

**FINDING THEIR VOICE: YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR  
PARTICIPATION AT THE BOYS AND GIRLS CLUBS OF CANADA**

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 2010

A Thesis  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
of the University of Lethbridge  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

**MASTER OF EDUCATION  
COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY**

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA**

January 2014

## **Abstract**

This study examines the specific elements of youth's experiences at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada (BGC) that contribute to the development of their social and emotional competencies. Social and emotional competencies include managing one's emotions, developing concern for others, and making responsible, ethically informed decisions. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 respondents ranging in age from 16 to 18 years old. This study gave adolescents a voice, empowering them to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which community youth programs can assist in positive youth development. Data analysis revealed three categories of themes: social setting at the BGC, interpersonal connections, and personal development. The CASEL model of social and emotional learning (SEL) was used as a conceptual framework, and evidence from the research themes was used to demonstrate how SEL skills may have been fostered at the BGC. The four elements of the BGC that were mentioned by respondents most frequently in relation to the development of SEL competencies were receiving and offering social support, acquiring successful coping skills, engaging in formal leadership opportunities, and developing conflict prevention and resolution strategies. The results of this study have implications for theory and practice. The information presented in this study can guide onsite workers to focus on specific aspects in their interactions with youth and inform future youth program planning.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the Boys and Girls Club of Lethbridge. From the start you have supported me in my research, and I am so grateful to all the staff and volunteers who helped me conduct this research.

Thank you to the youth who took the time to share their voices during the interviews. Without you I would have had an empty voice recorder, and a stack of blank pages.

A big thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Robert Runté. You challenged me to think like a researcher and write with precision. I am so appreciative of all the guidance that you have given to me.

Thank you to my committee, Dr. Mary Runté and Dr. Blythe Shepard, as well as the external examiner, Dr. Thomas Akiva. I appreciate all the time you have spent on my thesis. Your feedback has been so valuable to me.

To Tami, it is difficult to express how much your love and support has meant to me over the last two years. You have given me a reason to smile and laugh during my most difficult and stressful days. Thank you!

To IB, you have been a wonderful study buddy, an enthusiastic walking partner, and a caring companion.

To Mom, Dad and Chelsea, thank you for always being there for me and supporting my dreams. We are now a Master family.

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## Chapter 1: Overview

Research in developmental psychology has placed particular importance on adolescence. This developmental period has been recognized as a time of immense cognitive, social, and emotional development (Larson, 2000; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Thompson, 1994). The average youth has approximately 67 hours of out-of-school time each week, roughly double the amount of time they spend in school (Schonert-Reichl, 2007). Membership in youth programs continues to grow; yet research on the personal and social benefits of out-of-school programs has been mostly overlooked (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). What do youth feel they gain by attending community programs? What types of activities do they believe are most beneficial? Are there specific areas of personal or interpersonal skills development that they attribute to their attendance in the program? Many questions remain unanswered. In this chapter, I provide a description of the research problem and establish how this thesis contributes to both theoretical and practical applications. I also provide the purpose of this research study and an overview of the thesis.

### Statement of the Problem

The majority of young people's time is spent outside of school; there is, however, relatively little research that considers the specific elements of youth programs that promote personal and social developmental benefits (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). The growing consensus is that adolescents—or youth<sup>1</sup>, as they are often referred to in the community programming literature—require support outside of school hours to foster

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<sup>1</sup> Within this paper the terms *youth* and *adolescents* will be used interchangeably to refer to individuals between the ages of 13 and 19 years old.

their developmental competencies (Anderson-Butcher & Cash, 2010; Schonert-Reichl, 2007). Researchers who study children's out-of-school time believe that particular attention must be paid to uncovering specific factors in youth programs that are associated with positive outcomes (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). One area of youth programs that has been shown to promote positive outcomes later in life is an emphasis on developing social and emotional competencies. Research examining youth's out-of-school time suggested that community organizations, such as the Boys and Girls Club, may offer a location for youth to feel welcome, where they can receive safe, caring, and developmentally nurturing support (Anderson-Butcher, Cash, Saltzburg, Midle, & Pace, 2004; Jordan & Nettles, 2000). In the past, many studies focusing on identifying the developmental growth that occurs in youth activities have used surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). Although surveys and questionnaires are effective in describing characteristics of a large population, and focus groups are time- and cost-efficient methods of data collection, information-rich descriptions of individual human interactions are absent.

In studies that use surveys and questionnaires, connections may be drawn between attendance in a youth program and an increase or decrease in some outcome measure (e.g., an interest in helping others or an ability to cope with stress), but, at times, individual's experiences are lost in the data. Some of the limitations for surveys and questionnaires include employing set responses (e.g., using Likert scales or brief short-answer questions) and restricting the ability of researchers to follow-up on particular participant responses. These limitations make it more difficult for researchers to explore

deeper into the participants' responses in order to better understand the specific features of the youth program that helped facilitate each respondent's development. As a result, these types of quantitative research methods are not amenable to describing the particular features that characterize an effective program for youth development, and were not suitable for investigating the research objectives set out in this thesis.

Using focus groups, researchers are able to follow up on participant responses, which is an improvement over surveys and questionnaires. Focus groups do, however, possess weaknesses in describing the specific features of programs that promote social and emotional development in youth. Comparing the rationales for focus groups and one-on-one interviews in qualitative research, Breen (2006) reported that focus groups are ideal for "the generation of new ideas formed within a social context" (p. 466). In contrast, one-on-one interviews are more appropriate if the researcher seeks to "probe individual experiences, encouraging self-reflection on issues that could be distorted if social pressure were placed on the individual" (Breen, 2006, p. 466). In the case of research on social and emotional development in youth programs, it is imperative that respondents feel safe to share the elements of the program that they found most beneficial. At times, participants may be uncomfortable sharing certain parts of their experience, such as how their emotional needs were met by a staff member, in the presence of their peers. Yet, this information would be very important for the researcher's understanding of the specific elements of the program that positively impacted that participant's development. If these disclosures are considered to be personally revealing or sensitive in nature, the social setting of focus groups may deter

participants, especially adolescent participants, from sharing the specific features of their experiences in youth programs.

Focus groups are also susceptible to being controlled by one or two “vocal or dominant” (Breen, 2006, p. 467) participants. Having participants who control the conversation may lead to a false sense of security for researchers. Although these researchers may believe they have heard from a group of participants, it is more likely that they have only received the viewpoints of one or two participants and then passive agreement from the other participants. Along the same lines, social coercion or *groupthink*, in which group members “suspend critical thinking, or minimize conflict to achieve harmony and agreement within a group” (Passer & Smith, 2004, p. 610), is a stated disadvantage of focus groups (Breen, 2006). Being in a socially sanctioned setting may make it difficult for participants to express a divergent perspective once there appears to be agreement amongst other group members. This is particularly relevant in research with adolescent participants, since young people often rely on a well-established social hierarchy and commonly strive to fit in with the assumed majority. Considering the tendency for participants to agree with a popular response to preserve group harmony or to shy away from sharing personally revealing information, the use of focus groups does not address the call from Durlak and Weissberg (2007) for out-of-school time research to identify specific elements of youth activities that facilitate social and emotional development.

Using surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups as the chosen methods of data collection would not have met the objectives of this research project. If, as the researcher, I had employed these methods, the specific aspects of youth programs that

offer the best developmental outcomes as well as the particular activities that youth feel provide the most beneficial supports would remain unclear.

### **Purpose and Value of the Thesis**

In this study, I sought to provide more information on the specific elements of youth's experiences within community programs that respondents perceived as contributing to beneficial developmental outcomes, especially related to the development of social and emotional competencies. I met this objective by addressing two research goals. First, through this research I determined whether respondents identified the Boys and Girls Club of Canada (hereafter referred to as the BGC) as a setting in which they received services or took part in activities that fostered their social and emotional competencies. The respondents were not asked to directly address the overarching research question: What activities promote the development of social and emotional competencies in youth at the Boys and Girls Club? Instead the questions were designed to allow the respondents to consider their experiences at the BGC and reflect on the ways in which their sense of self and relationship with others changed since they began attending the BGC. From these accounts, I identified themes that appeared to cluster around social and emotional competencies. Researchers who have conducted previous research in the area of out-of-school programs have hypothesized about what youth should gain in these settings; however, in this thesis, I sought to better understand the experiences of respondents who actually participated in youth programs. Using in-depth accounts of youth respondents, I sought to develop deeper understanding of the current aspects of youth programs that foster the development of social and emotional competencies in adolescents. Second, through conducting this research I sought to invite

youth to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which youth programs assist in the positive development of young people. Specifically, I sought to provide respondents with the opportunity to reflect on the specific BGC activities and relationships that contribute to the development of social and emotional competencies in adolescents. This was a particularly meaningful goal within the research because youth are a traditionally neglected population in such inquiries (Way, 2005); therefore, through this thesis I sought to empower adolescents by giving them a voice within the research literature.

This thesis has implications for both theory and practice. Through this study I aimed to contribute to the out-of-school research literature by presenting qualitative accounts of youth's experiences in the BGC. Gathering in-depth descriptions from the perspective of youth respondents, I intended to determine the specific aspects of youth programs that respondents perceived as contributing to their social and emotional competencies. In addition, I used a Canadian sample, which is a population that is lacking in the body of research on the development of social and emotional competencies in youth programs. Through this study I sought to address the gap that currently exists by providing data on the development of social and emotional competencies in youth programs within a Canadian context.

For program staff, this research aimed to provide insight into the elements of out-of-school time activities that participants reported as having the greatest impact on their social and emotional competencies. A broader body of research on the aspects of youth programs that foster social and emotional competencies can make important contributions to the training of youth leaders and to the design of programs to better assist youth in

growing through their experiences in these activities. Through this thesis I sought to better understand the detailed accounts of youth participants at the BGC, and it was my expectation that this thesis would provide program staff with the detail required to better serve future participants of the BGC.

## **Overview**

Chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant literature on the developmental gains that adolescents may achieve by attending youth programs. Particular attention is given to youth's perceived development of social and emotional competencies. Chapter 2 begins with an overview of the BGC, including an outline of the organization's five core values of practice. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)—a research organization that promotes the advancement of social and emotional competencies as an essential part of education and positive youth development—is introduced, complete with a summary of the five core competencies of social and emotional development. Three areas of youth development that appear most frequently in research on out-of-school time programs are presented: personal development, interpersonal development, and social capital. These areas provide a theoretical background of the most commonly identified domains of development for participants in youth programs. Chapter 2 concludes with an overview of the alignment that exists between the three common areas of youth development identified in the literature and with the CASEL (2011) proposed five social and emotional competencies.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods utilized in this research study. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 participants. Emerging themes were identified and grouped to better understand the respondents' accounts of experiences that promote

social and emotional competencies in youth programs. Interviews occurred at the BGC in Lethbridge, Alberta. Ethical approval to conduct research with human subjects was obtained prior to any interviews being conducted. Youth who were under the age of 18 were required to obtain parental consent before they were eligible to participate. All efforts were made to protect the confidentiality, anonymity, and safety of the participants.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the research study. This chapter begins with some brief background information on the youth who participated in this study. In the remainder of the chapter the themes that emerged from data analysis are presented in three categories: (a) social setting at the BGC, (b) interpersonal connections, and (c) personal development.

Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the results and addresses the way in which social and emotional skills development may be fostered at the BGC. Evidence from the respondents' accounts of their experiences at the BGC is used to demonstrate the activities at the BGC that appear to promote social and emotional competencies.

Chapter 6 provides a summary of the research implications, including the implications for theory, implications for practice, and implications for counsellors in the community. Finally, limitations of the research are presented and recommendations for future research are discussed.

### **Personal Background on the Research**

In July 2011, I began volunteering in the Teen Stuff program at the BGC in Lethbridge, Alberta. After spending a few evenings interacting with the youth participants at the club, I began to think about how these young people could be spending their time anywhere (i.e., at the mall, in the basement with friends, home alone, or with

family). Despite the multitude of options for activities that take place outside of school hours, dozens of youth came to the BGC each week, and the majority returned regularly. This made me wonder, what do youth gain by attending these types of community programs? Having a background in psychology and a particular interest in adolescent development, I began observing how the youth interacted with peers and adult leaders. Almost immediately I thought about the impact this program could have on the youth's social and emotional development, and I knew I had to find out more! In designing the interviews questions and planning how to analyze the data, I wanted to allow youth to share their perceptions of what is gained in youth programs at BGC. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to provide youth respondents with an opportunity to find their voice in the research literature and to present readers with actual youth's perceptions of their developmental gains at BGC.

### **Summary**

Despite increasing participation in community youth programs, there remains a relative scarcity of research on the personal and social outcomes of these programs (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). This research used semistructured interviews to gather the perspectives of youth participants at the BGC. In this thesis, I sought to determine whether youth respondents identified the BGC as a setting in which they receive services or take part in activities that foster their social and emotional competencies. This research also aimed to empower youth respondents to enhance the community programming research literature by contributing to the deeper understanding of ways in which youth programs assist in the development of social and emotional competencies.

This research had implications for both theory, adding to the research literature by providing youth's accounts of specific aspects of youth programs that promote social and emotional competencies, and practice, identifying key aspects of youth programs that will serve to supplement the training of youth leaders and contribute to improving the design of programs to better assist youth in developing social and emotional competencies.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter provides an overview of the related literature in the following areas. Initially, I provide information about the BGC and CASEL. Next, I present previous literature on youth development in out-of-school time contexts. Three key areas of youth development are seen most often in the research on out-of-school time programs: personal development, interpersonal development, and social capital. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the overlap that exists between the five competencies of social and emotional development in the CASEL model (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2011), the core values of the BGC, and the three key areas of out-of-school-time research identified in the existing literature.

### **Research Background**

In this section I provide background information on two key organizations relating to this study. The first is the BGC, and the second is CASEL.

**The Boys and Girls Club of Canada.** The BGC's mission is to "provide a safe, supportive place where children and youth can experience new opportunities, overcome barriers, build positive relationships and develop confidence and skills for life" (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2010, p. 2). Across Canada there are 104 clubs serving over 700 communities, and more than 73,000 youth over the age of 13 attend BGC programs each year (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2010). The vision of the BGC allows all children and youth to achieve their dreams and to grow up to be healthy, successful, and active members of society (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2010). Services offered at the BGC are guided by the following five core values:

**Inclusion and opportunity:** Regardless of social, economic, or ethnic background, the BGC is committed to offering services to all youth. All BGC programs must meet the mandate to assist youth in achieving their positive potential in life.

**Respect and belonging:** Youth are provided a safe, supportive place where they feel included and accepted. At the BGC, youth are expected to uphold the values of honesty, a positive attitude, and respect for self and others.

**Empowerment:** The BGC believes all youth can grow into contributing members of society. In the clubs, youth are encouraged to develop healthy lifestyles, a sense of leadership, and a passion for social responsibility.

**Collaboration:** Community leaders and families work together to provide a healthy setting for youth to work towards achieving healthy, positive development.

**Speaking out:** The BGC strives to advocate on behalf of youth and families to improve their lives and allow their voices to be heard. Club staff also build self-esteem in youth by empowering them to help shape the program by sharing their ideas. Youth are given the opportunity to develop life and leadership skills by contributing to their clubs and the surrounding community. (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012b, para. 2–11)

The majority of onsite staff at the BGC are volunteers. Running programs with only a few paid employees allows most programs to be offered at little or no cost to the participants. In 2010 alone, over 14,000 community volunteers across Canada assisted in operating the clubs (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2010). For youth programs, the clubs adopt an open-door policy in which participation is voluntary and occurs on a drop-in basis. Clubs are accessible to all youth, regardless of race, religion, social, or

economic status. In clubs across Canada, 43% of participants come from single-parent families. A total of 19% of children and youth who attend are of Aboriginal descent, while 11% are new immigrants to Canada; 14% of participants have some type of special needs, and, wherever possible, clubs offer accessible buildings for those who are disabled (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012c).

The BGC strives to help youth build healthy, supportive relationships with caring and responsible adult role models. The BGC encourages adult leaders to interact with youth participants during the program hours, because they believe these meaningful connections have a deeply positive influence on the life path youth choose. The BGC's goal is to encourage healthy, respectful relationships with peers and family members that extend well beyond the program's hours. Programs for adolescents are offered primarily during the after-school hours when young people are most vulnerable to engaging in antisocial behaviours (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2011). Many clubs also offer programs during evenings, and occasionally on weekends, including youth camps and daytrips to local attractions. Nearly 60% of the participants in BGC youth programs are from low-income families (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2010). For many youth, these club-sponsored outings are their only opportunity to take part in such activities.

The BGC's programs are designed based on the belief that social interventions, such as leadership development, educational and occupational support, and access to recreation, "prevent negative behaviours, improve academic performance, strengthen peer relationships and equip young people with the tools to become healthy, successful and contributing adults" (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2011, p. 2). In each club across Canada, activities are tailored to the individual preferences of the local

participants. However, all clubs must adhere to the BGC mission, which requires that club programs help children, youth and their families develop “confidence and skills for life” (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012a, Our Mission section, para. 1). The drop-in youth programs are designed to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to (a) connect with friends; (b) take part in sports and other physical activities; (c) receive academic and social support; (d) obtain employment support, skills, and career training; and (e) learn how to become community leaders and give back (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012d). Given the nature of the drop-in program, attendance in almost all activities is voluntary. Participants may choose to engage in some activities and not in others. As a result, every youth has a different experience (Arbreton, Bradshaw, Sheldon, & Pepper, 2009). The youth who took part in this research project attended this type of drop-in program at the BGC in Lethbridge, Alberta.

The BGC strives to promote the social and emotional development of the children and youth who attend their programs. The staff and volunteers at the BGC attempt to strike a balance between providing unstructured time for free play, and planning programs that promote educational and career skill development. In all areas of the clubs, the BGC programs are designed to provide programming that encourages youth to engage in activities that promote social and emotional learning (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2010).

**The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.** CASEL is a not-for-profit organization that works to advance the science- and evidence-based practice of social and emotional learning. Founded in 1994 at the University of Illinois at Chicago, CASEL is devoted to advancing research, school practice, and public policy

focused on the development of children's and adolescents' social and emotional competencies. CASEL has identified a set of social emotional skills that underlie effective and successful performance for social roles and life tasks, drawing from extensive research in a wide range of areas, including brain functioning and methods of learning and instruction (Sherman, 2011).

In 2011, CASEL and a team of researchers from Loyola University conducted a meta-analysis that produced the most convincing evidence to support the promotion of social and emotional competencies (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Durlak et al.'s (2011) analysis was the largest, most rigorous review of research ever done on interventions that promote the social and emotional development of students between the ages of 5 and 18. Their meta-analysis included 213 school-based, universal, social, and emotional learning programs involving 270,034 students from rural, suburban, and urban areas (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al. (2011) found that, "compared to controls, SEL [universal social and emotional learning] participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance" (p. 405), as well as improvement in skills and emotional distress. Durlak et al. (2011) reported their findings in effect sizes ( $g$ ), in which "positive values indicated a favorable result for program students over controls" (p. 411). Across studies, Durlak et al.'s (2011) program participants demonstrated enhanced positive social behaviours ( $g = .24$ ), better academic performance ( $g = .27$ ), fewer conduct problems ( $g = .22$ ), and lower levels of emotional distress ( $g = .24$ ). Overall, these findings suggested that the promotion of social and emotional competencies might improve positive youth outcomes.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as “a process for helping children and adults develop the fundamental skills . . . to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work, effectively and ethically (i.e., developmental core competencies)”

(Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2007, p. 1).

Specific SEL competencies include understanding and controlling emotions, developing caring and concern for others, forming prosocial relationships, making responsible decisions, and managing challenging situations constructively. These competencies can be taught in community programs, provide youth with the tools to act as a responsible citizen, and reduce the risk factors associated with of maladjustment (Albright, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2011). CASEL indicated competencies that are fostered in childhood and adolescence carry over into adulthood and form the basis for healthy relationships and positive developmental outcomes.

