change among young people faced with life challenges.

There is also a need for future research to explore the role leisure scholarship plays in social justice initiatives. A growing number of recreation and leisure scholars (see Mowatt, 2018; Stewart, 2014) have focused their attention towards the role leisure research plays in social justice. Specifically, the use of Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD; Cammarota, 2011) should be considered as a way of empowering young people faced with marginalization. Through SJYD, youth learn key skills that impact themselves personally and their wider community. SJYD goes beyond our understanding of youth (from a middle-class white deficit-based perspective where youth are problems that require fixing) and allows youth to become more aware of a) power within social relationships, b) make their identity central, c) promoting systematic social change, d) encouraging the collective to work together towards an action, and e) embrace youth culture (Cammarota, 2011). Incorporating SJYD into future research (and practice) would allow these young people to realize how they experience social marginalization as a key to their empowerment and self-discovery. Within this realization, the youth may become aware of the larger forces to marginalization and that is not simply a result of their own

volition. With this newly formed knowledge, the young person may adopt a social justice perspective that then supports them in making systematic changes.

The strengths and limitations of each of the three studies that comprise this dissertation have been discussed in detail in each chapter. Generally, though, the overall strengths of this dissertation include the incorporation of the active voice of youth at risk, which is noticeably absent from the vast recreation and leisure literature (Hopper & Iwasaki, 2017). In addition, frontline practitioners' perspectives on a key aspect of meaningfully engaging youth at risk was incorporated. Each study was methodologically coherent and rigorous through the commitment to several self-verification strategies.

Despite the rigour of the dissertation research, there are limitations that should be considered. Although the sample sizes were appropriate for the purposes of this dissertation research, they were generally small in participant numbers. Given that qualitative research's intent is not to provide generalizability (nor the purpose of this dissertation), this is not a shortcoming of this dissertation per se; however, there are certain contexts where generalizability may be appropriate. Additionally, this study did not consider specific cultural backgrounds that the youth identified with. Exploring the meaningful engagement of youth at risk with the incorporation of various cultural perspectives may influence the overall experiences of youth at risk.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation research makes an important addition to the recreation and leisure literature and youth at risk recreation field of practice. Overall, the findings from each of the three studies indicates the importance of actively engaging youth through meaning-centered and strength-based perspectives within recreation and leisure contexts. The research in this

dissertation provides a better understanding of the role of meaningful engagement of youth at risk in recreation and leisure contexts through the view of youth and practitioners. This dissertation described the meaning-making process and how a bottom-up approach to recreation and leisure programming allows youth at risk to live a meaningful and purposeful life. The experience of marginalization among youth will likely continue to exist. It is hoped that the findings of this research will contribute and inform the overall practice of meaningful engagement used by researchers and frontline youth serving practitioners. Further, it will contribute to a more positive outlook for these young people. Finally, this research provides a foundation for future research that continues to explore the meaningful engagement of youth risk in recreation and leisure contexts.

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APPENDECIES

Appendix A

Study 2 Interview Guide
What is necessary for meaning-making processes for youth at risk in leisure contexts?

Practitioner participants
Introduction:
I am doing a study to find out more about how your involvement as a practitioner in Challenge by Choice program leads to more meaningful leisure for youth at risk. I want to know how a bottom-up approach or a youth-led engagement method may foster or bring about opportunities for the youth to find meaning. Before we start I just want to check you are aware a few things: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can leave at any time. Anything you tell me will be kept confidential, that means I won't tell anyone anything you tell me. When I write up my results I will not include your name or the names of anyone else you might talk about. Also, if you do not want to answer a specific question, that is OK. There are no 'right or wrong' answers to these questions. I am just interested in what you think. Do you have any questions you would like to ask before we start?

Demographics:
Hi there, could you please provide your demographic information? Age, gender, cultural background? What is your educational background?