CASEL (2011) outlined the following five core competencies that are key to a youth’s success in school, in the community, and in life (see also Zins & Elias, 2006):

1. Self-awareness: Recognizing one’s emotions and values as well as strengths and weaknesses.
2. Self-management: Managing emotions and behaviours to achieve one’s goals, and practising impulse control, goal setting, and perseverance.
3. Responsible decision-making: Making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behaviour.
4. Relationship skills: Forming and maintaining healthy relationship based on mutual support, reliable communication, effective conflict resolution, and resistance to inappropriate social pressures.

5. Social awareness: Fostering compassion, empathy for others, demonstrating cooperation with diverse groups, understanding what others are feeling, and taking their viewpoints into consideration.

I compared the CASEL (2011) core competencies with the BGC's (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012b) values and found significant overlap. The BGC claims that self-awareness is fostered by encouraging youth to feel empowered, both in their own success and through the support of peers and leaders. Youth are urged to develop respect for others and for themselves. This element of self-respect begins with an awareness of competencies and strengths that reside within oneself (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2007).

The BGC states that their programs recognize that focusing on the developmental assets of youth has positive implications for their mental and physical well being, as well as for successful future outcomes (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2007). In clubs across Canada leaders are encouraged to provide participants with external assets, such as support, caring relationships, and appropriate praise. Staff and volunteers are also expected to model and foster valuable internal assets like good self-care, promoting positive values, and instilling a strong sense of self-confidence (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2007). This dedication to both external and internal assets at the BGC aligns well with the criteria for self-management in the CASEL (2011) core competencies. Youth participants are also encouraged to take care of themselves physically. During the program hours there is time allotted for physical activity, and youth are taught about life skills, such as nutritious eating habits, identifying and choosing healthy relationships, and maintaining personal care (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012d).

Responsible decision-making is encouraged at the BGC through the monitoring and enforcement of the youths' behaviour while at the club. The onsite staff seek to promote responsible decision-making by ensuring at least one adult is present to supervise all activities in the club. In instances in which youth make poor decisions (i.e., starting a fight or behaving counter to the rules of the participant consent form) leaders are directed to take the infraction seriously and ensure it is addressed immediately (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2007). By promoting responsible decision-making and removing youth who fail to observe the standards of participation, the BGC strives to establish a safe, nurturing environment for the social and emotional development of youth.

The BGC strives to foster relationship skills through an emphasis on collaboration, respect, and inclusion. The BGC rules state that youth who do not show respect for themselves, others, the club property, and the leaders (e.g., excluding or demeaning others, excessive swearing, etc.) are asked to leave. These standards for participation are made clear to the participants, both when they first join and as they engage in activities at the club (Appendix A). New members must sign a participant consent form stating they understand the rules of the club. The standards of participation are also posted around the club. Specific penalties for poor behaviour vary from club to club, but BGC staff are given the authority to ensure positive behaviours (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2007). At the BGC in Lethbridge, participants who fail to adhere to the standards of participation are asked to leave the club for the evening or a more substantial period of time depending on the severity of the infraction.

Social awareness is one of the primary values stated in the BGC mandate. Across all five core values BGC emphasizes respect and caring for one's club and the surrounding community (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012d, 2012e). A fundamental element of community caring is recognizing the impact individuals have on those around them, and the BGC strives to provide this positive influence on youth through responsible caring of leaders and the attention that is paid to consideration of others (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2007).

### **Youth Development and Out-of-School Time Programs**

There is evidence to suggest that out-of-school programs such as those offered by the BGC can help develop SEL competencies similar to those described by CASEL (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Larson, 2000; Larson et al., 2004; Larson et al., 2006). Based on a review of the literature, there appear to be three key areas of youth development that are most frequently associated with out-of-school time programs: personal development, interpersonal development, and social capital (Arbreton et al., 2009; Benson, Scales, Hawkins, Oesterle, & Hill, 2004; Dworkin et al., 2003; Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010; Hansen et al., 2003; Herrera & Arbreton, 2003; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Larson, 2000; Larson et al., 2004; Larson et al., 2006).

**Personal development.** Personal development describes the growth that occurs within individuals throughout childhood and into the adolescent years. Personal growth can be seen best by comparing the differences in behaviour between children and adolescents. Young children often inherit their beliefs systems and values from parents and other significant adults (Cole, Cole, & Lightfoot, 2005). Due to the fact that children

have limited exposure to a variety of value systems and environments, they often internalize what they see in their home without critical analysis. In contrast, adolescents are often given more freedom to interact with an array of peer groups and to be immersed in a world outside the home. During these diverse experiences youth may encounter potentially new ways of thinking and behaving (Waterman, 1984). In their school and community settings adolescents begin to form their unique sense of self. Gaining the confidence to assert the values that feel most congruent to their emerging sense of self and having the cognitive capacity to express themselves more competently than children, adolescents begin integrating new and existing knowledge into their adult identity (Cole et al., 2005). In the literature, personal development is most commonly found within four main areas of growth: (a) identity formation, (b) initiative development, (c) improving emotional regulation skills and (d) increasing cognitive skills (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005; Dworkin et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2003; Larson, 2000; Larson et al., 2004; Larson et al., 2006; Lauver & Little, 2005; Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, & Davidson, 2010).

During adolescence and in the transition to adulthood, establishing strong emotional skills is fundamental to forming meaningful relationships, developing caring for others, and managing emotions to meet the goals of the situation (Buckley, Storino, & Saarni, 2003). All of these skills are integral to establishing oneself as a competent, responsible adult. Youth programs provide a controlled environment for young people to interact with peers while working on managing their feelings (both positive and negative), controlling impulses, and handling stress in a socially demanding setting (Dworkin et al., 2003).

In community youth programs, young people may also be encouraged to develop cognitive skills. Examples of cognitive skills include using logical inquiry techniques, applying critical thinking, and developing abstract reasoning (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004).

**Identity.** Erik Erikson (as cited in Cole et al., 2005) was the first researcher to focus on identity formation across one's lifespan. Erikson is most famous for his creation of a developmental trajectory that consisted of crises that must be confronted to achieve identity formation (Cole et al., 2005). Erikson's work was exceptional in terms of its focus on the struggle that youth face in identity development (Passer & Smith, 2004). Since Erikson first published his theory in the 1960s, researchers interested in adolescent development have adapted his model to reflect changes in our understanding of adolescent development (Cole et al., 2005).

Based on Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Marcia (2002) proposed four patterns of identity formation that he indicated occurred during adolescent development. Across Marcia's four patterns, youth vary in their levels of identity exploration and commitment to their identities. Some youth are in a state of foreclosure, in which an identity is formed without encountering an identity crisis. These youth do not experiment with different ways of being; instead they simply adopt the values of their parents or other significant figures in their lives.

According to Marcia's (2002) model, youth in identity diffusion lack a sense of identity; however, individuals in this stage may or may not have experienced a crisis. Youth in identity diffusion often report feeling overwhelmed by the task of identity development, and many youth express little interest in defining their identity. In this

stage, youth do not have a strong sense of self, but they do not experience much anxiety because they are not invested in the process of identity development. Once they begin to care more about defining their identity these youth often shift into a state of moratorium.

Youth in the stage of moratorium are in an active state of identity crisis but have not yet emerged with a strong sense of self (Marcia, 2002). This can be a very distressing time for adolescents. In this stage, youth would like to have an established view of the world, but their identities still lack clarity. These individuals are closer to a sense of identity than those who are not experiencing an identity crisis, but they experience anxiety because they are still uncertain what they value in an identity.

In identity achievement, youth have gone through a crisis and have emerged with a strong sense of self (Marcia, 2002). These individuals have experimented with different ways of being and found an identity that fits them well. Youth in this stage often possess a self-confidence that comes with establishing a stable sense of self. Marcia (2002) believed this was the final stage of identity formation prior to entering adulthood.

Most recently, Kroger (2003) reviewed over four decades of research on identity formation in adolescence and posited that there has been a movement towards considering the role of social context in adolescent identity development. Schachter (2005) wrote that there exists “a growing sense of discontent with psychological approaches to identity that are seen as excessively individualistic and atomistic” (p. 376). In the study of identity development there has been a paradigmatic shift towards an understanding of identity development that includes the individual and social processes as well as the growing consensus that identity both shapes and is shaped by the

surrounding social milieu (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Côté, 1996; Harter, 2012; Kroger, 2004; Schachter, 2005).

Adams and Marshall (1996) demonstrated the contextual nature of identity development based on a comparison of thousands of adolescents living in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Adams and Marshall reported that in communities in which adults maintain consistent values and expectations, adolescents are more likely to develop a positive sense of self, set goals with a clear purpose and direction, and make a commitment to an identity that includes a personal and social responsibility to self and others. As a comparison, adolescents raised in areas in which their families and communities fail to provide consistent goals or expectations, are often drawn toward role confusion, project negative outlook for the future, and develop a diffused sense of self.

In community programs, youth often report a strong sense of self-discovery and identity formation (Dworkin et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2006). Dworkin et al. (2003) conducted focus groups with 55 high school students who regularly attended after-school programs; these youth were asked to think about specific activities that “teach you something or expand you in some way, that give you new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of interacting with others” (p. 20). Dworkin et al.’s participants identified common themes that relate to identity and self-discovery, including trying new things, gaining self-knowledge, learning personal limits, and taking responsibility for oneself. In after-school programs, Dworkin et al.’s respondents reported learning “not to sell myself short but to know my limits as well” (p. 21) and discovering that “I can still keep on doing something even if I don’t enjoy it” (p. 21). These participants tried new activities, and were more willing to welcome unknown experience, with one respondent stating, “It’s

better to take on a lot of things . . . than to not experience new things because you're afraid" (p. 20).

Larson et al. (2006) surveyed 2,280 11th-grade students from 19 high schools, asking about both their positive and negative experiences in commonly attended activities. The youth participated in a variety of activities: sports teams, arts programs, academic clubs, faith-based groups, service or volunteer activities, and community organizations (Larson et al., 2006). Respondents reported positive developmental experiences in each of the activities, and no single activity involved more negative than positive experiences. On Larson et al.'s (2006) questionnaire, participants were asked directly about identity on six items: three items asked participants about experiences related to identity exploration in the activity (e.g., "Tried doing new things") and three asked about reflection experiences (e.g., "This activity got me thinking about who I am"). Respondents reported experiencing identity work most often in faith-based groups, followed by community organizations and art programs.

In community-based activities, youth participants reported achieving a sense of identity based on the freedom they had to choose amongst various activities, and the organization's efforts to place strong emphasis on trying new skills and experiences (Dworkin et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2006). When compared to alternative choices for afterschool time, such as working a part-time job, youth reported more choice and less stress in organized activities (Larson et al., 2006).

Borden et al. (2005) organized brainstorming groups with 77 ethnic youth who attended community programs at least 3 days a week. Youth in Borden et al.'s study described that within community programs they were given an opportunity to explore

different characteristics and values that they could consider including as a part of their identity in the future. Borden et al.'s participants reported these programs provided a fun and safe place to learn healthy behaviours, promoted exercise, and offered instruction on making nutritious meal options. Time spent at the community organization helped youth establish life skills that they needed to feel better prepared for living independently (Borden et al., 2005). Community organizations also appeared to provide youth with an opportunity to get out of the house and gave them a glimpse of how their lives would be away from their parents (Borden et al., 2005).

During identity formation youth must be able to retain and sort out all the lessons they have learned while in an identity crisis (Marcia, 2002). Community programs appear to be one setting that provides a supportive and caring place for youth to explore and develop their sense of self (Dworkin et al., 2003). All the youth programs reviewed in the relevant literature provided youth with the opportunity to explore beliefs about themselves and relations with others and have their sense of autonomy fostered by supportive adults and a wide selection of peers (Borden et al., 2005; Dworkin et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2006).

***Initiative.*** In the context of adolescent development, initiative is “the ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal” (Larson, 2000, p. 170). Developing perseverance towards goal attainment is vital for adolescents as they begin to look towards the future, set long-term goals, and become active producers of their own developmental outcomes (Larson, 2000). Developing initiative is no easy task, however, and youth often lack the skills to develop and execute plans. Dworkin et al. (2003) suggested that youth with a good sense of initiative are pushed by

an internal motivation, rather than the promise of external rewards. These youth set their sights high, do not back down when a challenge arises, know what they want to achieve, and let nothing stand in their way (Dworkin et al., 2003).

Larson (2000), who utilized self-reports from a sample of 392 adolescents from working- and middle-class backgrounds through capturing diary data from over 15,000 random moments during a one-week period, suggested that adolescents often perceive the future as unstable. When this uncertainty becomes too overwhelming, Larson (2000) argued, youth develop lower self-expectations and destructive patterns of behaviour. To overcome these insecurities and revitalize youth who appear to be bored, unmotivated, and unexcited about their lives, Larson (2000) asserted that adolescents must be supported in developing initiative. Specifically, Larson (2000) posited that youth should be provided with environments that (a) promote long-term goal setting, (b) encourage following through with persistence, and (c) provide the experience of feeling successful.

Hansen et al. (2003) surveyed 450 9th-, 11th-, and 12th-grade students from a high school in a small, mostly working-class American city. In the questionnaire, Hansen et al. asked respondents questions about initiative development on 12 items divided into four categories: the categories included (a) goal setting (e.g., “I set goals for myself in this activity”); (b) exertion of effort (e.g., “I put all my effort into this activity”); (c) problem solving (e.g., “Observed how others solved problems and learned from them”); and (d) time management (e.g., “Learned about setting priorities”). Hansen et al.’s questions were taken from the *Youth Experience Survey* (as cited in Larson et al., 2006, p. 853). Based on the responses to the initiative questions, Hansen et al. reported that community programs appear to provide youth with ideal opportunities to develop and

practice elements of initiative. More than alternative activities, such as watching TV or spending time alone, youth in these organizations were given a chance to set long-term goals, learn skills for coping with disappointment, and develop strategies for persevering despite challenges.

These developmental gains in initiative appear to endure over time. Larson et al. (2004) followed a sample of 34 high school-aged youth (both boys and girls) over the course of a school year. They conducted brief, bi-weekly phone interviews with program participants from three community programs, seeking to understand how the participants experienced these programs (Larson et al., 2004). Larson et al. (2004) found that the respondents' development of initiative grew as they encountered challenges in goal attainment. At first, the youth in Larson et al.'s (2004) study struggled most with time management; they found it difficult to allot the time required to complete a task and struggled with distractions from other areas of their lives. As the weeks passed, however, the youth in Larson et al.'s (2004) study learned that success was related to starting early, managing their time, and putting forth a committed effort. The participants started to think about future time—upcoming days and weeks—as “an arena in which their effort can be deployed” (Larson et al., 2004, p. 544) in any manner they desired. Larson et al.'s (2004) participants learned how to problem solve, develop contingencies, and organize steps to successfully complete a task. When the goals became more complex, respondents reported that they were taught how to think logically about what would be required to organize several concurrent tasks in their work (Larson et al., 2004). These youth began to develop plans that accounted for the dynamics of multiple systems, including the whole group interest, time constraints, and other particulars about their

projects (Larson et al., 2004). In these programs, youth appeared to mobilize their time and energy more efficiently, while also developing more advanced strategies for coordinating their efforts (Larson et al., 2004). Larson et al. (2004) reported that respondents commented that their increased ability for initiative transferred to other areas of life, such as career planning and coordinating schedules with parents and friends. Although the findings are preliminary, Larson et al. (2004) asserted that these reported developmental changes in youth contribute to the claim that involvement in community programs predicts better outcomes in educational and occupational attainment later in life.

Related to the development of initiative is a change in youth's motivation. Larson et al. (2004) found that youth often reported feeling chronically bored, especially when they were engaged in challenging tasks that require sustained effort (e.g., school). To thrive as adults, Larson et al. (2004) found that youth must first learn to be internally motivated by a challenge and develop the skills that allow them to persevere despite occasional struggles. To that end, Larson et al. (2004) argued that youth must be given opportunities to face challenges with the confidence that they can stick with it and achieve success. Having greater life experience, many adults understand that determination often breeds success. Larson et al. (2004) suggested that this sense of intrinsic motivation to stay with difficult tasks must be learned, and it is their contention that this internal drive for success begins to peak during the adolescent years.

Based on their focus group data, Dworkin et al. (2003) reported the following four prominent themes that support the claim that youth programs are a good setting for initiative development: Youth programs (a) guide youth in setting realistic goals,

(b) develop persistence to achieve these goals over time, (c) help youth to learn effective time management, and (d) ensure youth take responsibility for the successful completion of goals.

First, community programs are often designed to provide an appropriate setting for youth to learn how they can set realistic goals. Since schoolwork is graded and students are often driven by rankings and results, youth frequently either set school goals that are unattainable (e.g., obtaining a perfect score on an exam) or fail to set future goals entirely because they become discouraged by previous failures (Covington, 2000). In community organizations, however, youth do not receive grades based on achievement, so they tend to set goals that are more achievable (Dworkin et al., 2003).

In the community organizations described in Dworkin et al.'s (2003) study youth were also encouraged to develop sustained effort and perseverance to reach their goals. In the focus groups, Dworkin et al. reported, "A common theme was learning to push oneself, trying harder, being disciplined, [and] staying focused" (p. 21). Dworkin et al. did not include percentages for the frequency of specific responses; however, they did highlight that a common response concerned the realization that "you have to really concentrate if you want to be able to do something" (p. 21). If participants did require additional support, respondents stated that adult leaders were often present in these activities, which Dworkin et al. posited was a positive factor in fostering the participants' development of skills related to perseverance and initiative.

Dworkin et al. (2003) identified learning how to manage time more effectively as one of the most common themes amongst respondents. This was especially prominent when participants had to carefully plan out their daily activities given that "many of these

youth described being extremely busy with schoolwork, multiple activities, family obligations, and sometimes jobs” (Dworkin et al., 2003, p. 21). Specifically, respondents reported “learning to get their homework done, say ‘no’ to social opportunities, and set priorities” (Dworkin et al., 2003, p. 21). Dworkin et al. identified organizing one’s time amongst a busy schedule as a common theme within the participants’ responses.

Dworkin et al. highlighted particular responses that captured the essence of the focus groups, including “you have all these opportunities that present themselves and you have to decide which ones you’re going to do” (p. 21), and “I learn how to budget my time and figure out when I can do stuff and how much of the stuff I can actually get finished” (p. 21). Since participation in youth activities is often a choice that young people make for themselves, Dworkin et al. posited that these activities provide youth with the autonomy to learn on their own to manage their time.

Along with the implementation of improved time management strategies, Dworkin et al. (2003) found that adolescents also learn to take responsibility for their own personal goals in these youth activities. Youth in Dworkin et al.’s study described that within community organizations they were able to learn the skills required to remain accountable to their goals, such as step-by-step planning and handling challenges before they become overwhelming. Youth reported learning “how to depend on myself more” (Dworkin et al., 2003, p. 22) and recognizing that while other people’s opinions are worth considering, for many decisions “you just really have to rely on yourself, and rely on your own judgment” (p. 22).

Dworkin et al. (2003) claimed that youth activities appeared to be a setting in which adolescents learn to carry the weight of autonomous decision making and action.

Participants learn to set goals, allocate time, devote the required time and effort, as well as take responsibility for achieving their goals.

***Emotional skills.*** Passer and Smith's (2004) review of the literature suggested it is widely accepted that during the transition from childhood to adolescence young people learn the emotional recognition and regulation skills that allow them to form the close relationships that facilitate social goals throughout life. Passer and Smith provided a summary of research on adolescent social and emotional development, reporting that one of the primary developmental tasks during adolescence is forming meaningful friendships that help support the transition to increasingly independent lives.

Often research on emotional regulation is conducted with young children at a time when their emotional regulation is just starting to develop. Looking to study emotional development during the transition from childhood to adolescence, Gullone, Hughes, King and Tonge (2010) tracked use, norms, and development of emotional regulation strategies in 1,128 children and adolescents over a 2-year period. Gullone et al. chose to monitor two strategies in the participants: expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal. These strategies were chosen because they had been the focus of previous emotional regulation research (Gross, as cited in Gullone et al., 2010), and they are commonly used in everyday life. Cognitive reappraisal involves "redefining a potentially emotion-eliciting situation in such a way that its emotional impact is changed" (Gullone et al., 2010, p. 568); for instance, a student who blames an external source (e.g., the teacher) for his poor exam score diminishes his responsibility for the failure. Expressive suppression is defined as "a response modulation involving the inhibition of ongoing emotion-

expressive behaviour” (Gullone et al., 2010, p. 568), such as when a presenter hides his embarrassment when he cannot answer an audience member’s question.

Gullone et al. (2010) found that as participants increased in age they were more likely to use healthier, more skilful emotion regulation. Specifically, older participants demonstrated the use of cognitive reappraisal, which is linked to negotiating stressful events by reframing them in an optimistic light, demonstrating more active attempts at repairing negative moods, and expressing less negative affect (Gullone et al., 2010). In comparison, younger participants were more likely to use expressive suppression strategies (Gullone et al., 2010). The use of this strategy is linked to increased negative affect and decreased success at mood repair. These findings are an indicator of the emotional development that occurs during adolescence. Younger participants chose emotional regulation strategies that decreased negative affect only slightly, whereas the older participants selected strategies that replaced negative moods with more positive affect (Gullone et al., 2010). There is support in the literature that suggested that these types of emotional regulation skills are fostered in organized youth programs (Borden et al., 2005; Dworkin et al., 2003; Riggs et al., 2010). Three studies that seemed to substantiate the effectiveness of youth programs in supporting emotion regulation are described below.

During their focus groups with high school students Dworkin et al. (2003) asked respondents to name the most favourable elements of their community activities. One of the areas that stood out for the respondents was the focus that community activities placed on gaining knowledge about controlling their anger and anxiety. In these programs their emotional education was twofold: participants learned both why they

should control their anger and how it could be done successfully. Concerning the common theme of learning to control anger, specific responses from Dworkin et al.'s participants included, "I have learned how to block out negative things" (p. 22), and "I have learned that I have to control my temper [and] *how to* control my temper" (p. 22). Dworkin et al.'s respondents also reported learning specific strategies to regulate their emotions. These authors identified the acquisition of strategies for managing stress to be a major theme for the participants of their focus groups (Dworkin et al., 2003). Participants' responses included, "When things don't work out and you're really upset . . . you just have to remind yourself that it's not the end of the world" (Dworkin et al., 2003, p. 22) and acknowledging the benefits of becoming "less competitive, because [competition] creates stress and interferes with keeping focused" (p. 22). In each of the youth programs they studied, Dworkin et al. reported that respondents identified a variety of learning experiences that addressed the regulation of their emotions.

Borden et al. (2005) reported that in their brainstorming sessions with ethnic youth who regularly attend community programs, the respondents recounted how activities within their community organization helped them develop confidence and gave them the emotional regulation skills to remain poised in social situations. Following the brainstorming groups, Borden et al. ranked the top five reasons why youth chose to participate in the community programs. The most commonly cited reason for participating amongst both Latino males and Latina females was to increase personal development and develop confidence (Borden et al., 2005). One of Borden et al.'s respondents captured the general sentiments of his peers when he stated, "I can do something, even when [others] say I can't" (p. 38). Borden et al. reported that learning

emotional regulation skills also ranked in the top five most common responses. In the sample of all Latino youth participants, having the ability to develop emotional regulation skills was the fourth most common reason they chose to attend community programs. Participants mentioned that during the program hours they were encouraged to monitor their emotional reactions to other youth and leaders, making use of regulation strategies if they became overwhelmed. Learning the skills to control anxiety and reevaluate the situation, youth agreed that if they handled emotions responsibly, their frustration and other barriers could be overcome (Borden et al., 2005).

Riggs et al. (2010) examined the relationship between participation in a youth program and the development of emotion regulation skills in rural at-risk youth. Participants included 118 Latino and Latina youth (60% male) who attended a youth program focused on promoting social and emotional competence, and increasing academic skills. Riggs et al. found that regular attendance in the youth program was beneficial for increasing emotion regulation skills in the youth participants. In Riggs et al.'s study, emotion regulation skills were measured using four items: controls temper when there is a disagreement, thinks before acting, expresses needs and feelings appropriately, and can calm down when excited or all wound up. Program staff and the youths' schoolteachers in Riggs et al.'s study both rated the use of positive emotion regulation skills on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Almost Never to 6 = Almost Always). Compared to participants who were low attenders (i.e., attended less than 53% of the program dates), youth who regularly attended the program were shown to demonstrate more positive emotion regulation skills after 8 months in the program (Riggs et al., 2010). Riggs et al. reported a significant negative correlation between regular attendance

in the program and emotion regulation problems ( $r = -.46$ ). As a youth's attendance increased, he or she tended to experience a decrease in problems with emotion regulation (Riggs et al., 2010). Given the deliberate focus towards teaching emotion regulation skills in this program, Riggs et al. demonstrated the potential for positive outcomes when participants are taught emotion regulation skills in youth programs.

***Cognitive skills.*** Adolescence is a time of rapid expansion in cognitive development (Passer & Smith, 2004). Besides birth, there is no developmental period that compares to the changes experienced during the shift from childhood to adolescence (Cole et al., 2005). Cole et al. (2005) suggested that there are four characteristics that distinguish adolescent thinking from childhood thinking. During adolescence individuals begin to use hypothetical reasoning, develop better abstract thinking skills, utilize deeper metacognition, and have “more sophisticated theory of mind” (Cole et al., 2005, p. 621).

Moshman (1998) found that, compared to children, adolescents possess greater cognitive development, which allows them to engage in hypothetical thinking. Steinberg (2011) agreed with Moshman's assertion, stating adolescents can think about things that cannot be directly experienced in a much more advanced way than children. This ability to engage in more complex thinking allows adolescents to produce theories about their surroundings and to assess them in real time (Moshman, 1998). Adolescents begin to question the logic behind statements, more so than they did in childhood (Moshman, 1998). Although this may be frustrating for parents, who must argue with adolescents to rationalize parental rules, an adolescent's increased sense of inquiry signifies a cognitive awakening (Cole et al., 2005).

Adolescents begin to “think about thinking” (Cole et al., 2005, p. 621), developing metacognition that increases in complexity into adulthood. Metacognition includes increased awareness of one’s thinking, a better sense of one’s own breadth or depth of knowledge, and a better ability to explain one’s thoughts to others (Steinberg, 2011). Being more introspective, youth begin to ponder their own emotions and think more about their own thoughts. The advancement of these areas can also lead to adolescent egocentrism. Adolescents may become more self-conscious, develop the sense of an imaginary audience (in which everybody is focused on them), or develop a feeling that their personal experiences are completely unique (e.g., “nobody could possibly understand me”). At first these changes in cognition can be distressing for adolescents; however, the anxiety tends to decrease as they begin to gain control of their thinking (Steinberg, 2011).

Adolescents are also better able to plan ahead (Cole et al., 2005). In planning out their weekend, for instance, adolescents consider the balance between elements of fun (spending time with friends) and responsibilities (completing their homework). Younger children often think only of the leisure and fail to consider their required activities (Cole et al., 2005). An adolescent’s ability to plan out many dimensions of his or her weekend demonstrates how the adolescent’s scope of reference is expanding. The future-focused perspective is not fully developed until mid- to late-adolescence; therefore, adolescents may appear to be unaware of consequences (Cole et al., 2005). Adolescents, more than children, are likely to engage in risky behaviours (Greene, Krmar, Walters, Rubin, & Hale, 2000). For this reason, it is particularly important for adults to provide youth with

a safe, inviting place to spend their out-of school-time during this developmental stage (Quinn, 1999).

Community organizations often strive to provide opportunities for cognitive development, while still being fun and offering leisure activities (Quinn, 1999). Outside of school, youth often have the choice to participate in any number of leisure time activities. Some youth choose leisure activities that help them unwind and reduce stress, such as watching TV or playing video games. Although these types of activities may be important for the adolescents' sense of relaxation, young people also require activities that increase knowledge and engage their multiple learning styles (Borden et al., 2005).

Based on a review of out-of-school time literature, Lauver and Little (2005) reported that participants often gave higher satisfaction ratings to programs that provide a structured environment for learning (e.g., community service learning through volunteering and life skills training). However, the youth were adamant that the program should not feel like an extension of school hours. Across programs, Lauver and Little reported that even academically proficient youth did not regularly attend community organizations if the program was structured like a part of the school day.

Some organizations embed the learning within project-oriented activities, such as writing and performing a play (Lauver & Little, 2005). Other programs offer homework help as one of the activities that youth could choose (Fredricks et al., 2010). No matter how the learning activities were structured, youth who spent more of their out-of-class time in structured activities showed greater personal investment in school and sought out further opportunities for knowledge acquisition (Jordan & Nettles, 2000). By offering participants a chance to learn without the pressures of testing, community organizations

seem to be well positioned to complement the lessons that youth learn while in school (Quinn, 1999).

**Interpersonal development.** The development of interpersonal relationships during the adolescent years is integral to the formation of meaningful relationships. Along with the confidence to move away from the family of origin, youth must learn interpersonal skills that provide the foundation for an independent lifestyle (George, 1993; Shanahan, 2000). The developmental milestones of adolescence place incredible importance on the acquisition of interpersonal skills (Shanahan, 2000). With significantly more opportunities for engagement with peers and less contact with parents, youth must learn the interpersonal skills that facilitate close relationships in adulthood (Hartup, 1996). Adolescents also undergo dramatic social changes. Friendships become more intimate and youth are often expected to take on more responsibility within their family (Collins, 1997). The literature on community organizations provided evidence that youth programs offer adolescents the type of support required to negotiate these social changes (Borden et al., 2005; Dworkin et al., 2003; Larson, Kang, Cole Perry, & Walker, 2011; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2004).

Mahoney et al. (2004) investigated the impact of out-of-school time activities on children's development over time. These researchers initially contacted participants in the 7th grade, followed up with them annually through to the 12th grade, and then again contacted the participants at the age of 20 years old (Mahoney et al., 2004).

Longitudinally, Mahoney et al. found that there was a significant link between participation in out-of-school time activities and interpersonal competence. Specifically, Mahoney et al. (2004) reported that out-of-school time activities provide youth with the

opportunity to build interpersonal competence within a diverse peer group and form bonds to adult leaders who provide support for the youth as they look ahead to the future. In the following section I provide evidence that suggests community youth organizations foster social skills, fortify current friendships, and assist in the acquisition of new peer networks (Benson et al., 2004; Borden et al., 2005; Dworkin et al., 2003).

***Social skills.*** When describing their experiences at community organizations, a recurring theme for youth respondents was learning the skills to work together as a group or team (Benson et al., 2004; Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Dworkin et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2011). These skills include collaborating respectfully with peers (includes giving and receiving feedback), sharing resources (such as supplies and information), negotiating the challenges of working as a team, and understanding that successful group work requires individual members to take personal responsibility for that work (Dworkin et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2011). Conrad and Hedin (1982) examined the findings of a national study of 27 programs, which were grouped into the following four types: voluntary community service, career internships, community study and political action, and adventure education. Based on the responses of 4,000 students, Conrad and Hedin reported adolescents shared an important realization that successful groups require designated leaders who take on more responsibility. In competitive youth settings, like those created in schools or sports, youth tend to consider peers as rivals rather than collaborators. At youth organizations, however, a sense of community and teamwork were often emphasized. Youth reported that they learned it was important to work well as a group, and they found that together they could often achieve more than they could on their own (Conrad & Hedin, 1982).

Benson et al. (2004) performed an extensive review of literature on the dimensions and indicators of successful young-adult development. Benson et al.'s findings demonstrated that youth were able to take the skills learnt at community programs and apply them at home and in school. The section of Benson's et al.'s research devoted to social development suggested that participants in youth activities learn that successful social interaction requires knowledge about how to speak and behave appropriately within a collaborative effort. In community programs in which group work was emphasized, Benson et al. proposed that youth learned to more graciously give and receive feedback. These feedback giving and receiving skills were found to be one of the most important sources of prosocial functioning and personal well-being for youth over time. Benson et al. suggested that youth who demonstrate the ability to work effectively in teams of their peers are more likely to possess the interpersonal skills that allow them to make a more successful transition to adulthood.

Larson et al. (2004) suggested that youth often lack a sense of accountability from peers or adults in their day-to-day lives, and this can result in a failure to develop personal responsibility. Larson et al. conducted interviews with 34 youth and found that respondents believed community programs were one setting in which they regularly felt accountable to others and sensed an expectation to demonstrate responsible behaviour. Based in part on these interviews, Larson et al. suggested that youth in community programs develop responsibility over a three-stage process.

Within community programs youth take part in activities in which they are assigned tasks. When given the responsibility to complete a task or assignment in their community programs, it is not uncommon for youth in Stage 1 to feel anxious that the

task is beyond their capabilities (Larson et al., 2004). However, with the support of adults and other youth, adolescents can take the time to learn the skills required and often achieve success within their task. In this stage, when youth take on a task that makes them nervous, they are supported in meeting the goal and are often surprised by their capacity to be successful. Over time, as youth take on more tasks and continue to find success, they move towards the second stage.

In Stage 2, youth are less surprised at what they can accomplish (Larson et al., 2004). Adolescents begin to experience “an emerging responsible self that was specific to the program (Larson et al., 2004, p. 552). In this stage, personal responsibility is a behaviour that occurs within, but not outside, the confines of the program.

In Stage 3, youth begin to generalize responsibility to areas outside the program. Participants reported feeling “older” (Larson et al., 2004, p. 552), “slowed down” (p. 552), and “more responsible” (p. 552) as they transfer the traits of personal responsibility to other areas of life. Having achieved consistent success in tasks both during the program and in the rest of their life, youth began to “internalize a general sense of themselves as responsible” (Larson et al., 2004, p. 552) across domains.

The developmental process evolves by way of the relationship between the individual’s commitment to the program’s goals and the support they receive from peers and leaders in the program. Research in the area of social support received in the context of youth activities contends that adolescents appear to benefit immensely from relationships with more mature role models (usually adult leaders in the program) and membership in prosocial peer networks (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Fredricks et al., 2010).

*Peer networks.* In most community programs, youth are encouraged to participate in activities with peers in a structured, prosocial environment. Within these activities young people develop relationship skills that teach them how to be valuable, caring, and responsible members of society (Arbreton, Sheldon, & Herrera, 2005). Often youth meet new peers at the community organization, and they continue to interact with them outside of the program hours (Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997). Due to the fact that this peer group was formed within the context of the structured program, all its members are socialized with the same principles concerning prosocial behaviour, and positive morals become integrated into their group norms (Youniss et al., 1997). Even outside of the program hours, these youth continue to relate to each other in ways that benefit both themselves and their peers (Youniss et al., 1997).

Community organizations have been shown to provide a safe space for youth to spend time with their established group of friends. For example, Fredricks et al. (2010) surveyed 54 youth who attended the Boys and Girls Club of America in a low-income neighbourhood. When asked about friends at the club the majority of respondents could identify at least one good friend who participated with them in the community activity. Specific skills that assist in friendship development were also learned within community organizations. Most prominently, respondents mentioned they learned how to communicate more clearly, to listen so others would speak more openly with them, and how to initiate and foster mutually beneficial friendships.

In the same study, respondents were asked to list the reasons they liked attending community organization and social factors, such as meeting new people and spending time with friends from outside the program, were the second most common responses

after “fun activities” (Fredricks et al., 2010, p. 374). At school, youth are seldom given opportunities to meet new friends because “in my regular day at school . . . I’m always busy with work” (p. 375), and the youth were always kept on a strict schedule with the same classmates. At the community organizations, however, youth were encouraged to interact and became better acquainted with their peers. One respondent in Fredricks et al.’s research (2010) reported, “At the Boys and Girls Club you are always making new friends . . . some of your old friends are here like you be surprised by how many” (p. 375). Youth in the programs were given a choice of activities that they could do together, and adults did not hurry them along. Participants often attended the programs in the company of peers with whom they interact outside the community organization, such as in school or on community sports teams. In this way, youth were able to use the program hours to build on these friendships in a safe, comfortable setting (Fredricks et al., 2010).

Arbreton et al. (2009) reported that community activities maintain a relatively consistent group of attendees. In their review of three studies about the participation at the Boys and Girls Club of America, Arbreton et al. (2009) found that over half of the respondents reported attending the program at least once a week, while almost a third attended more than 2 days a week, and close to 13% attended every night it was open. Respondents felt a strong connection to the club, and nearly 60% of respondents rated their level of belonging at the club to be high. When asked to describe how it felt to be supported at the club, some respondents reported “I feel like I belong” (Arbreton et al., 2009, p. 17) and that “at the club, people really listen to me” (p. 17). Furthermore, the majority of Arbreton et al.’s (2009) respondents felt the Boys and Girls Club of America

had helped them in areas beyond the club, including school life (59%), family life (60%), and in their ability to work well with others (85%). Overall, respondents in Arbreton et al.'s study expressed positive experiences from their time at the Boys and Girls Club of America.

**Social capital.** Social capital is “the sum of all the assets available to members of a network or a group” (Jarrett et al., 2005, p. 42). In the way that physical capital is the transformation of raw material to refined goods through the use of mechanical tools, social capital, in this context, involves the use of relational tools (e.g., caring and meaningful relationships) to produce positive, prosocial outcomes. Perks (2007) suggested that social capital should be considered from the perspective of social networks, in which mutually beneficial cooperation and coordination produces an outcome “that makes subsequent collaborative work easier and more likely” (p. 379). In the context of community organizations, the subsequent collaboration takes the form of increased responsiveness and respect for adult leaders and the rules of the organization. Hemingway (1999) posited that an abundance of social capital within a group increases the degree of trust and deepens bonds between individuals in the organization.

In the context of community youth programs, social capital is often built through the interactions between youth and nonfamilial adults. The elements of relationships with nonfamilial adults in community programs that appeared to impact positive youth development most prominently will be explored in more detail below. In community youth programs social capital can be increased and developed through actions as simple as greeting youth at the front door when they first enter the building, or as complex as creating a program for underprivileged youth to experience life successes. In community

programs, social capital is dispensed primarily in three ways: access to information, direct assistance, and exposure to more developmentally mature adults (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Jarrett et al., 2005). Access to information involves the dissemination of facts, such as the impact of drug use or how to apply for university. Direct assistance includes offering transportation to the youth, or using one's own professional or social networks to help the youth attain employment or schooling. Exposure to adulthood offers youth a glimpse into the adult world. For example, leaders may share personal stories about adult responsibilities (e.g., living away from home) or provide reflections on their own transition following high school. Providing youth with an opportunity to experience a more mature approach to perspective taking and adult social roles increases youth's appreciation for viewpoints other than their own (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Hansen et al., 2003).

In community programs, one opportunity for social capital comes in the form of information and resources that would not be available if youth only spent time alone or with same-aged peers. In programs that place a focus on life skills, such as drug abuse prevention and healthy living habits, social capital is disseminated overtly through workshops and guest speakers (Jarrett et al., 2005). In most community programs this type of overt lesson delivery is rare, as access to information tends to occur informally. Youth may ask questions that allow adult leaders to share information, or a situation may arise that naturally lends itself to the distribution of resources (Jarrett et al., 2005).

Within community organizations youth are often provided with direct support, wherein adults offer services or opportunities that youth could not access on their own. Examples include introductions to local community members who could offer

employment, volunteer opportunities, or job shadowing (Grossman & Bulle, 2006).