Practitioner:
Given the study focuses on understanding the interactions (connections, engagements, relationships) between recreation practitioners, youth at risk and the leisure programming, I would like to understand how you see recreation (and especially Challenge by Choice) programs having an impact on young people/participants' lives.

> Explain what recreation and leisure mean to you. Please provide some examples for this.

> What activities or experiences in your life do you feel have shaped how you currently understand "recreation" or "leisure"?
>> Perhaps thinking back to when you were younger, or perhaps a new leisure passion?

I am interested in meaning-making, this is a term that within the leisure context. Please tell me what meaning-making means to you? Would you be able to explain to me what you feel meaning-making means or a meaningful life means?

Some literatures suggests that meaning-making refers to the way of engaging in an activity to find a purpose of life and to make sense of life. Tell me about meaning making and how you might (or might not) experience this in your **own l**eisure activity? How does that influence how you may foster meaning-making in your practice?

What do see the role of constructive and meaningful leisure is in benefiting youth at risk (including youth who participate in Challenge by Choice program), especially emphasizing leisure-induced "meaning-making"?

What role, if any, do you think leisure plays in meaning-making? Or leading to more fulfilling lives for the young people you work with?

Can you think about how your **own** leisure provides opportunity for you to be *connected* (self-expression, exploration, and spiritual, and cultural connectedness)?

Can you provide me some examples of how your leisure provides opportunity for you to live a discovered life, personally and collectively?

And a composed life? This means how your leisure helps you stay collected and in control and to maintain harmony and balance.

How about empowerment? Can you think of an example of when your leisure has helped you feel in control?

Now, thinking back to your own leisure, can you tell me about how CbC provides the opportunity for the youth participants to experience these?

Prior to beginning your position as a recreation practitioner, in what ways did you interact with (connect with, engage with, have relationships with) youth at risk?

How do see other recreation practitioners interacting with "at-risk" young people?

How do you feel the Challenge by Choice program is unique in offering constructive and meaningful leisure and benefiting those "high-risk" youth, especially emphasizing leisure-induced "meaning-making"?
    To feel better connected? To discover about themselves and others? To feel more confident in dealing with stressors, and to be resilient.

In what ways do you presently engage youth at risk?

Can you please tell me a bit about what this engagement looks like?

What do you envision the role of youth engagement playing in meaningful leisure?

How do you currently use a youth-lead approach to your TR practice?

What role do you think meaning-making plays in the youths' lives?

Please tell me about any connections that you feel support your interactions with the marginalized people and "at-risk" in the community? And in support of providing a youth-lead approach to programming?

For example, the work or community culture? Colleagues? Friends? Family? Community groups and/or programs? Specific activities?

Please tell me about any barriers that you feel get in the way of your interactions when engaging youth at risk?

For example, the work or community culture? Colleagues? Friends? Family? Agency Mandates? Performance objectives?

Youth at risk participants:
Introduction:
I am doing a study to find out more about how your involvement as a participant in the Challenge by Choice program leads to more meaningful leisure for youth at risk. I want to know how a bottom-up approach or a youth-led engagement method may foster or bring about opportunities for you to find meaning. Before we start I just want to check you are aware of a few things: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can leave at any time. Anything you tell me will be kept confidential, that means I won't tell anyone anything you tell me. When I write up my results I will not include your name or the names of anyone else you might talk about. Also, if you do not want to answer a specific question, that is OK. There are no 'right or wrong' answers to these questions. I am just interested in what you think. Do you have any questions you would like to ask before we start?

Hi there, could you please provide your demographic information? Age, gender, cultural, and educational background?

How long have you been involved with Challenge by Choice?

To begin, a term often used to define young people who are faced with challenges, is "at-risk" or "high-risk" what do these words mean to you?

Given the study focuses on understanding the interactions between recreation practitioners, youth at risk and the leisure programming, I would like to understand how you see recreation (and especially Challenge by Choice) programs having an impact on your life.