Direct assistance provides youth with the resources that would be lacking if their community program did not offer this type of contact with adults. For many youth, the adults in community programs are their first contact with the world of work and higher education (Jarrett et al., 2005).

Jarrett et al. (2005) reported that youth programs are often designed to include purposefully constructed social networks that involve both youth and adults. Youth initially attend these programs because they feel comfortable spending time with their peers, but soon they become immersed in an adult-youth integrated culture. Adults possess social resources that are potentially beneficial to youth, and within youth programs these social resources can be passed down deliberately (through activities) or inadvertently (within casual conversations). Since the youth participants and adult leaders share a common space, youth need not look far to receive support or guidance. Having trusted adults in their space, youth in Jarrett et al.'s (2005) study expressed feeling more at ease when sharing concerns or worries. In many programs, adult leaders are not assigned a specific "lesson plan"; instead the main purpose of the youth–adult interactions is to provide opportunities for diffusion of social resources. The relationships between nonfamilial adults and youth are the basis of further development.

In these relationship-based programs the adults act as mentors or role models, facilitating a youth's skill acquisition in interpersonal, social, and emotional domains (Grossman & Bulle, 2006). Unlike most other settings in which youth spend time outside of the home (e.g., school, spending time with friends), youth programs offer adolescents

opportunities to build social capital by accessing the expertise of more mature adult leaders (Larson et al., 2004).

In their study of youth participants from three community programs, Larson et al. (2004) reported that participants described the connections they formed with adults in community programs as “opening new worlds” (p. 549). The respondents learned more about specific educational and career paths and described how they felt more equipped to deal with the “challenges of the world” (Larson et al., 2004, p. 549). As a result of their participation in community programs, the respondents were more trusting of adults in the community and acknowledged discovering that adults often want to help young people achieve their goals for the future. In terms of developing future goals, the exposure to adult worlds gave the respondents more hope for the future. Learning about a wide variety of educational and occupational opportunities that exist in the adult world, youth in Larson et al.’s (2004) study expressed increased confidence regarding their future decision making. By developing bonds with the adults in the program, the youth were able to draw from real-world experiences in ways that allowed for social capital and presented an exciting outlook for their future (Larson et al., 2004).

Ideal conditions for social capital in community organizations occur when youth participants feel a strong attachment to the community adults. This connection happens most often when participants are actively included in decision making (Catalano et al., 2004). Youth in these settings can gain a stronger sense of self, better critical thinking, improved teamwork skills, and a greater feeling of belonging within the group (Catalano et al., 2004; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008).

In deciding which activities would be most beneficial, adult leaders often face a dilemma. Research suggested that optimal social capital development requires information that is relevant to the participants and youth who are active participants in the program (Hemingway, 1999; Larson, 2000).

Based on his theory of positive youth development and research with participants in community activities, Larson (2000) suggested that any activity chosen must ensure that the participant's choice to engage was self-selected and driven by internal motivation. At the same time, activity objectives must be structured and sophisticated. For example, if an activity is too simplistic (e.g., watching a movie) the youth's decision to participate would be voluntary, but it would provide little challenge or educational structure. Conversely, if the program is too highly demanding (e.g., implementing a mandatory homework period), the outcomes would be challenging and well planned, but the youth may feel forced into participating. Although program leaders must sometimes walk a fine line between challenging youth and fostering intrinsically motivated decision making, maintaining both program strength and encouraging trust and connections between youth participants and adults is crucial to making full use of social capital.

***Relationship building with nonfamilial adults.*** Nonfamilial adults are older individuals outside of the youth's family unit who develop supportive, caring relationships with youth (Grossman & Bulle, 2006). In the context of community organizations, nonfamilial adults are often the volunteers and staff leaders who run the programs and interact with the youth. These adults may act as figures of reassurance: supporting youth in both current and future developmental tasks (Hirsch, Mickus, & Boerger, 2002). Nonfamilial adults could act as role models, providing a glimpse into the

adult world, which may help youth plan for their lives beyond adolescence (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Support from adults other than parents is particularly important because youth often perceive the relationship with parents to be more psychologically complex than relationships with nonfamilial adults (Gilman, Meyers, & Perez, 2004). Youth often see their parents as authority figures, rather than individuals with whom they can relate (Gilman et al., 2004). The perceived decrease in psychological distance between themselves and nonfamilial adults may allow youth to view these adults as more impartial, providing a sense of comfort that allows them to learn from the nonfamilial adult's more sophisticated point of view (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). In relationships with nonfamilial adults, youth are supported as they take on meaningful social roles and as they begin to integrate more independent leadership qualities into their identity (Putnam, 2000).

Jarrett et al. (2005) found three stages of relationship development between adults and youth to be particularly evident in youth organizations. Participants in Jarrett et al.'s study were asked to describe their experiences with adults in community programs. Respondents reported that at first they began by feeling disconnected from adult leaders. When youth first entered into a new environment, with unknown adults, they reported feeling disengaged and quite opposed to making contact with the adults. At Stage 1, the youth are still uneasy around the adults (Jarrett et al., 2005). Based on previous experience, in school and at home, youth had experienced adults who were dismissive and demanding (Jarrett et al., 2005). Even though the current setting was less formal, the youth were still unsure of the balance of power between youth and the adult leaders. After spending some time at the community program, however, youth began to see that

the adults were there to support them, which increased the level of comfort and allowed for greater depth of interactions with the adults (Jarrett et al., 2005).

As the youth gained comfort with the adults they moved into Stage 2, in which they became the initiators of youth-adult interactions. The youth became more accustomed to the adults, and they began to invite the adults into the youth space. The youth often asked questions to familiarize themselves with the adults and granted the adults rights as full participants. As the youth spent more time in the presence of the adults they began to interact more often. Connections blossomed, particularly around activities in which the adults and youth shared common interests (Jarrett et al., 2005).

In Stage 3, the youth behaved similarly around adults and other youth. The youth participants saw the adults in a positive light. During this stage deeper, lasting connections began to develop. By opening up to the adult leaders within community organizations, youth began to trust the adults, gathering further proof that the adults were not going to become controlling. Youth and adults interacted around shared issues, which increased the level of comfort, trust, and meaningful connections between the seemingly disconnected youth and adult worlds (Jarrett et al., 2005).

Grossman and Bulle (2006) reviewed four studies looking at the connection between youth participants and adults in community programs. To measure the degree of connection between youth and adults in these programs, respondents were asked if there was at least one adult at the program they could go to for support. Across studies, 55% to 89% of respondents were able to identify at least one supportive adult from the program (Grossman & Bulle, 2006). In their research, Grossman and Bulle compared one-to-one youth mentoring programs with regular youth programs and found that there were more

reported connections between youth and adults in the one-on-one programs. Grossman and Bulle suggested, however, that the prevalence of supportive relationships does not vary only by adult–youth ratio. Intentionality and the design of specific programs are also quite important factors. For instance, if the program explicitly encourages staff to befriend participants, such as in the case of gang prevention programs, the rate of perceived youth–adult connection was as high as 95%.

Scales and Gibbons (1996) reviewed the available literature about the role of unrelated adults in the lives of adolescents. These authors reported that although parents remain the most important adults in the lives of young people, unrelated adults do play an important role, particularly for adolescents who have a low socioeconomic status. Scales and Gibbons reported that youth who had nonfamilial adults who supported them during adolescence had better outcomes in academics, higher self-esteem, displayed better emotion regulation, and engaged in fewer risk-taking behaviours.

*Caring relationships.* Given all the benefits youth accrue from interactions with nonfamilial adults, it is important to consider whether all adult–youth interactions produce the same positive results. There is evidence that even brief interactions, such as being welcomed at the front door, give youth a sense of belonging (Scales & Gibbons, 1996). In community programs, however, youth benefit most when they form close, lasting relationships with adults (Mitra, 2004; Steinberg, 2001). Often, youth approach settings in which adults are prominent with a sense that the adults will be acting as disciplinarians or evaluators. In community programs, however, adults often look to foster positive interactions, eliminating the element of grading or assessment (Jarrett et al., 2005).

Having this opportunity to engage with supportive adults outside of the home is essential to achieving separation of home life and social life. This ability to establish relationships outside the home is believed to be integral to a youth's progression into adulthood (Jarrett et al., 2005). Although youth cannot choose their parents, in community programs adolescents are often able to pick the adults with whom they interact. In most youth programs, there are a variety of adults present, so participants can choose to work with many different adults who have varied interests and would resonate with various participants (Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, & Coleman, 1992).

Interactions with nonfamilial adults can also benefit youth outside the organization's hours (Fielding, 2001). In Herrera and Arbreton's (2003) study, over 80% of participants (583 respondents) reported that they had at least one adult in the community whom they could turn to for support. In many cases only one caring relationship was needed to have a positive effect that could be seen across settings. For many youth their self-reported well-being was based more on the quality of connection with meaningful adults than on the absolute number of adults with whom they interacted (Scales & Gibbons, 1996).

Respondents in McLaughin's study (1993) stated that the connections youth fostered with adult leaders at their community organization often felt like a family. Participants in McLaughin's (1993) study reported that if they left the program permanently the aspect they would miss most was the time spent with staff. More than the interaction with peers, and involvement in fun activities, youth perceived the connection with the nonfamilial adults to be most valuable. Across studies, many youth participants found community organizations provided the one place where adults would

actually listen to their concerns (Grossman & Bulle, 2006). This respectful consideration and genuine interest shown by the adults was a key predictor of success within the relationship. The ability to interact one on one with adults gave participants a sense of meaningful connection to the adults, and the genuine support youth received was perceived as more valuable than if they were in a large group (Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996). These adults often provided support and caring that youth did not always receive from their own parents (Jarrett et al., 2005). Within community programs, participants appeared to be provided with a variety of adults who served various needs and gained a significant connection to adults outside of the home that they would miss dearly if they no longer attended the program (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Jarrett et al., 2005; McLaughlin, 1993).

### **CASEL Competencies and the BGC**

This chapter began with a summary of CASEL's (2003) proposed five core competencies as key to a youth's success in school, in the community, and in life. Research from CASEL suggested that youth who attend programs that foster social and emotional development have more favourable long-term outcomes compared to nonparticipants (Albright et al., 2011; CASEL, 2007; Zins & Elias, 2006). Youth in SEL programs appear to demonstrate superior self-awareness and social awareness, possess superior recognition of their emotions and personal strengths, and are better able to consider the emotions and perspectives of others (CASEL, 2007). CASEL (2007) suggested that these youth are better able to manage their emotions, control their impulses, and have healthier relationships based on mutual support, reliable communication, and resistance to inappropriate social pressures. CASEL researchers

proposed that youth in SEL-conscious programs also make more responsible decisions by considering multiple factors and potential consequences before settling on the most carefully considered option (CASEL, 2007; Durlak et al., 2011).

The CASEL (2011) core competencies of social and emotional development were presented as criteria against which to gauge programs that claim to foster social and emotional skills in youth (e.g., BGC). The literature supported these core competencies and suggested there are positive outcomes for youth who attend programs that foster SEL development in their participants (CASEL, 2007; Durlak et al., 2011). When comparing the core competencies of social and emotional development with the fundamental values of the BGC, there appears to be considerable overlap. In both cases there is an emphasis on respect for oneself and others, care for common spaces (e.g., the school or club facilities), and appreciation for the surrounding community.

The majority of Chapter 2 has focused on a review of past research in the area of community youth programs. Based on this review, three categories of potential youth development appeared most frequently: personal development, interpersonal development, and social capital. To this point there is a lack of research that links common areas of growth identified in the youth program literature with CASEL's (2003) proposed five social and emotional competencies. Bringing these two streams of adolescent social and emotional development research together presents an opportunity to enrich the BGC's understanding of the impact that youth programs have on their participants. Below is an overview of the alignment that appears to exist between these two areas of the literature.

In the category of personal development there are two CASEL (2007) competencies that align well. The first is self-awareness, which is the identification and recognition of one's emotions, personal strengths, and a stable sense of self-confidence (Zins & Elias, 2006). Self-awareness is required for identity formation, emotional regulation, and in the development of cognitive skills. Youth who lack self-awareness would find it difficult to form personal identities. Rather than establishing personal characteristics of identity, they would likely seek out external cues for how they should behave, choosing similar interests as their peers or conforming to the expectations of their parents or other significant adults. These youth would also experience difficulty reflecting upon their emotional and cognitive development. Without a clear understanding of one's current emotional and cognitive state there is no foundation on which to achieve further development in these areas (Dworkin et al., 2003; Gullone et al., 2010; Lauver & Little, 2005).

Personal development also includes self-management, which governs impulse control, stress management, and goal setting (Zins & Elias, 2006). Self-management aligns well with initiative development. Youth with strong self-management skills are able to set goals, create plans, and see their plans through to completion. Similar to initiative development, youth with strong self-management skills demonstrate perseverance and determination despite challenges in goal attainment. Self-management and initiative are both gained through experiential learning and hands-on practice with problem solving.

Interpersonal development aligns most naturally with CASEL's (2007) concept of social awareness. Social awareness includes demonstrating empathy appropriately,

showing respect for others, and possessing accurate perspective taking, such as perceiving situations from others' points of view (Zins & Elias, 2006). Social awareness is integral to the development of social skills. Youth who lack social awareness may struggle to understand the viewpoints of others and may not possess empathy or respect for others' perspectives. Their inability to relate to others in an appropriate manner limits their ability to form mutually beneficial relationships.

Responsible decision-making also appears to align well with the integration of youth into available peer networks. Responsible decision-making includes the evaluation of, and reflection upon, responsible choices that take into account both one's own interests and those of others (Zins & Elias, 2006). Youth who lack responsible decision-making skills make choices that meet their needs only, without considering the impact their choices would have on others. In terms of forming peer groups these youth fail to follow the rules of mutually beneficial relationships and would find it difficult to integrate into available social groups.

Interactions with nonfamilial adults and the development of relationship skills align well with one another. Relationship skills include forming and maintaining healthy relationship based on mutual support, reliable communication, and help seeking (Zins & Elias, 2006). Youth, who acquire and build upon their relationship skills in an adult-supported environment, feel more connected to those around them and demonstrate the aptitude required to initiate and maintain meaningful social interactions later in life (Zins & Elias, 2006).

The CASEL (2011) core competencies are a relatively new area of research. Based on the findings from their meta-analysis, Durlak et al. (2011) suggested that social

and emotional competencies can be developed in youth programs. Durlak et al. explained that if these competencies are fostered during childhood or adolescence they have the potential to increase positive qualities, such as improved attitudes about self and others or prosocial behaviour, while decreasing negative qualities, such as emotional distress or aggressive behaviour. Based on these findings there is evidence to suggest that programs that focus on fostering the social and emotional competencies provide youth with the skills for success now and in the future.

### **Summary**

Despite the literature reviewed in this report, the question remains: What are the specific aspects of out-of-school time youth programs that lead to the development of social and emotional competencies? Amongst out-of-school-time researchers there is a growing consensus that this represents a gap in the current literature; therefore, future research should place an emphasis on identifying the specific factors in youth programs that are associated with the development of social and emotional competencies (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). In this study I sought to fill this gap in the literature by approaching the youth directly and asking them to describe their experiences in youth programs. The CASEL (2011) model of social and emotional competencies was used as a framework to conceptualize the accounts of the youth respondents. Based on the empirical support for the CASEL model (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Durlak et al., 2011; Zins & Elias, 2006) and the ease with which the core competencies appear to align with the commonly identified themes in youth program literature, the CASEL (2011) model of social and emotional competencies provided a clear, well-reviewed conceptual framework for this thesis.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research methods used in this study. I provide a description of the population, measures, procedures, and methods of analysis and discuss the unique challenges that are present in research with adolescent participants. The chapter concludes with a description of the conceptual framework based on the CASEL (2011) model of SEL competencies.

#### **Participants**

Ten participants were selected for this study. Participants were youth who were 16 to 18 years of age, and who have attended the Boys and Girls Club in a mid-sized Western Canadian city (BGC-WC) at least twice a month for the last 6 months. An equal number of males and females were selected to participate in this study. I selected this age group because it well represented the youth who attend the BGC-WC and because these youth had several years to attend, so they were able to provide more concrete examples when describing their experiences. Researchers have suggested that in qualitative research using long interviews two to 10 respondents should be sufficient to reach saturation (Boyd; Creswell, as cited in Groenewald, 2004). Saturation occurs when new themes are no longer emerging from the interviews. At the point of saturation, no further interviews are conducted and data collection is complete.

Originally participation was limited to respondents between the ages of 17 and 18 years old. However, during recruitment of respondents it became clear that the BGC-WC had fewer female participants over the age of 17 than originally anticipated. As a result, the lack of availability of female participants in this age group necessitated the inclusion of 16 year-old respondents. In total there were three 16 year-olds included in the

research. At the BGC selected to be the research site, male participants are generally older than female participants; therefore the inclusion of 16 year-old respondents actually provided a more representative sample of the population being sampled. However, the expanded range in age groups represented a potential limitation since it made it more difficult to draw conclusions based on age groups.

Participants were selected from within the group of adolescents who attend the Teen Stuff youth drop-in program at the BGC-WC. In this program, youth ages 14 to 18 are invited to drop in to the club from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., Monday to Thursday. Youth are presented with both structured activities (e.g., learning to knit scarves or bake brownies) and unstructured activities (e.g., free time in the gym). Youth from the Teen Stuff program are invited to join a youth leadership team called Keystone. In this leadership team, 10 to 12 youth participants organize community service opportunities outside the BGC (e.g., volunteering at the food bank), and they are given additional responsibilities around the club on program evenings. Specifically, Keystone members develop activities for the other youth, they help the leaders monitor inappropriate language, and they operate a concession during the drop-in program. In the Teen Stuff program, the youth-to-staff ratio is approximately 8:1, and the adult leaders are encouraged to interact with the youth one-on-one and also in small groups. The majority of adult leaders in this program are volunteers. Often, the leaders are university students studying in areas devoted to the helping professions, like teaching, social work and counselling. When they first join the BGC, leaders are provided with basic training in skills such as active listening, and conflict resolution. The Teen Stuff program is a youth-driven program

(Larson et al., 2005), meaning that activity options are presented to the youth, but they have complete control over where and for how long they choose to participate.

To select and recruit youth to participate in the interviews, I visited the BGC-WC 2 weeks prior to data collection. During the meeting at the drop-in program, the attendees were presented with the goals and importance of the study (collecting the experiences of youth at the BGC), the expectations of participants (to take part in an hour to 90-minute interview, as well as a 20- to 30-minute follow-up meeting), and their compensation for participation (a \$10 gift card for the local mall). I also provided prospective participants with contact information and invited them to sign up for an interview time and become participants in the study. Youth under 18 years of age were given a parent consent form, which the participant was required to have signed and returned prior to the youth taking part in the study. I also left posters at the BGC-WC to remind the potential participants about the study with my email address so that they could contact me if they had any questions (Appendix B). Interviews were scheduled with participants at a time that was convenient for them.

### **Instruments**

This study consisted of semistructured interviews with the youth respondents. The interviews were digitally recorded, and following the interviews a written transcript was created. These qualitative interviews were designed to generate in-depth responses and to allow participants the opportunity to express personal experiences in their own words.

Gorden (1969) recommended researchers create an interview guide to help manage the interviews. The interview guide includes a selection of set questions that the

interviewer must ask. Each question in the interview guide has room for the interviewer to write notes on what to probe, comments about the respondent's body language, and any other observations. The interview guide ensures the interviewer avoids structuring participants' answers by ensuring questions are open ended, thereby allowing the respondent to answer the questions however he or she desires. The interview guide also acts as a means for keeping a running inventory of what questions have been addressed (Gorden, 1969). Participants are not required to provide responses for each of the questions; however, the guide does help the interviewer to ensure all the topics have been discussed. Every respondent must have had an equal opportunity to consider each of the questions put forth by the interviewer. The interview guide helps the researcher and the respondent remain focused on the objectives of the study.

The purpose of the interview is to gather the participants' unique experiences; therefore, the questions must allow each individual's perspectives to be shared without the researcher structuring or guiding the answers. The interview questions were designed to allow the respondents to reflect on their experiences at the BGC and identify any changes in themselves, their relations with others (including family and friends), and their connection to the community that may have occurred since they began attending BGC.

The primary question, which was listed first in the interview guide (Appendix C), addressed three particular values that the BGC strives to promote through the programs offered at their clubs across Canada. The BGC's emphasized values are (a) mutual respect, (b) teamwork, and (c) being socially responsible (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012e). The first interview question provided respondents with an opportunity to reflect upon the presence or absence of these qualities in their personal experience at

BGC. This question was designed to encourage respondents to think about experiences that they have had in the BGC youth program that demonstrate these three values and to promote reflection about what they did experience at the BGC if these values did not fit with their experiences. Using interrogative probes employed at my discretion, I further explored changes in how respondents viewed themselves and their relationships to others as a result of their experiences at BGC.

Given the research objective of identifying specific elements of BGC programs that respondents perceived as contributing most to positive adolescent development, the first interview question allowed the respondents to talk about aspects of their experiences that have had the greatest impact on them. By asking the respondents to recall interactions, or activities at the BGC that have stayed with them over time, I believe participants reflected upon the most critical elements of their time at the BGC. These significant experiences revealed the most about the value participants derived from their time at the BGC. The respondents' stories about how their experiences at BGC affected them provided insight into the ways in which the program contributed to their social and emotional development.

The second question asked, "Is there anything you would like to add? Or were there any other experiences at the Boys and Girls Club that you thought about while we were talking, but that you haven't shared yet?" This question allowed the respondents an opportunity to address any elements of their experiences that may have been forgotten or which they had not discussed to this point. This served as a final check-in to ensure that the respondents had every opportunity to share their experiences from the BGC youth program.

During the interviews, I did not pressure the participants to provide an answer for each question. If after hearing the question and having adequate time to consider an answer the respondent could not generate a response, I moved on to explore another area of the respondent's experiences, or I asked another question.

Within the interviews I used my discretion to decide what types of probes to employ. Gorden (1969) defined probes as "a form of verbal or nonverbal behaviour used by the interviewer when the respondent's reply to the question is not relevant, clear, and complete" (p. 368). Examples include the silent probe, encouragement, elaboration, clarification, and mutation. The silent probe allows the respondent to progress however he or she sees fit. Gorden considered silence to be the most neutral of probes because "it neither designates the area of discussion nor structures the answer in any way" (p. 372).

Encouragement includes "all remarks, nonverbal [cues] and gestures which indicate the interviewer accepts what has been said without in any way specifying *what* the respondent should talk about" (Gorden, 1969, p. 372). Encouragement probes include prompts like "uh huh," "I see," and "hmmm," as well as gestures such as a nod of the head or an expectant facial expression. Elaboration probes may be immediate or retrospective.

Immediate elaboration indicates to the respondent that the interviewer would like the participant to elaborate upon the topic at hand, without asking for anything specific. Examples include, "Then what happened next?" or "Tell me more about that" (Gorden, 1969, p. 372). Retrospective elaboration "indicates a general interest in a topic that has been mentioned . . . some time previous" (Gorden, 1969, p. 372). For retrospective elaboration probes, Gorden (1969) suggested the following two sentence stems: "A while

ago you said that . . . could you tell me more about that?” and “Let’s go back to the point where you . . . tell me more about that.”

Clarification probes can also be immediate or retrospective. Immediate clarification probes not only ask for more information but also specify the type of information desired. Gorden (1969) explained that an interviewer may ask for a more detailed sequence of events, such as “What happened right after you . . . ?” (Gorden, 1969, p. 373) or probe for more detail on some specific element of the story, such as, “When/how did that happen?” (Gorden, 1969, p. 373). Retrospective clarification occurs in the same circumstances as retrospective elaboration and includes sentences stems, such as “You told me how you saw . . . what was the *first* thing you did?” (Gorden, 1969, p. 373) or “What did you say the first time you saw . . . ?” (Gorden, 1969, p. 373).

Gorden (1969) labelled a mutation probe as occurring when an interviewer “introduces a new topic that cannot be construed to be an elaboration or clarification” (p. 373). In this instance, the interviewer takes the initiative to change topics, rather than waiting for the respondent to lead into the topic on his or her own. The exemplar of a mutation probe comes from Gorden’s work in a tornado-ravaged town, as demonstrated in the following quotation: “So far, you have given me a good picture of how you and your family got along during the disaster, but I need to know something about what other people in the community were doing” (p. 373).

## **Procedures**

After I had chosen the BGC-WC as a suitable location for this study, I approached the BGC-WC leadership to ask if they would be willing to have research conducted in their facility. The Director of Services at the BGC-WC discussed the research proposal

with me and allowed me to proceed with the ethics application. Following the University of Lethbridge's ethical approval, I once again met with the Director of Services at the BGC-WC to review the ethical considerations and request formal approval to conduct research with the BGC-WC youth participants. After a discussion in which I answered all of the Director's questions, I was granted permission to conduct research with BGC-WC youth participants.

As some participants were under 18 years of age, the parents or guardians of these participants were asked to sign a letter of consent (Appendix D). The signed forms were received prior to setting a time for the interview. Participants over 18 years of age were not required to obtain parental consent; however, they were asked to complete and return an assent form for themselves (Appendix E). It was essential that the youth enter into the interviews as willing participants. Prior to starting the interviews participants were briefed to ensure they understood their rights and responsibilities as a participant in the study. Assent was collected both in writing, by having the participant sign an assent form, and verbally, as I read an assent script aloud prior to conducting the interview (Appendix E). As the researcher, I took the time to ensure that the participants fully understood they could withdraw before or during the interviews. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time following the interviews without consequences, and they could request to have their data removed from the study. I provided participants with a list of research contacts, including my contact information, the thesis supervisor's contact information, and information for contacting the University of Lethbridge Graduate Studies Office. Participants were asked to contact the supervisor if they had concerns or complaints about my behaviour as the researcher, and they were

advised to contact the University of Lethbridge Graduate Studies Office if they had concerns about the research project, complaints about me, or complaints about my supervisor. For all other questions or concerns about the research or their participation, participants were asked to contact me at any time. Interviews did not proceed until participants fully understood their rights and were prepared to begin.

A private, quiet space was selected to conduct the interviews. Finding a quiet space allows participants to speak comfortably, without having to compete with outside noise. A quiet space also ensures that the audio will be captured clearly by the recording device. To ensure that the participant feels safe throughout the interview, the space was also easily accessible to the public, and there were other offices nearby.

There was no set time limit for the participant to consider and respond to each question. If after giving the question some thought the participant did not have a response, then I offered a probe. I used my discretion when using probes since I did not want to guide the participant towards a certain response. Asking leading questions or inadvertently guiding responses was a particular risk given the semistructured style of the interviews. It was essential to the integrity of qualitative research that respondents were allowed to answer questions using their own experience as a guide, rather than responding to close-ended questions from the interviewer (Gorden, 1969).

The interviews were recorded for data analysis purposes, and I also took handwritten notes during the interviews. Specifically, I made notes about the body language of the participant; irregular reactions to certain questions, and any information that was shared before the recording device had been activated or after it had been turned off.

Once the interview was complete, participants were given a chance to address any concerns they had during the interview. The participants were thanked for their time, given a \$10 gift card as compensation for their time and efforts, and reminded about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Another appointment was set for participants to verify and check the data. At this second meeting, participants had the opportunity to review the themes that emerged from their own interviews. These follow-up meetings occurred between one and two months after the initial interview and they took between 20 and 30 minutes to complete.

To protect the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were given and applied during analysis and presentation of the findings. I assigned each participant a pseudonym following the initial interview. Pseudonyms were of particular importance in this research with youth because maintaining confidentiality and privacy of responses was integral to this project.

I transcribed the recordings from the interviews. Paper copies of the interview records have been stored in a locked filing cabinet. Audio files have been kept on a secure, password-protected computer. I will keep these records for 5 years, at which point I will send the paper copies to be confidentially shredded and I will erase all digital information from the computer hard drive.

### **Interviewing Adolescents**

Bassett, Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepevic, and Chapman (2008) suggested that there is a unique set of challenges present when conducting interview research with adolescents. At the outset there are struggles with recruitment of participants. When participants are under 18 years of age they require consent from their parents, which can

make it difficult for researchers to be certain that the adolescent is entering into the interview process voluntarily. Having previous contact with the participant's parents introduces the potential for coercion from parents or a sense of obligation to participate (Bassett et al., 2008). This concern seems to be more common in a school setting because parents are often informed about research studies from teachers or other staff members. This is less of a concern in the current study, because if youth did not want to participate in the study they could decide not to bring the consent home to be signed and the parents would likely be unaware of the study.

As the current study was designed to gather the youth voice, free of parental influence, it was of the utmost importance that I ensure that adolescents entered into the study as willing participants. Before starting any formal interviewing, I reviewed the assent form with respondents, clearly outlining their rights and responsibilities as a participant. Participants also signed a paper copy of the assent form.

By virtue of giving their child consent to participate in research, parents sometimes assume they will be entitled to the information their child shares (Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). This represents a challenge for researchers on two fronts. In dealing with parents researchers must be clear about the type of information that is permitted for disclosure to parents, namely the relevant limits to confidentiality (i.e., harm to self or others and reports of abuse). Researchers must also ensure that youth respondents understand that the information they share will not be repeated to their parents, outside of the few specified exceptions. This is very important in establishing a trusting interviewer–respondent rapport and allows for honest responses from participants (Mishna et al., 2004). Once again, this is generally more of an issue for research in

school settings. In the current context, parents may worry less about how their child is answering the questions when compared to other youth. A school setting increases the level of competition between youth on all levels, but the informal, nonacademic setting of the BGC likely reduced potential anxiety for participants and their parents surrounding evaluation.

As a researcher interviewing youth, my first priority was to ensure that the respondent felt safe and that his or her ethical rights were protected (Duncan, Drew, Hodgson, & Sawyer, 2009). Although none of the respondents asked to be removed from the study, I was prepared to handle this scenario respectfully and ethically. In the event that a participant had approached me to drop out of the study, I planned to first acknowledge that I have heard his or her wishes and affirm the participant's right to withdraw. Then I planned to ask the participant if he or she had any specific concerns about the research that led to the withdrawal. This question was not intended to talk the participant out of withdrawing, rather I felt an obligation to ensure that any concerns the participant had were acknowledged and addressed. At the time of the participant's withdrawal I would also supply them with another copy of the contact sheet that provides contact information for the thesis supervisor and the University of Lethbridge Graduate Studies Office, and I would encourage the participant to share any concerns with those resources. Most importantly, I would not pressure the youth in any way or try to stop them from withdrawing from the study. If the participant had completed the interview, he or she would keep the \$10 gift card. The participant would be thanked for his or her time and the data would be removed from the data analysis and would not appear in this thesis.

Often youth are considered “passive participants” (Litt, 2003, p. 315) upon whom research is performed. Rather than being equal partners in the research process, youth are given questionnaires or surveys to complete and then dismissed without being given a collaborative role in the research (Mishna et al., 2004). Litt (2003) identified how researchers sometimes consider their position to be far different, and much superior to that of a young person. Researchers limit communication between themselves and the participants, thereby omitting the collaborative element that often occurs in research with adults. When researchers conduct studies with youth there is less frequent sharing of emerging data, as involving youth as more than subservient informants is regarded as “a threat to the integrity of the analytic process” (Litt, 2003, p. 315).

**Questions to consider in research with adolescents.** Recognizing the need to address power imbalances that exist within research with youth, Goodenough, Williamson, Kent, and Ashcroft (2003) developed a set of questions that researchers should consider when conducting research involving young people. Goodenough et al. presented the following three questions:

1. “Did we provide space for the children to contribute to our knowledge of their understanding of the main areas of discussion?” (p. 122).
2. “How do our methods stand up to scrutiny under the ethical considerations of research with children?” (p. 122).
3. “How has the epistemological framework changed the overall aims of the project?” (p. 122).

***Providing space for the youth to contribute.*** In this research, respondents were provided ample space to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning youth’s

experiences in out-of-school time activities. Given the use of semistructured interviews, respondents were free to discuss whichever aspects of their experiences they considered worth sharing. By providing limited direction on how the respondents should answer the questions, youth were encouraged to use their own words and expressions when describing their experiences. Respondents were also given an opportunity to contribute fully to the research literature by participating in a validity check following analysis of the interview transcripts. During the validity check respondents had the chance to review the themes that emerged from their interviews and were able to confirm whether their experiences had been understood correctly and fully. The validity check was implemented to empower the respondents and give them full ownership of their personal accounts. Wherever possible, I have quoted the respondents directly using their own words. This is another way that I, as the researcher, have encouraged the true voice of the participants to be heard. Using direct quotes also reduced the likelihood of inadvertent misrepresentation of the respondents' experiences. Through the use of semistructured interviews, allowing respondents to participate in validity checks, and using direct quotes wherever possible, the youth participants in this research were given an opportunity to contribute to research literature by contributing their perspective on their experiences at the BGC.

*Ethical considerations of this research.* Ethically, interviews with youth carry special considerations. Youth are considered a vulnerable population in research; they lack life experience and may be unaware of how the interview questions will affect them (Bassett et al., 2008). The researcher holds the responsibility of monitoring the respondent's affect and must intervene if the respondent appears to be at risk emotionally.

The questions being asked are not meant to be overly personal or revealing; nevertheless, it is possible that respondents may become uncomfortable or overwhelmed during the interview. Had this occurred, I would have stopped the interview and consulted with the participant to ensure he or she was capable of continuing. The unique ethical challenges that face researchers in interviews with adolescents have been outlined at length in the previous section (see the Interviewing Adolescents section in this chapter). As some of the participants are under 18 years of age, all steps were taken to ensure that the respondents felt safe and that their ethical rights were protected throughout all phases of this research.

***How the epistemological framework changed the overall research goals.***

Goodenough et al. (2003) provided effective strategies for ensuring that the epistemological framework does not negatively impact the research results. These authors suggested that the researcher remain vigilant in decreasing the perceived power differential between youth and researcher by “becoming naïve partners in the knowledge sharing component of the research process” (Goodenough et al., 2003, p. 122). To remain a naïve partner in the research, I approached each interview with an open curiosity for what was to be shared by the respondents. Even though the CASEL (2011) core competencies provide a framework that suggests potential areas of youth development in out-of-school time programs, I took care not to simply lead respondents towards confirming this framework.

There were two major safeguards in place to reduce the potential for confirmatory bias in the research. Firstly, the semistructured interview questions were designed to allow participants to respond however they saw fit. The questions provided respondents

with the structure to consider their past experiences, but they did not suggest a specific response. Specifically, emphasis was placed on avoiding potentially leading questions that guide respondents towards the CASEL (2011) core competencies. Secondly, youth were invited to participate in validity checks. As previously described, this follow-up meeting gave respondents the opportunity to clarify any misconceptions that they identified in their interview themes. If participants felt that some element of their interview had been misunderstood they were given a chance to set the record straight. Using a predetermined interview guide and providing respondents with the opportunity to check the validity of their interviews helped me to satisfy Goodenough et al.'s (2003) request that researchers act as naïve partners in the knowledge sharing component of the research.

Another aspect of this research that decreased the power imbalance between respondents and me, as the interviewer, was the age of participants. In this research, the participants were 16, 17 and 18 years of age. Unlike in research with young children, the age and experiential gap between researcher and participants was not excessive. In this way, the challenge of decreasing the perceived power differential between the researcher and the participant was less difficult. In addition, I am young enough that there was less social distance between the respondents and me. I believe this age difference allowed the participants to feel more relaxed. Furthermore, I am not an authority figure; therefore, the atmosphere did not perpetuate an uneven power dynamic similar to a teacher–student or parent–child interaction. Creating a rapport that invites openness from participants was integral to the research objective, which aimed at gathering the respondents' individual perspectives.

Finally, Goodenough et al. (2003) indicated that researchers must provide youth with the structure required to be full participants in research, adopting an epistemological framework that places youth in an intelligent light. Researchers who fail to acknowledge the insights of youth in research settings risk alienating participants, further perpetuating the power differential that threatens youth research. In this research the participants were given expert status, as they shared their perspectives on involvement at the BGC. I believe that nobody knows more than these youth do about their experiences; as such, the questions were intended to empower the respondents to share the aspects of their experiences that seemed most relevant for them. The semistructured interview style provided respondents with a focus; however, what was said, and how it was expressed was their choice. The research was designed specifically to shift focus to the respondents' viewpoints and inspire young people to share their perspectives with confidence.

Despite the specified challenges, interviews with youth respondents provide an important perspective. Although research often neglects to gather the perspectives of young people (Litt, 2003; Mishna et al., 2004), this study was designed explicitly to capture the unique viewpoints of youth respondents. The interview participants in this study are the consumers of community programs; therefore, as the researcher, I considered them to be the experts of what occurs in these programs. Youth are capable and competent informants, so I believe it was essential that I gather their perceptions about the developmental gains achieved during their time at the BGC.

## **Methods of Analysis**

Through using thematic analysis I attempted to better understand the experiences of the youth respondents under study. All interviews were transcribed, and I reviewed the transcripts to identify recurrent themes and categories related to developmental processes and changes in the respondents' sense of self, their relationship with other people, and their connection to their community since they have been attending the BGC. The participants' responses helped to determine the categories that emerged for further analysis. For instance, multiple respondents reported an appreciation for the relationships they have formed with staff, and this was noted as a prominent theme. The data analysis then progressed through multiple rounds of analysis, wherein connections between areas of development (i.e., links between perceptions of personal growth and development in interpersonal skills) were drawn.

I have a particular interest in the development of social and emotional competencies; as such, I focused additional attention directed towards this area of development during data analysis. In the body of literature that focuses on the promotion of positive outcomes in adolescent development, there are three models that gather the most attention: Larson's (2000, 2006) positive youth development, the Search Institute's (2013b) developmental assets, and CASEL (2011) core competencies of social and emotional learning.

In the context of positive youth development, Larson (2006) posited, "Young people are agents who have tremendous built-in potential for growth" (p. 682). During adolescence, Larson (2000, 2006) suggested that young people must be the producers of their own positive development. A primary factor in Larson's model of positive youth

development is the cultivation of initiative during adolescence. Larson (2000) defined initiative as “the ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal” (p. 170). Within the context of community programs, supportive adults and an environment that allows for independence and structure both play an important role in guiding positive youth development. Young people are best prepared to achieve positive developmental outcomes when they are given the supports necessary to “experience ownership and gradually develop greater ability to regulate this agency” (Larson, 2006, p. 682). In order to develop initiative Larson (2000) indicated that young people must have intrinsic motivation. Within community programs youth should be provided with activities that promote connection and involvement in their environment and require sustained effort and concerted engagement over time. Specifically, youth must be encouraged to strive towards positive future outcomes, while also being supported in learning how to handle setbacks, reevaluate goals, and adjust their strategies of goal attainment (Larson, 2000). Within the current thesis, I had expected that respondents would identify experiences at the BGC that support Larson’s (2000) model of positive youth development. This model, however, lacks clearly defined developmental competencies that are present in other models of positive development in adolescence, and as such it could not be used as a conceptual framework during the data analysis.