Prior to joining Challenge by Choice, what types of leisure programs or personal leisure do you partake in?

Please explain what recreation and leisure mean to you?

Tell me about a recreation or leisure experience that you had that was positive. What was it about this experience that was so positive? How do you think that shapes your current understanding or feelings towards recreation or leisure?

Tell me about a recreation or leisure experience that you had that was negative. What was it about this experience that was so negative? How do you think that shapes your current understanding or feelings towards recreation or leisure?

Meaning-making refers to the way of engaging in an activity to find a purpose of life and to make sense of life. How do you experience meaning-making in your own leisure activity?

What role, if any, do you think leisure plays in meaning-making? Or leading to a more fulfilling life

Can you think about how your **own** leisure provides opportunity for you to be *connected* (self-expression, exploration, and spiritual, and cultural connectedness)?

Can you provide me some examples of how your leisure provides opportunity for you to live a discovered life, personally and collectively?

And a composed life? This means how your leisure helps you stay collected and in control and to maintain harmony and balance.

How about empowerment? Can you think of an example of when your leisure has helped you feel in control?

Now, thinking back to your own leisure, can you tell me about how CbC provides the opportunity for the participants to experience these?

In your own words, how would you define constructive or meaningful leisure?

What do see the role of constructive and meaningful leisure is in benefiting youth/young people?

Would you be able to explain to me what you feel meaning-making means or a meaningful life means?

What role (if any) do you think leisure plays in meaning-making or making your life more meaningful? Or leading to more fulfilling lives for young people?
        To feel better connected? To discover about themselves and others? To feel more confident in dealing with stressors, and to be resilient.

How do you feel the Challenge by Choice program is unique in offering constructive and meaningful leisure and benefiting youth, especially emphasizing how you find meaning in your leisure?

During your time participating in the Challenge by Choice program, what types of changes (if any) have you experienced as they relate to making your life more meaningful?

Did these changes happen because of experiences in your leisure? If so please described such experiences.

Any changes in your personal life?

How do you feel Challenge by Choice currently "engages" you?

What do you think the role of youth engagement playing in making your leisure and your life more meaningful?

How does Challenge by Choice currently use a youth-lead approach?

What role do you think meaning-making plays in your life?

In what ways, if any does Challenge by Choice help you build a good relationship, respect each other, appreciate/promote youth's talents, empower youth, etc.?

Appendix B

Study 3 Interview Guide
What is the role of youth – adult relationships in meaningfully engaging youth at risk in recreation and leisure settings?

Practitioners' Group Interview:
Introduction:
Hi everyone, thank-you for coming. As a reminder, I am doing a study to find out more about how your involvement as a recreation practitioner/service worker whose practice aims at providing services for "at-risk". I want to know the role of supportive, safe and trustworthy youth-adult relationships how this leads to more meaningful engagement of youth at risk. Before we start I just want to check you understand a few things: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can leave at any time. Anything we talk about today will be kept confidential, that means I won't tell anyone anything you tell me. When I write up my results I will not include your names or the names of anyone else you might talk about. Also, if you do not want to answer a specific question, that is OK. There are no 'right or wrong' answers to these questions. I am just interested in what you think. Do you have any questions you would like to ask before we start?

Tell me about your most recent interaction with a youth at risk.
      What is positive? What can you remember about it? How about a negative experience?

Through your observations, do ever witness recreation practitioners interacting with young people including youth who participate in your programs? How does this interaction look?

Prior to beginning your position as a recreation practitioner, in what ways did you interact with youth at risk?
      In other words, do you remember a particular time you had interaction with a homeless youth, or a perhaps a family member who experienced hardship?

      How did this or does this impact your current work?

How different or similar in your interactions and relationships with youth at risk between your first months and/or years of working as a recreation practitioner versus your present interactions and relationships with them?

      If so, what has changed?

      What do you feel has shaped these changes?

      As an adult mentor, what role do you play in empowering the youth?