The Search Institute (2013a) provided a model of positive development in adolescence that outlined 40 developmental assets, which represent, “building blocks of healthy development . . . that help young children grow up healthy, caring, and responsible” (Search Institute, 2013a, para. 1). The developmental assets include both

external assets (i.e., support, empowerment, boundaries & expectations, and constructive use of time), as well as internal assets (i.e., commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity). The Search Institute research has found that when these assets are fostered during adolescence, they are “a set of skills, experiences, relationships, and behaviors that enable young people to develop into successful and contributing adults” (Search Institute, 2013b, para. 1). In the context of out-of-school time, these developmental assets may provide adult leaders with direction regarding the types of resources they could offer that would be most beneficial for positive youth development. The Search Institute (2013a) recommended that youth participate in out-of-school programs for at least 3 hours per week; as such, there are elements of the Search Institute developmental assets that are well suited to an application within community programs. Specific assets that are likely to occur within community programs include receiving support from nonparent adults, developing personal restraint, improving decision-making skills, and increasing interpersonal competence. However, the assets also require contributions from external noncommunity contexts in the lives of adolescents, such as family and school settings. Although individuals in these settings are important contributors to adolescent positive development, they would not be present during participation in community programs. As a result, the Search Institute’s (2013a) developmental assets do not provide an appropriate framework for conceptualizing positive youth development in the context of participation in community programs.

Despite the strengths of Larson’s (2000, 2006) model of positive youth development, and the Search Institute’s (2013a) developmental assets, the CASEL’s (2011) five core competencies of social and emotional development were used as the

conceptual framework during the data analysis in the current research (Appendix F). Previously, the CASEL (2011) competencies have been used extensively in research within the context of schools. In this setting, participants from classrooms that fostered the development of social and emotional competencies demonstrated enhanced positive social behaviours, better academic performance, fewer conduct problems, and lower levels of emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011), yet there has been very little research conducted investigating the development of the CASEL (2011) core competencies in the context of out-of-school time programs, yet there is growing consensus amongst researchers in the field of adolescent development that nonschool hours play an important role in adolescent development. As such, this is an area that would be suitable for further investigation using the CASEL (2011) core competencies. In this research, I attempted to expand the scope of research using the CASEL (2011) model by applying these core competencies to the context of community programs and gathered evidence to determine whether participants reported examples of these core competencies being fostered at the BGC. Specifically, I was interested in identifying respondents' experiences that demonstrated development in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness.

**Conceptual framework: CASEL social and emotional competencies.** The CASEL (2011) SEL competencies fall within five core groups: (a), self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) responsible decision-making, (d) relationship skills, and (e) social awareness. Each of these core groups is discussed below.

***Self-awareness.*** Self-awareness involves the ability to recognize one's own emotions and values. CASEL (2011) has identified that an individual who possesses

strong self-awareness has an accurate understanding of how his or her emotions and thoughts affect behaviours, and how those behaviours and words will affect others. Self-awareness also includes a “well-grounded sense of confidence” (CASEL, 2011, para. 2), which encompasses an honest awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses (CASEL, 2007). Like all the social and emotional competencies, self-awareness develops over time. Children and adolescents learn to become more self-aware within a supportive and caring environment, complete with adult-support, adult role modelling, and deliberate instruction. Elementary school children demonstrate self-awareness when they “recognize and accurately label simple emotions such as sadness, anger, and happiness” (CASEL, 2011, para. 7). By the time children complete middle school their ability to understand the motivations for behaviour expands and they demonstrate the capacity to “analyze factors that trigger their stress reactions” (CASEL, 2011, para. 7). By high school youth demonstrate the ability to analyze how their “expressions of emotion affect other people” (CASEL, 2011, para. 7).

***Self-management.*** Self-management consists of “regulating one’s emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles” (CASEL, 2011, para. 3). Individuals who possess self-management competencies are able to identify strategies and make use of available resources to facilitate achievement of long-term goals (CASEL, 2007). Self-management also includes the development of skills that individuals use to effectively direct their own activities toward the achievement of objectives. Specific areas of self-management include deliberate or focused planning, scheduling, task tracking, self-evaluation, and self-control. These areas of self-management are also sometimes referred to as the executive processes (CASEL, 2007).

Elementary school children can be expected to demonstrate the ability to “describe the steps of setting and working toward goals” (CASEL, 2011, para. 8). By middle school a child can potentially “make a plan to achieve a short-term personal or academic goal” (CASEL, 2011, para. 8). High school students can be expected to “identify strategies to make use of available school and community resources and overcome obstacles in achieving a long-term goal” (CASEL, 2011, para. 8).

***Responsible decision-making.*** Responsible decision-making involves more than just fulfilling one’s own wants and needs. Individuals who possess responsible decision-making competencies consider ethical, moral, and social consequences when making decisions (CASEL, 2011). Their decisions demonstrate respect for others and reflect a consideration for likely consequences of various actions. Their decision-making skills are generalized to all areas of life and are demonstrated readily in both social and academic settings. Those who exhibit responsible decision-making competencies contribute to the well-being of their surroundings, including the community, home, and school (CASEL, 2007). Children in elementary school are expected to be capable of simply identifying “a range of decisions they make at school” (CASEL, 2011, para. 11). During middle school, students demonstrate an ability to evaluate strategies for resisting difficult social situations, such as peer pressure and make decisions that help them avoid “unsafe or unethical activities” (CASEL, 2011, para. 11). High school students face the uncertainty of their future beyond school; therefore, at this age, youth should be able to think about how their present choices will affect their future outcomes, including analyzing “how their current . . . [decisions will] affect their college and career prospects” (CASEL, 2011, para. 11).

***Relationship skills.*** Relationship skills consist of “establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation” (CASEL, 2011, para. 4). Youth who have developed competencies related to relationship skills are capable of “preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict” (CASEL, 2011, para. 4) using appropriate verbal deescalation interventions rather than alternative strategies, such as physical confrontation. Individuals who possess strong relationship skills are better able to resist inappropriate social pressure and seek out help from more competent supports, if necessary (CASEL, 2007). Children in elementary school display “an ability to describe approaches to making and keeping friends” (CASEL, 2011, para. 10). During middle school youth demonstrate a propensity towards “cooperation and teamwork to promote group-wide goals” (CASEL, 2011, para. 10). In high school, adolescents “are expected to evaluate uses of communication skills with peers, teachers, and family members” (CASEL, 2011, para. 10). Specifically, high-school-aged youth should be able to identify similarities and differences in language and voice tone based on their relationship to the listener (i.e., knowing that individuals speak differently with friends and supervisors). Adolescents in high school are also expected to monitor and modify the way they communicate in the various areas of their life, such as work, home, and school (CASEL, 2011).

***Social awareness.*** Social awareness involves “being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others” (CASEL, 2011 para. 4). An individual who has developed competencies in social awareness listens respectfully to others in order to acquire a deeper understanding of their points of view. Employing what they have gained from social interactions, individuals with social awareness possess a heightened ability to

recognize how specific situations and behaviours will affect others. Social awareness also includes a recognition and appreciation for individual and group similarities and differences (CASEL, 2007). Individuals with social awareness skills demonstrate the ability to adjust their actions in order to accommodate those whose needs are different from their own. Elementary school students are expected to “identify verbal, physical, and situational cues indicating how others feel” (CASEL, 2011, para. 9). In middle school, youth develop the ability to recognize “others’ feelings and perspectives in various situations” (CASEL, 2011, para. 9). During high school, youth should be capable of evaluating “their ability to empathize with others” (CASEL, 2011, para. 9). In order to facilitate this more complex social task in mid to late adolescence, individuals must be aware of their own emotional states, in addition to the feelings of those around them (CASEL, 2011).

**Identifying themes.** Similar to Dworkin et al.’s (2003) data analysis procedures, the process of identifying themes in this study involved two steps. In the first step I read the transcript several times to identify overarching domains of growth experiences. Items that seemed to be essentially similar were grouped together. For example, a respondent could describe how he frequently received social support from the leaders at the BGC. In categorizing those sections of the text, I (a) identified these as examples of receiving social support, (b) underlined that section of the text, and (c) wrote the term “social support at the BGC” in the margin. Yin (2011) called this phase the “disassembling procedure” (p. 178), in which data units are “broken down into smaller fragments or pieces . . . by assigning new labels to the [data]” (p. 178).

Once I read through the transcript several times and identified each example of youth perceptions of developmental growth experiences within the transcript, I moved to the second step, which involved conceptualizing the respondents' experiences at "an even higher conceptual plane" (Yin, 2011, p. 191). Continuing with the previous example, the researcher (a) identified all the domains of growth experiences that logically clustered together (e.g., social support at the BGC, meeting new peers, diversity at the BGC); (b) selected all the themes that appeared to be examples of the social and emotional competency called relationships skills; and (c) copied and pasted each of these highlighted sections into a word processing document designated for instances of relationship skills. Yin (2011) proposed that during this stage the researcher should be "searching for patterns" (p. 191) within the emerging themes and asking questions such as "do the emerging patterns make sense?" (p. 191) and "how do the patterns relate to the concepts entertained at the outset of the study?" (p. 191). By displaying the respondents' quotations in word processing documents devoted specifically to each area of growth identified I found it was easier to recognize similarities and emerging themes amongst the respondents' experiences. Once I had organized all the themes based on their similarity to other responses, I began to make note of how experiences at the BGC appeared to have impacted the respondents' personal growth and social and emotional development.

At this point in the analysis I created word processing documents for each of the thematic areas identified in the interviews. The experiences of the respondents dictated the specific category headings and the number of word processing documents. These documents included numerous participant responses that were examples of experiences that cluster under the specific category headings. Comparing the number of responses in

each word processing document provided a preliminary indicator of the areas of the club that respondents perceived have had the most positive impact on their development. For instance, the category labelled “Relationships with leaders” included 60 quotes and “Relationships outside the BGC” only had 19 quotes, this provided some indication of the experiences that respondents considered to be most important during their time at the BGC. Responses were weighted (i.e., responses identified as more important by the respondent were denoted by an asterisk in the word document) according to the importance that respondents placed on these experiences during the interviews. For instance, “Developing coping skills” included fewer quotes than most of the other themes, but the responses were especially important for the respondents; therefore this theme was considered particularly significant to the respondents’ experiences at the BGC.

During this step in the analysis I began making connections between the experiences of respondents and started drawing conclusions about the presence of activities and interactions that I believed were important in fostering the development of social and emotional competencies. Dworkin et al. (2003) advised that within this stage it is important for researchers to include respondents’ quotes taken directly from the interviews. Given the research objective of including the participants’ voice in the youth program literature, it was particularly important to stay true to the respondents’ experiences. These quotes provided a direct connection to the respondents’ points of view. Each of these cases informed the research objective of developing deeper understanding of the aspects of youth programs that have the potential to foster the development of social and emotional competencies.

In the Discussion section of this thesis I expand upon the findings from the participants' responses. Any findings on the activities and experiences at the BGC that respondents perceived to offer the greatest potential to foster social and emotional development are discussed further. I identify the most common responses and discuss how these reported experiences might be related to the activities that the BGC offers youth. The presence or absence of participants' reported experiences that appeared to foster the CASEL (2011) social and emotional competencies are also examined within the Discussion section. Burnard (2004) suggested that, in a discussion section, "it is sometimes tempting for the researcher to speculate about meaning" (p. 179). Instead, Burnard proposed, "The best approach is to both present the findings in a flat and factual way and to offer a discussion that never strays further than the limits of the data" (p. 179). In the Discussion section the findings are explained in greater detail and placed in the context of social and emotional development. However, I do not conjecture or try "to 'get inside the head' of the respondent, or attempt to . . . 'interpret' what that respondent meant" (Burnard, 2004, p. 179), without supporting these findings using quotations from the interviews.

**Protecting against potential bias.** There were four measures included in the research design that protect against potential researcher bias in the analysis and interpretation of the data. The first measure for validating my interpretations was an invitation for all respondents to participate in a validity check. During this follow-up meeting, participants were given the opportunity to review emerging themes and ensure that their initial interview was understood correctly. Respondents had the ability to add, delete, or revise their responses to ensure that I had accurately captured their experiences

at BGC. Going straight to the source by asking the respondents if my interpretations of the data units fits with the participants' perceptions of their experiences was a very effective approach for ensuring that I had accurately captured the respondents' experiences. All 10 respondents participated in a validity check meeting.

The second measure involved my use of direct quotes wherever possible in the presentation of the research findings. Direct quotes allowed the respondents' perspectives to emerge from the interviews unaltered and ensured that I stayed true to the experiences of the respondents. This preventative measure also lent itself well to the research objective that strove to give adolescent participants a voice in the youth program literature.

The third preventative measure was my commitment to approach the interview data with openness and curiosity. Acting as a "naïve partner in the research" (Goodenough et al., 2003, p. 122), I did not assume that I knew what the respondent meant within a specific section. Instead, I constantly referred back to the transcript, taking context into consideration, and supported any findings with evidence from the interviews. Further addressing this measure, I used the feedback from the validity checks meetings to further support my interpretations of the respondents' experiences.

For the fourth and final preventative measure, I made all efforts to acknowledge and recognize my personal biases that relate to the subject matter and research methods (e.g., participant selection and emphasizing specific responses). Upon consulting the Canadian Psychological Association (2000) *Code of Ethics*, I found two standards that were applicable to this measure. Principle III.10 stated that researchers should "evaluate how their personal experiences, attitudes, values, social context, individual differences,

stresses, and specific training influence their activities and thinking, integrating this awareness into all attempts to be objective and unbiased in their research, service, and other activities” (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000, p. 24). To address this ethical standard, I used a research journal to record any values, attitudes, or personal beliefs that emerged before, during, or after the interview that could potentially bias the research. Following each interview, I made time to note these reactions so that these biases could be tracked over time. These notes were reviewed during the interpretation stage and assisted me in evaluating how personal factors (i.e., values, attitudes, etc.) may have hindered attempts to be objective and unbiased. The second applicable standard (found in Principle III) outlined the ethical requirements that researchers “present instructional information accurately, avoiding bias in the selection and presentation of information, and publicly acknowledge any personal values or bias that influence the selection and presentation of information” (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000, p. 24). To address this standard in my research, I publicly acknowledged personal values or biases that influenced the research by including any pertinent biases that have been noted in the research journal. This approach to monitoring potential biases allowed me to become aware of one element of the research that may have resulted in a possible bias. A more thorough description of the potential clash between my personal values and the need for impartiality as the researcher has been included in the Limitations section of this thesis (see Chapter 6). In addition, I explored the impact of any personal factors that influenced the research and outlined solutions for reducing the impact of biases on the research findings.

Although it is difficult to eliminate bias altogether in qualitative research, steps have been taken to diminish the potential for bias in the proposed research. The four measures identified in this section demonstrate that I have considered the stages of the research procedures (i.e., during data analysis and interpretation) in which bias is more likely, and I have taken precautions to reduce its potential impact on the research findings.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research**

Discussing the need to promote reliability and validity in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four aspects that they encourage researchers to consider for enhancing the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba explained, “The four terms ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’, ‘dependability’ and ‘confirmability’, are . . . the naturalist’s [the term used to describe qualitative researchers] equivalents for the conventional terms ‘internal validity’, ‘external validity’, ‘reliability’ and ‘objectivity’” (p. 300). Within these four aspects of trustworthiness are specific methodological strategies for demonstrating “qualitative rigor” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 294).

**Credibility.** The implementation of credibility in qualitative research includes two elements. First, as the researcher, I must “carry out the inquiry in such a way that the probability that the findings will be found to be credible is enhanced” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296), and second, I must “demonstrate the credibility of the findings by having them approved by the constructors of the multiple realities being studied” (p. 296). Specific strategies for promoting credibility in research include triangulation and member validity checks. In the current research, the interview data from multiple respondents

was used as a form of triangulation, a method that Lincoln and Guba stated allows for “*multiple* copies of one *type* of source” (p. 305). Through retrieving multiple copies (accounts from several respondents’ experiences) of one type of source (participation in one-on-one interviews), the researcher may receive a more comprehensive understanding of youth’s experiences at the BGC. Credibility was also promoted through the use of member validity checks. Respondents had the opportunity to confirm that I had accurately understood their experiences by reviewing the emerging themes from their interview data. Respondents were encouraged to adjust or add to their accounts, if they felt it was necessary at that time. A more detailed description of validity checks has been included above.

**Transferability.** Despite labelling transferability as the qualitative equivalent of external validity, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested, “The establishment of transferability by the naturalist is very different from the establishment of external validity by the conventionalist” (p. 316). Quantitative researchers are able to express precise statements about validity using statistical confidence limits, whereas qualitative researchers are unable to provide similarly detailed claims. Instead, qualitative researchers may put forth only “working hypotheses together with a description of the time and context in which they were found” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). In the pursuit of transferability, the qualitative researcher is somewhat limited and is only able to provide “the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). In the current research, I acknowledged the narrow scope of my findings (i.e., a single program in one Boys and Girls Club in one

city) in the Limitations section of this thesis (see Chapter 6), and I strived to provide enough detail in the results to allow future researchers to expand upon the findings by conducting similar research in other youth programs and locations.

**Dependability.** Describing the characteristics of dependability in qualitative research, Guba (1981) drew a parallel between the relationships of validity to reliability and of credibility to dependability. Specifically, Guba (1981) argued, “since there can be no validity without reliability (and thus no credibility without dependability), a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter” (p. 316). Although Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested this argument is true in merit, they contended that it is also “very weak” (p. 317), since it establishes “dependability in practice, but does not deal with it in principle” (p. 317). In order to establish a strong solution, Guba and Lincoln suggested that researchers deal with dependability directly. One research technique Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed is an inquiry audit, which is based metaphorically on the fiscal audit. In an inquiry audit an “auditor” is called in to review both the process and the product of the research. First, the auditor is expected to attest to the *process* of the inquiry, checking on the specifics of how the data were collected and how the researcher monitored his own biases throughout the inquiry. Lincoln and Guba stated, “By determining acceptability [of the process] the auditor attests to the *dependability* of the inquiry” (p. 318). Second, the auditor also examines the *product* derived from the inquiry, reviewing the data, findings, interpretations, and recommendations. Should the auditor confirm “that [the product] is supported by data and is internally coherent” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318); the auditor is then able to express confidence in the *confirmability* of the inquiry. Since the current inquiry was

conducted as a part of a master's thesis, the inquiry audit is built into the design of the academic exercise. Over the course of the thesis, both the process and the product of the research are reviewed, or audited, by the thesis supervisor, the thesis committee, and the external examiner. To that end, the current research will be thoroughly audited prior to being presented for final submission.

**Confirmability.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the inquiry audit also represents the major technique for establishing confirmability in qualitative research. As previously stated, the confirmability of research is established following an objective review of the product of the inquiry. Lincoln and Guba proposed two other techniques that are also important for establishing confirmability. First, the use of triangulation demonstrates that the source of the data (i.e., the interview respondents) have verified the researcher's interpretation and confirms that the emerging themes have accurately captured their experiences. Second, Lincoln and Guba recommended researchers use a reflexive journal, in which the researcher "records a variety of information about *self*, and *method*" (p. 327). With respect to self, the researcher is expected to "provide the same information about the *human* instrument that is often provided about the paper-and-pencil or brass instruments used in conventional studies" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 327). Possible examples of information about self includes, identifying factors that could introduce bias into the research during analysis, or personal beliefs that surfaced for the researcher during the interviews. Lincoln and Guba suggested information about "methodological decisions made and the reasons for making them" (p. 327) should also be included in the reflexive journal. In the current research, I kept a research journal to record any values, attitudes, or personal beliefs that emerged before, during, or after the

interview. Greater detail about the use of a research journal in this study has been outlined above.

### **Summary**

This study employed semistructured interviews to gather the accounts of participants' experiences at the BGC. The interview questions were designed to allow each individual's perspectives to be shared without the researcher guiding the responses. Each interview was transcribed and the responses were clustered into themes using data analysis procedures similar to Dworkin et al.'s (2003) methods. Categories were created based on the themes that emerged from the respondents' accounts. Considering my focus on social and emotional development, the five core social and emotional competencies (CASEL, 2011) were used as a conceptual framework during the analysis. In this chapter special considerations for research with adolescents were described, including an ethical requirement for parental consent, strategies for avoiding a researcher–respondent power imbalance, and suggestions for encouraging respondents to be more than passive participants in the research process. The ethical rights and responsibilities of the researcher and participants were also outlined.

This study provides value for both theory and practice. The research has contributed to the literature on the developmental impact of community youth programs, presenting accounts of the participants' experiences at the BGC. Through seeking out youth respondents, those who experience community programs on a firsthand basis, served to provide insight into the elements of youth programs that may promote social and emotional competencies. In practice, the findings of this research will enhance the

training of youth leaders and contribute to improving the design of programs that assist youth in developing social and emotional competencies.

As a graduate student, and a future counsellor, I want to learn more about the development of youth. Having volunteered in community youth programs and worked with adolescents in a clinical setting, I am particularly passionate about the development of social and emotional competencies in adolescents. By completing research in this area, I have contributed to the existing literature in a manner that will encourage the continued promotion of these skills in adolescents. I expect that this research will provide a better understanding of the social and emotional development of youth in the context of community activities and offer valuable guidance to those who play a role in supporting the social and emotional development of children and adolescents.

## Chapter 4: Analysis of Themes

The purpose of this research was to utilize in-depth accounts of youth respondents to develop a deeper understanding of the current aspects of BGC youth programs that foster the development of SEL competencies in adolescents. In this research I also sought to invite youth to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which youth programs assist in the positive development of young people.

I begin this chapter by providing some background on the youth who participated in this study. These profiles are an opportunity for the reader to “meet” the youth who volunteered to have their voices heard in this research. Following the introductions I present an exploration of the themes that emerged from the interviews. Quotes are verbatim except where edited to avoid repetition (as indicated by spaced ellipsis points) or altered for clarification (as indicated by square brackets). To protect individuals’ anonymity and confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms in place of the respondents’ names as well as the names of all other individuals referenced in the quotations.

### Meet the Respondents

A total of 10 respondents were recruited to participate in this study. Respondents were between 16 and 18 years of age; five of the participants were male and five were female. Respondents were not asked to identify their ethnicity.

**Male respondents.** Of the five male respondents in this study, three were 17 years of age and two were 18 years of age. At the time of this research, the five male respondents had attended the BGC for durations spanning 7 months to 2 years. The respondents come from diverse backgrounds. One respondent was raised by a single mother, and another was separated from his siblings after his parents divorced in his early

adolescence. Two of the respondents had moved frequently throughout their lives; one of the youth had four different homes in the span of 4 years, and another respondent stated that he had moved “about 30 times” in his life.

Chris was a member of the Keystone group—a youth leadership team open to all youth who attend the Teen Stuff program. Chris valued the added responsibility that came with his role in Keystone, and he appreciated that his position in the leadership group helped him make “a bigger difference” at the BGC. During his time at the BGC Chris enjoyed playing dodge ball and spending time with his friends. Chris said one of the most important factors that made him a regular member of the BGC was “the friendship between the leaders and some youth.” He considered these relationships to be integral to his time at the club, and he shared, “I’ve talked to [the leaders] about things that I wouldn’t talk to any of the youth about, ya, so there’s trust.”

Ben was also a member of the Keystone group, and he liked how his leadership position enabled him to effect change: “I get to put my own ideas into what can go on here.” Ben described himself as “a very shy person,” but he believed his time at the BGC had helped him become “more comfortable with talking to people.” Ben remarked that the BGC provided him with opportunities to form new relationships and participate in engaging games and club trips. When describing some of the factors that made him a regular member of the BGC, Ben said, “Coming here and being able to hang out with [friends], but also being able to do activities . . . it’s just really, really fun.”

Charlie shared that he was raised in a very rough neighbourhood, and growing up he was “surrounded by violence.” Before coming to the BGC Charlie said his life was headed “down the wrong path, both with police and with myself.” When asked to

describe himself, Charlie said, “I might seem like I’m a hard-ass . . . who has no care if anything upsets him. But in reality, a lot of people are more sensitive than what they let on; I’m one of those people.”

Rick lived in one of the neighbouring towns, and he had to commute about an hour each time he attended the BGC. Rick described himself as “a country person . . . a farm boy, more than a city person.” Rick explained, “I like to be me. I like shooting, I like hunting, playing sports, you know, some video gaming. I like to play guitar, and . . . I like the simpler things in life.” Rick also placed great importance on physical fitness, and he emphasized the important role that the BGC played in helping him stay in shape.

Travis described himself as “a very sporty person” and he explained, “I love to hunt, and I love to talk about huntin’. I like to talk about my guns, I like to talk about my trucks, and I love to talk about wrestling and football.” Travis disclosed that in the past “a lot of people liked to spread [negative] rumours around me.” Travis cautioned, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Travis admitted, “I have that look of an absolute hard-ass . . . but my biggest weakness, [and] my biggest strength is my big heart. . . . I’m a very, very sensitive, caring person . . . you cannot hurt me physically, [but] you can break me down in tears emotionally as easy as a five-year-old girl.” Travis compared his time at the BGC to “a utopia,” and he disclosed, “It’s actually hard for me to find places that I truly enjoy going to [but] . . . [the BGC] is probably one of my favourite places to be.”

**Female respondents.** Of the five female respondents, three were 16 years of age and two were 17 years of age. At the time of this research, the five female respondents had attended the BGC for durations spanning 7 months to 2.5 years. On average the female respondents had been attending the BGC longer than the male respondents. The

female respondents had grown up in a variety of settings. One of the respondents spent much of her free time in childhood attending the afterschool program at the BGC. Another respondent described herself as a “back and forth child” because she moved four or five times between her mother’s and father’s homes after they divorced when she was a young child. One of the respondents had an older brother who “didn’t do very many good things” as a teenager; this participant discussed the impact that older siblings can have on an individual’s personal development and stated, “[I learned] a lot in life about how I should and shouldn’t act.” Conversely, another respondent explained that she was an only child, which “kinda gets lonely,” but she said she was able to spend alone time with her parents to amuse herself.

Emily had recently started attending a high school near the BGC because “no one stopped” the persistent bullying that she had been facing for 5 years in her previous school. Emily explained that many of the girls in her old peer group “were just so cliquey and judgmental, and if you didn’t meet what they thought you should be . . . you were left out.” Reflecting on her time at the BGC, Emily stated, “Here you can be yourself, and that’s how it should be.” Despite her previous struggles with bullying, Emily described her optimistic outlook on the future: “Life goes on, things move on, everything happens for a reason. . . . If something happens that gets you down, don’t let it, because it’s gonna get better.”

Nicole described herself as “a fun, relaxing person.” She said that she always wanted to show new people that she was “outgoing,” and further stated, “I usually have a really big heart.” Nicole shared that the last year of her life had been “really hard” after she was kicked out of her family’s home following some “bad conflict[s]” with her

parents. Looking back on that time in her life Nicole stated, “Moving out is really hard . . . [and] I wasn’t ready for it.” Nicole has since been invited back home, and she and her parents are “actually getting along very, very well.” Nicole said that relaxing was an important part of her time at the BGC, and she remarked, “I can come in here, chat with friends . . . [and] I can just keep my mind off [any conflicts outside the BGC].” Nicole said the BGC was “a pretty nice place”, and she appreciated the opportunity to unwind: “I can just lay back, and relax, and enjoy myself.”

Donna has a physical disability that limited her mobility, and as a result she sometimes feels left out of some activities at the BGC. Despite these challenges, Donna shared that music had always been a positive outlet for personal expression in her life. At the BGC, Donna was heavily involved in Drop’n Beats, a music program offered to all members at the club. In this program, youth were encouraged to write an original song, record their music using professional sound equipment, and then contribute to the mixing of a compilation album. Donna described how the Drop’n Beats program gave her a sense of personal success and helped her feel more comfortable at the BGC.

Maggie was a member of Keystone, which she joined as soon as she began attending the Teen Stuff program. Maggie said, “My life kind of revolves around my leadership.” Maggie explained that Keystone played a large role in sparking her interest towards service to others. With a smile she revealed, “I put [community service] before anything else. . . . I put it before school all the time.” Outside of the Keystone group, Maggie also enjoyed spending time with friends at the BGC and helping to prepare the Teen Stuff snack in the kitchen.

Juliet described herself as quite “shy” and “usually not one to really interact with new people.” There was, however, another side of Juliet that emerged when she was in a comfortable setting with people whom she trusted. Under those conditions, Juliet revealed, “I absolutely love goofing around, getting crazy . . . and I love to party.” According to Juliet the BGC was one of the places where she felt particularly at ease. Juliet noted, “I walk in here and I just get this feeling, it like rushes through me, it just brings me up.” Juliet was a member of the Keystone leadership group, and she said it had helped her feel more self-assured at the BGC. Juliet shared, “[The BGC] always cheers me up. . . . I love coming here! It’s like the highlight of my Tuesday and my Thursday.”

### **Research Themes**

Based on the interview findings, three categories of themes emerged. The first category described the social setting at the BGC. The second category, interpersonal connections, was comprised of responses that appeared to be related to the respondents’ willingness or proficiency to interact with individuals in and outside of the BGC. The third category, personal development, groups responses in which respondents identified factors or incidents they felt had particularly significant impact on their personal growth.

**Social setting at the BGC.** During their interviews the respondents often described their personal experience of attending the BGC. Participants shared personal stories about events that occurred within the club, commented on the types of activities they enjoyed, and noted the impact of conflict on their experiences at the BGC. The themes included in this section provide a glimpse into the respondents’ everyday experiences at the BGC. Within this category there were 13 themes, which I have

organized into three subcategories: general atmosphere, activities at the BGC, and conflict and drama at the BGC.

*General atmosphere.* The general atmosphere subcategory includes themes that describe the social setting at the BGC, without focusing primarily on the activities or conflict and drama at the club. I present six themes in this subcategory.

*Positive and welcoming environment.* All 10 respondents reported experiencing a positive and welcoming environment at the BGC. Some of the respondents compared the BGC to the comfort of being in a family. One participant stated,

Everybody's like a little family here . . . if there's something going on and . . . you're close friends with [another youth] it's kind of like a little family. . . . If something happens, [other youth are] there right away so you know they're your true friends. . . . Lots of people think of me as, like, their big sister because I'm older than most people here. . . . They can come to me for any advice on anything because I've been there, done that.

Another participant said,

The staff [and] the youth are very welcoming. . . . It's kind of like a family. . . . [People at the BGC are] so, like, happy to see you. . . . They just ask about how your life is, and they're not just, like, the top of the surface.

Another group of respondents considered the BGC to be like "a second home."

This was a significant acknowledgment because some of the youth at the BGC come from unstable home environments. In some cases, youth do not have a permanent home and other youth witness frequent conflict or experience a lack of parental involvement at home. One respondent described BGC as providing a comfort of home:

[The BGC is] just a great place to be . . . [at first I] knew absolutely no one at all and I just kind of sat in the corner by myself . . . [but] people started coming up to me and being like, “Hey, do you want to go and play a video game or go make a bracelet, or go play hockey or whatever?” . . . Here it’s just a really welcoming, home-y type of feeling.

Another participant stated,

The first day I came in and everybody seemed like they were getting to know me. . . . When you come, you just have to sign in; everybody’s talking to you . . . I enjoy how the leaders are always positive, you know, they’re friendly, caring, helpful, and a lot of the [youth] also same thing.

One respondent explained that BGC is supportive and fun:

It’s just really welcoming, and supportive . . . [and] it’s nice to come. . . . Everybody was welcome . . . [and it’s] a good place to be. . . . I would recommend anyone to come here if they needed any place to go. I would say, “Come here; come have fun.”

Another respondent said,

Yes, we did feel at home coming to Teen Stuff. We felt like it was incredible; we got a place to like hang out. . . . You did have your jocks, your nerds, your weed smokers, and your odd people, so you know, we felt right at home. We were like, this is a lot better than school, because we’re not outnumbered. It’s all equal.

Another factor that contributed to the positive, welcoming environment was the absence of racist and sexist behaviour at the BGC. One participant expressed,

[There is] a lot of kindness . . . there's no racism, there's no sexism . . . and [there are not] a lot of bad jokes and stuff like that going around. . . . There's a lot that discourages [discrimination]. . . . One of [the leaders has a] . . . rule [to] treat others how you wanna be treated, so a lot of people kind of take that to heart.

Another respondent affirmed that that BGC is a healthy, positive space:

There's no racism, no sexualism [*sic*], no nothing like that. . . . [Youth] respect [the club enough] to not cause the problems here, and to not bring our problems here . . . this isn't a place to have problems; this is a place to be in a better mood . . . we're all together as one, and so everyone is happy when they're here.

Respondents also described how the positive environment at the BGC left them feeling more energized throughout the evening. One participant stated,

All the positive energy . . . [and] having a good time . . . no matter what, as soon as you walk in that front door, you're leaving your rivalries outside. You walk in and it's like a different atmosphere; everyone's being friendly. . . . This is sort of a place to . . . just go to get along.

Another participant commented,

[There's an] upbeat mood [at the BGC]. . . . I walk in here, and I just get this feeling, it like rushes through me, it just brings me up. . . . [If I am] having a bad week . . . [the BGC] always cheers me up. . . . I'll go dance with my friends, and be crazy and wild, and just forget about everything that's happened in the week. . . . My experiences [at the BGC] have been wonderful. . . . It's really fun.

Providing youth with a welcoming environment was an especially important theme for the respondents, and it was clear that the BGC gave youth a positive place to

visit and a space where they felt comfortable. A welcoming environment is important to fostering positive youth development, because if youth did not feel welcome at the BGC they would simply not attend, and the leaders would lose the ability to have a positive influence on the youth.

*Having fun at the BGC.* Respondents reported that the amount of fun they had in a particular setting was an important factor in deciding how they spent their time. Seven of the respondents described the BGC as a setting where they expected to have fun and wanted to come back week after week for more good times. One participant explained,

I look forward to it, like, at the end of my day. It's just like, oh, I had a hard day at school or you know, I had a bad day. I can come [to the BGC], and I can just have fun.

Another respondent stated,

You're just here to have fun; you're here to see your friends; you're here to play games, [and] you're here to . . . just hangout. . . . It makes me happier because I actually have more people I can talk to now; just more people that I get to see and have a good time with.

One respondent described what makes the environment more fun:

Instead of just sitting around playing video games, or just sleeping or whatever [at home], come [to the BGC]. . . . It's just really, really fun. . . . It makes it a better time for everybody, instead of just standing around now they've more things to do.

Another respondent stated,

[I] just come here and hang out with [friends]. . . . I can have fun with [the leaders], we can talk about anything, we can goof around with each other. . . .

Sometimes my friend and I will go by the speaker and if a song we like is playing, we'll sing really like ugly on purpose, like make our voices crack, dance like we don't know what's going on . . . it's just what I mean by goofy, it's fun.

One respondent described a specific example of a fun activity at the BGC. She recalled the excitement that followed when the leaders encouraged youth to take part in a Harlem Shake dance video:

[One of the leaders] just started dancing . . . [and another leader] was like, "Oh guys we're going to do the Harlem Shake." And everybody was like, "Oh lord, yay!" And so everybody dressed up. . . . It was so funny and so much fun to see everybody doing 'cause usually people are like, "Ugh, Harlem Shake is stupid. Why do people do that?" But the club actually thought it was a good idea. . . . I actually thought it was going to be bad because I hate dancing in front of everybody . . . but it was actually kind of fun. I enjoyed myself. (Participant)

Another respondent shared her enjoyment of the excursions organized by the BGC. This participant found one outing from 2 years ago to be particularly memorable:

It was so much fun. It's something that I won't forget doing 'cause it's just, like, yup, me and a bunch of my friends went . . . to the "Sugar Bowl" in the pouring rain and just like slid down hills. . . . The amount of laughs that we had, and that next week we all showed up and we were all sick. . . . It's just been a good time [at the BGC]; like there's very few bad times I've had here.

Similar to the importance of a positive and welcoming environment, offering a fun setting for youth promotes regular attendance. The responses in this theme indicate that it is essential that youth attend the BGC consistently to receive the full benefit of the activities and interactions at the club.

*Feeling of judgment and nonjudgment at the BGC.* Seven respondents described their experiences with a feeling of judgment or nonjudgment at the BGC. Six respondents recognized a lack of judgment at the BGC, and one respondent described instances where she did feel some judgment at the BGC. Several respondents described how the lack of judgment at the BGC helps them to feel comfortable interacting with a variety of peers. The nonjudgmental environment also inspires youth to move beyond labelling other people:

It's like, an enlightening experience, to finally step out of the zone of labels. . . . Because you can be part of a group and not know it for years, and to finally be part of the group that has no labels or cliques, is an amazing thing. . . . The leaders don't judge you based on your opinions, and that's one thing that I find no other youth group has. . . . No one really cares how you are in life; they just care that you're there to have a good time.

One participant shared,

All my life, I was labelled . . . you go [to the BGC], there are no such labels. It's as if they don't exist. There are many people here who have gone through depression and have self-harmed, there are a few people here who have attempted suicide [and] they're not labeled suicidal, or even "emo." . . . It means a lot,

because now all of a sudden, instead of people labelling you as having depression, they're actually trying to do something about it.

Another participant explained that youth are free to be who they really are when people legitimately care for one another and do not judge:

Not a lot a people really care what you do as long as you're within reason, like not doing anything bad. . . . [At the BGC] I haven't heard anything about me being judged so that's alright . . . it brings out my . . . almost carelessness. Like, I don't really have to worry. . . . You're not really apart from the group; you're with them. It doesn't matter who you are, what you do, or what you look like; it's all the same.

Another respondent described the lack of judgement in this way:

To come here and be accepted by, like, anyone, and to go up to anyone and talk to them and be like, "Hey, you wanna go and hang out? You wanna play dodge ball?" . . . Ya, it's nice to not be judged. . . . If you wanna hang out with someone you can always meet new people and, like, no one's judgmental of you.

One respondent explained how the lack of judgment helps her to feel safe:

[It is nice] to come in here and just not be scared to approach another girl, or have another girl looking at you, because an automatic response to a girl is, "Oh she's looking at me, like, what is she saying to her friends?" . . . I'm sure if anyone said anything about anyone here [the leaders would] find out right away, and it would be stopped.

One participant explained,

I think people here, most of them have had experiences like that where they get trash talked or whatever, so they know how it feels. . . . Most of the people here I've seen, I've noticed they have, like, cuts on their arms or scars. . . . I really can relate to that 'cause I kind of do too. . . . I'm pretty sure that most of the kids here that I've seen have cut themselves, so . . . I won't judge you, you don't judge me, that kind of thing.

Lastly, one respondent recognized how the culture of nonjudgment at the BGC became a part of his personality outside the club as well:

You can come here and there's no judging. . . . Everyone here respects each other, you know, no matter what type of person you are, what you've done. . . . Now you're not so judgmental on people. . . . You're more open to learn [about] people . . . by coming here, and never having that judgmental attitude here, it becomes a part of who you are and you don't judge people in other places either.

The respondent who acknowledged that she sometimes felt judged at the BGC described the factors that contributed to this negative feeling within the club:

Sometimes when I come here I feel like . . . I'm different . . . cause you know, people see me and they think that I can't do anything, which I can do a lot more than people think. . . . Some days it's better than others, but some days I'll come here, and I'll just be sitting alone. . . . I don't know; I just make do with what I have I guess.

Respondents who described a lack of judgment at the BGC believed all the youth and leaders were encouraged to be open-minded at the BGC. Although most of the

respondents described feeling accepted at the BGC, one respondent expressed times when she felt different than most of the group and this made her feel judged. The responses in this theme suggest that offering a nonjudgmental environment is integral to promoting openness towards the other peers and leaders at the BGC.