      How do you juggle your role as a practitioner/adult when supporting the youth? Do you power share with youth?

What role does co-learning with youth play in your current programming?

Have you ever (connected, engaged, made relationships) with youth at risk and other community members whom you are providing services for in activities outside of your work place role?

If so, can you please tell me about some of these interactions

If not, do you wish there were ways to interact (connect, engage, relate) with the community members outside of the work environment?

What do you imagine these interactions (connections, engagements, relations) might look like?

Where might these interactions take place?

Who usually initiates the interactions you presently have with youth at risk? How could these interactions be changed?

In thinking back to your decision to work in this community, were you already then thinking about your interactions with marginalized youth?

Did you see interacting with marginalized and youth at risk as an aspect of your becoming a recreation practitioner?

What did you imagine these interactions (connections, engagements, relationships) would entail or be like?

During your time working in the community, what changes, if any, did you experience in your understanding of interacting with "at-risk" and those on the margins?

Did these changes happen because of experiences in your work experiences?

In your personal life?

In your own words, can you define what a safe space is?

What can you tell me about co-creating safe spaces?

How do you or how does your facility currently create safe spaces?

Are these spaces co-developed?

How does creating safe spaces align with an engagement/bottom-up approach?

Can you tell me a bit about co-learning and power-sharing?

What opportunities do you currently offer to co-learn and power-share?

What benefit can you see this bring to "at-risk" young people's lives?

Tell me a bit about how relationships are formed in your work/recreation and leisure?

> Between youth, between adults and between youth and adults?

Youth at risk Group Interview:
Introduction
Hi everyone, thank-you for coming. As a reminder, I am doing a study to find out more about how your involvement as a youth who may at one point been labelled as an youth at risk and accessed a variety of services in the city (recreation, housing support, etc). I want to know the role of supportive, safe and trustworthy youth – adult relationships and how this leads to more meaningful engagement of youth at risk. Before we start I just want to check you understand a few things: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can leave at any time. Anything we talk about today will be kept confidential, that means I won't tell anyone anything you tell me. When I write up my results I will not include your name or the names of anyone else you might talk about. Also, if you do not want to answer a specific question, that is OK. There are no 'right or wrong' answers to these questions. I am just interested in what you think. Do you have any questions you would like to ask before we start?

Tell me about a recent time you interacted with an adult in a service setting?

Please tell me about a positive experience, relationship or interaction you have had with an adult staff? Why was this experience so positive?

> What do you typically expect when you interact with adult staff? Good? Bad? Positive?

> What would you like to see in your interactions with adult staff?

How do you describe your interactions and relationships with staff in your typical recreation and leisure engagement?

> What opportunities, if any, are there for power-sharing between youth and adult, or allowing youth to lead? Any examples?

> Tell me how power-sharing could be a positive thing. And how could it be negative?

> What opportunities, if any, are there for co-learning in terms of youth and adult learn from each other?

> What do the interactions look like between the staff?

How do you typically make friends? Where do you meet your friends?

What types of things do you like to do with your friends?

Who usually initiates the interactions you presently have with staff?

Are your interactions initiated mostly by you or recreation staff?

By other community members?

How do you typically see staff interacting with youth participants?

How could the recreation staff you deal with better support the youth participants?

Why is this important?

Would this make you more motivated to participate?

Appendix C

Approval of Ethics

Notification of Approval

Date: March 20, 2017

Study ID: Pro00068079

Principal
Investigator: Tristan Hopper

Study
Supervisor: Yoshitaka Iwasaki

Study Title: Engaging "at-risk" youth: Meaning-making in leisure contexts

Approval
Expiry Date: Monday, March 19, 2018

Approved Consent Form:	Approval Date	Approved Document
	3/20/2017	Consent Form Practitioner_Hopper.docx
	3/20/2017	Consent Form Institutional_Hopper.docx

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

Anne Malena, PhD
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).