*Being included.* Reflecting on their time at the BGC, six respondents described features of the BGC that they believe either promote or discourage inclusion at the club. Five respondents described feeling included at the BGC, whereas one respondent acknowledged aspects of the BGC that she believes has resulted in exclusion at the club. Respondents who felt included described receiving invitations from peers and leaders to join activities, and they acknowledged that the BGC felt like one big group of youth, rather than many small, separated cliques:

Not everyone has the same personality . . . or the same reactions to people; [and] not everyone has like the same outview [*sic*] on life. . . . Coming [to the BGC] and seeing everyone's different . . . [youth can] join in anywhere . . . people will be like, "Hey ya, come on my team" . . . we can all just come together, and . . . interact with whoever. (Participant)

One participant stated,

[Other youth and the leaders] don't really care who you are, like your background or . . . what side of the city you live on. They're just like, "hey we're going to hang out together, so let's go do this." . . . When there's just a kid like sitting there . . . by themselves, or doing whatever, people they don't know walk up and it's like, "hey how's it going? What's your name? How's this? How's that?"

Another participant explained that time with peers helps people feel like they belong:

[Spending time with other youth] makes me feel like I fit in. . . . It makes me happier, and makes me feel like I actually belong. . . . [When] people . . . let me participate more in things, like games [and] people talk to me more . . . it feels good.

Finally, one participant stated, “When you come here it doesn’t matter the type of person or the style that you have, everyone here is friends. . . . When you come [to the BGC], everyone is together . . . we’re all one group.”

One respondent recalled a specific example of the way in which people learned to look past differences to increase inclusiveness. She explained that the BGC was located in the north side of town, and she revealed how members were able to move past a common stereotype about “the typical North-side kids”:

[People think] we’re so ghetto . . . they just think they you’re going to be a certain way and that you’ll act a certain way, and they’re like, “Oh wow, they’re actually nice, and, you know, I hear rumours about these people all the time, but then once I meet them they’re not like that.” . . . They learn that [we are] actually normal people . . . not a bunch of skids.

Thinking back on their own experiences with being new at the BGC, two respondents remarked that the importance placed on inclusion at the club helps new people become initiated into the group very quickly. The first respondent stated,

[New members] come in nervous, not knowing what’s gonna happen, and by the end of the night, it’s like they’re a regular. They know everyone; they are friends with everyone, it’s like bang, bang, bang. . . . When someone new comes in,

they're not excluded from anything, you know, kinda like where going to a new school, you can be. When you come here, you're asked to join in everything. You're not excluded from it, and so it's nice. . . . Come here and everyone's asking me to come do stuff with them, you know, come outside, come play dodge ball, come play belly baseball, come play air hockey, come play foosball, whatever. You're asked to go do things to just relax, and so it's nice that, you know, you're not excluded ever. You always have something to do here, and you always have people that you can do it with. Always.

The second respondent stated,

A lot of the times, like, when I was first here a couple of [the other youth] just came up to me and told me, you know, they're playing sports if you wanna join . . . it gives you more of a sense of, I don't know, pride-ish . . . [and] it makes you wanna go into [activities] because you know you're being invited. . . . I had a lot of people just coming up to me, talking to me, introducing themselves and their friends. . . . They weren't excluding me; they were coming talking to me; they were friendly. . . . [It was] a really good feeling, like, it made you wanna be there instead of just leaving.

One respondent shared elements of her experiences at the BGC that she believed resulted in exclusion at the club. Specifically, she worried that disrespectful language made some youth feel uncomfortable:

I've heard people call each other "sluts", [or] like B-words . . . [and] I don't see why people trash talk each other. It's like, hey just because she wears short shorts, like, every day, doesn't mean she particularly does that. Maybe she just

feels pretty enough to wear them, and if you trash talk her, she's gonna feel ugly, so stop.

Similar to the theme of feeling of non-judgment, the data in this theme suggests that youth believe an inclusive environment promotes a sense of unity at the BGC. Fostering an inclusive group also increased the comfort that respondents felt at the BGC, which encouraged youth to return regularly.

*Feeling of safety.* The BGC is a space where most respondents felt safe—both emotionally and physically. Six respondents described their experiences concerning their feeling of safety at the BGC. Four respondents reported feeling safe at the BGC, and two respondents described the elements of the club that made them feel unsafe at times. The respondents who felt safe at the BGC discussed the factors that promoted their sense of safety, with one participant stating,

It's becoming more of a safer place because last year I've had to deal with cops here. . . . It's a safer place when the alcohol and stuff is out . . . [and for parents] as long as their kid is happy and they don't have to hear [about] the drama, then they know [their kids are] in a safe place.

Another respondent explained,

When I was a kid growing up, I lived in the ghetto. . . . One day, so and so got stabbed, and then the next day, oh, this person got robbed . . . then all of a sudden, you know, hey, you're going to get into a fight with this kid. . . . You start going [to the BGC], and it's like none of that—there's no one getting stabbed, no one getting robbed, and no real drama.

Lastly, one participant said,

Well, it's a place to come so then you don't have to worry about any of that [negative] stuff, you know, you don't have to worry about people coming here just [being] rude, [or] starting fights and so it seems it's a safe place.

People here, in general, feel safer because it's more of an open area where people can just talk [and support is available]. . . . So being here more people talk to me.

Two respondents described the elements of their time at the BGC that left them feeling unsafe. One participant stated,

Whenever people come here to fight, I don't feel safe because . . . fighting is terrible, and dangerous. . . . They start to involve other people, like, "Ah, come back me up", that kind of thing. . . . [But] I don't want to get involved with this because I could get in trouble [or] I could get punched in the face by somebody, and I don't want that to happen.

Another participant explained,

[The fighting] makes me feel unsafe. I'm sure it makes a lot of people feel unsafe. I mean, it's not cool to fight. . . . It's supposed to be a place to feel safe, and just lately it hasn't been . . . [because] people can't put their differences aside. . . . [But] I know there's a lot of leaders here, so I know nothing would ever happen. So it makes me feel safer.

Some of the respondents had acknowledged that they witness conflict in their home, or at school; therefore, it was significant that most respondents acknowledged the sense of a safety at the BGC. The two respondents who described feeling unsafe identified fighting as their biggest concern. The responses in this theme suggest that

conflicts and fights are an area of the BGC experience that most threatens participants' feelings of safety.

*A space to relax.* Four respondents described elements of the BGC that were relaxing or helped them feel more at ease. Having a welcoming environment and feeling a sense of safety allowed the youth to relax at the BGC, but there were other factors that were also conducive to promoting a comforting space. Respondents shared the specific factors that promoted relaxing at the BGC, with one participant stating, "Sometimes you just need to relax . . . it's nice to just come in and, like, be able to sit and like chill . . . I like to be outside, when it's nice out especially . . . you know, just hanging out."

Another participant explained,

I come here Tuesdays and Thursdays to catch up with my friends . . . [to] have a great time, and not worry about anything. . . . Usually, every time I come here, I just find my friends right away, and then I just relax with them. . . . [Recently] I can see that some people are more interested in just relaxing, like, I know some people that are just chillin' on some chairs . . . [and] having a great time.

Two of the respondents described how their time at the BGC gave them an opportunity to forget about outside challenges for a few hours each week. One respondent stated,

Coming here just relaxes me as well, and since I started coming here I felt a lot more relaxed. . . . It's like a getaway, you know, when things are just getting hard, you can just come here and you don't worry about the stresses of life while you're here. . . . For even just a couple hours from all the stress you have, and it just makes you feel a lot better.

Another participant stated, “You come here, have a good time, sort of a place to get away from all the stress of the real world.”

In addition to providing a welcoming environment, and a sense of safety, the BGC also promoted relaxation by offering an unstructured setting at the BGC. Specifically, youth were given options at the club, and they were encouraged to use all the space to cultivate a carefree environment for relaxing.

The general atmosphere subcategory offered a glimpse into what the respondents’ experienced while they were attending the BGC. This subcategory included six themes: positive and welcoming environment, having fun at the BGC, feeling of judgment and non-judgment at the BGC, being included by others, feeling of safety, and space to relax.

***Conflict and drama at the BGC.*** Conflict and drama were two issues that a majority of respondents reported experiencing at the BGC. Conflict and drama were frequently described as occurring together; therefore, I have combined the two for coding and presentation. The respondents’ experiences relating to conflict and drama at the BGC were split into the three subthemes: initiation of conflict and drama, preventing conflict and drama, and resolving conflict and drama. The following section begins with a brief description of ongoing conflict that occurred during the data collection period.

*Ongoing conflict during the data collection period.* Before continuing with the presentation of the themes, it is important to recognize a series of events involving physical violence that occurred at the BGC of Lethbridge during the data collection period. As the researcher, I believe these events may have had repercussions on the respondents’ perception of conflict and drama at the BGC. I include a summary of the events and a brief description of the potential effects on the research here.

One evening during the interview period the BGC was closed early following a near fight between Teen Stuff participants on the street in front of the BGC. It was later reported to the Teen Stuff leaders that a fistfight involving two members of Teen Stuff had occurred at a nearby school after the BGC had closed that evening. The leaders of Teen Stuff reacted cautiously and cancelled the Teen Stuff drop-in hours for three evenings. On the evening of the second cancellation, all youth participants were invited to attend a meeting at the club in which the leaders solicited ideas from the youth about how best to deal with the conflict that had been escalating in and around the club. Taking the feedback they received during the youth meeting, the executive staff at the BGC of Lethbridge decided that the Teen Stuff program would be changed to include a drop-in program on Tuesdays only. Thursdays became a program night that a limited number of youth could attend, and the leader-to-youth ratio was increased. I spoke with the managers of the Teen Stuff program, and they reported that the youth were not particularly upset with the change in programming, and they had not noticed a significant drop in the number of youth who attended the program following these changes.

Due to the unexpected nature of these events, the interviews for this study were disrupted. I conducted four interviews prior to the cancellations, and the other six were conducted following these events. I believe that the results of the interviews following the events may have been affected. Although I cannot confirm whether the events had impacted the respondents' attitudes about conflict at the BGC, I expect that the peak in confrontations would be fresh in the minds of the respondents who took part in interviews following the altercations. As a result, I expect that the respondents who had interviews following the cancellations held a more negative view of conflict and drama at the BGC.

Readers should keep these events in mind as they read the following sections on conflict and drama at the BGC.

*Initiation of conflict and drama.* Respondents appeared to be quite familiar with the origins of conflict and drama at the BGC. In total, seven respondents described their experiences with the initiation of conflict and drama at the BGC, with one participant stating, “As a whole, mutual respect I don’t think it exists at the club. There’s always conflicts everywhere. . . . We’ve got people who, you know, will search for problems [and] you’ve got people who lie and create problems.” Another participant stated,

I’ve heard a few times there’s been fights and stuff. That doesn’t show mutual respect at all . . . [and] it’s made it kind of hard, I mean, to be here cause I try and stay away from all the drama and stuff, and I come here to get away from that stuff, but then it’s dragged here. . . . I haven’t really experienced anything [personally], but . . . I’ve heard that someone got beat up.

A third participant explained,

People sometimes just come here to fight or bring up some drama, get attention or something like that. . . . Some of the other kids that come here, who they think they have perfect lives and they can do whatever they want to other people . . . they’re like, “I’m better than you, I’m stronger than you, I can knock your butt to the ground.” . . . That’s usually how it starts . . . [or] big buff guys come [to the BGC] like, “Oh, I can take on you any day.” . . . That’s where all the fights come from . . . it usually just like starts out as bickering, where they’re going back and forth, and eventually somebody will get so angry they’ll hit or kick.

Reflecting on exposure to conflict and drama, one of the respondents described how threats about physical violence were much more common than actual fistfights at the BGC. This participant used the term “cold war” to label this type of verbal sparring at the club:

It’s kind of like, when there’s no legitimate, like, conflict going on. . . . One guy goes up to the other and says, “I’m gonna beat you up,” and then another guy joins in and says, “Hey if you beat him up, I’m gonna beat you up,” and he says, “Well, my friends are gonna beat you up,” [so the person says,] “Well my friends will beat them up,” and then it just kind of escalates. It gets bigger, bigger and bigger.

Two of the respondents identified that the younger youth (i.e., people 14–15 years of age) had a bad reputation for coming to the BGC looking for conflict or wanting to escalate drama. One respondent described observing the younger youth increasing conflict and drama:

There’s the little groups that just go around and sometimes they don’t like each other, and whenever they get mixed confrontation happens. . . . They seem to just hate a lot of people and just start confrontations. . . . There’s [also] the people who don’t [respect others] or try to mess with the other people that are respecting each other. . . . They seem to be like the kids that have more trouble at home or something. . . . They’re pushed into bullying either by their parents or other people at school, and they just bring it here. . . . They feel like they need to be better than the other people. . . . I had a lot more fun a year ago, because there was a lot less people and not as much confrontations.

Another participant explained,

Mostly [drama is] just cheating on relationships and fights for no apparent reason. . . . There's certain people in this building that I've noticed if they come here it's when the drama happens . . . [and] I've noticed here that once in a while that the drama's actually quite calm just because some people are out, like kicked out for a couple days. . . . I think it's just more of kids asking for attention, because what I've noticed is that half the kids here, it's either home troubles or school trouble, so they ask for like attention, so I think that's why there's so much drama here. . . . There's been a couple times where I've wanted to leave . . . because the drama just gets out of control.

*Preventing conflict and drama.* Eight respondents noted three primary factors that they believed played a role in preventing conflict and drama at the BGC: clear rules at the BGC, timely conflict interventions from leaders, and providing engaging activities for the youth.

The first rule that helped prevent conflict was a change in the sign-in and sign-out procedures for youth who drop in to the club. Before this year, members were allowed to come and go from the BGC as many times as they wanted throughout the night. When the new managers started in January 2013 they adopted a new policy in which youth signed in when they first arrived and could only sign out when they were leaving at the end of the evening. One respondent shared his views on the role of this rule change in preventing conflict:

Ever since we've decided to shut the doors and leave only one sign-in . . . it's been going very well, and the rules are now more respected. . . . There's no

stopping that odd few in any group, but, you know, when you've got the one sign-in, the rules are respected.

One participant explained that having a clear set of rules at the BGC also brought some order to an otherwise unstructured environment:

There's a certain set of rules that you have to follow or else you can't be there, and then the leaders are there to make sure that you follow them instead of just a big chaos of kids running around punching each other. . . . Over the year, the numbers [of youth] have just kept coming and raising and raising and raising. Eventually [the leaders are] gonna have to put a limit on it . . . because there's gonna be too many people. . . . There's the leaders, and they have to maintain the rules, and the more the kids, the more they think they can get away with stuff.

Another participant described repercussions for starting conflicts:

I've noticed that . . . if you do anything like, let's just say try to start a conflict, you're out for the rest of the night, and I find that helpful because maybe that's a lesson saying, "You don't do that in a public place," because it just teaches them, and then when they grow up like 17, 18 [years old] they learn, and then they know better.

The second factor that protected against conflict at the BGC was well-timed interventions against conflict by both leaders and other youth:

[Leaders] watch over and make sure nothing bad happens. They're more like a guardian at the moment while you're in Teen Stuff, and they're trying to make people feel safe. . . . Making sure everyone's alright, [and] making sure there's no big problems. . . . Leaders try to deal [with issues] as quickly and quietly as

[they] can. As long as you can not attract a lot of attention to get them out . . . that's probably the best way to deal with [issues]. Then you don't have people fighting about it, and then people trying to take the other people's side. You avoid the confrontation.

Another participant explained,

If the leaders catch [conflict] right on time and talk to [the youth] in private, it usually comes a little better, and they just walk around and make sure that they're not near each other, just so each person can enjoy themselves and ignore each other.

Another participant discussed how conflicts are addressed:

[When there is a conflict escalating] one of the leaders will come talk to you and get your side of the story and then go to the other person, get their side of the story. And then they'll sit both of you down and go over like what happened and why it happened and what can be done to make sure it doesn't happen again and to see like, if we can get through the issue and try to still be friends, or if it's just at a point where the two of those two people just don't talk to each other. . . . One person that I would've never thought to ever be friends with was Margot, and because of here and sitting down with [a Teen Stuff manager], and going through some reconciliation with Margot, me and her are actually really close friends now. . . . We get along really well.

Providing youth with a variety of engaging activities was the third factor that respondents reported had an influence on preventing conflict at the BGC:

When there is something to do, the kids are more outgoing and they're more focused on the game than they are drama. . . . [The BGC] offers a lot of activities [but] people just don't find it interesting [and conflict gets worse].

Another participant stated,

If everybody's doing something big and fun together it'll just, like, diffuse the confrontation sometimes. Instead of doing the same thing everyday, and everybody just gets bored and like, "Oh, I gotta go do something. I'm gonna go pick a fight with this guy," if everybody's doing something fun, then they'll all forget about the differences that they were threatened, and like, "Oh, I'm having fun with this guy. I like him now," and like, "He's not a bad guy after all."

*Resolving conflict and drama.* In situations in which conflict at the BGC shifted from a threat to a more serious incident, respondents reported that the youth and leaders at the club frequently resolved it. Six respondents described their experiences with conflict resolution at the BGC. In some cases youth stepped up and mediated conflict between their peers. For example, one participant stated,

[There have been] a couple fights with drama between the youth, where you know, the fellow youth will break it up before the leaders get there, and everyone's like, "Okay, talk it out, talk it out." It's much better to talk it out than to do something violent, because if you do something violent, it's not going to get you anywhere. . . . [The youth are] taking . . . the responsibility into their own hands, and sort of being that positive role model. Sort of being the person that goes, "Hey, wait, don't do that."

Another participant explained how the BGC has helped build confidence and enabled the participant to speak up:

Normally, I wouldn't go and just confront somebody and tell them to stop doing something, but now . . . that I have a little bit more authority and be able to not have any consequences of doing that and getting dragged into it. I feel confident. . . . Everybody [is] supposed to respect each other, and when that doesn't happen somebody's gotta try and stop it, and either break it up, or try to get them to talk it out.

Two respondents described the importance of staying calm when there was a conflict at the BGC. In one instance, a youth at the club accused the respondent of stealing her phone, but instead of becoming defensive or getting upset, the respondent calmly presented the facts, and solved the problem without a confrontation:

I'm like, "Oh, I have the same phone as you. I can prove it to you," like, enter my password, show pictures, I was like, "You know, I'm sorry, like, I had no idea." It got solved quickly, and . . . it's ok, mistakes happen. Like, I'm sure I've blamed someone for something they didn't do too. . . . I'm just glad it was upfront and, like, solved quickly . . . and not getting talked about behind your back just because something was assumed.

Another respondent proudly shared his strategy for resolving an argument between two of his friends:

I stepped in and said, "Okay, calm down! Calm down, and we can work this out." And then just talking about it, found out what it was all about. And then I'm like, "Colby, is this going to matter in the future? Is this going to be something that

you're going to dwell on for the rest of your life?" And then we started talking and he's like, "You know what, you're right, and I shouldn't be getting this mad over something so small."

Leaders also played a role in resolving conflict, and many of the respondents mentioned that leader involvement was a regular part of conflict resolution at the BGC:

Most things that happen here are resolved here as well, so it's definitely nice having the extra people to reach out to, to talk about an issue that you're having and have them help you resolve it. . . . [One of the Teen Stuff managers] has helped me resolve issues with people in the past. Like, I can ask him something, or ask him to do something, and he will go do it on the spot.

Another participant explained,

If it gets really, really out of control, the leaders do step in and try to pull it back and say, "You know what, you're kicked out for a day or two," and then gives the other people time to relax, and calm down and just mind their own business. . . . The leaders are right on conflict . . . they like go up to the people and tell them stop it, and see what's going on, and then they talk to each person to find out the story.

Another respondent described how BGC leaders handle conflict:

The leaders definitely discourage confrontation. . . . Whenever something breaks out and someone starts calling each other names . . . the leaders will try to stop it. . . . [They] would step in, and keep [the youth] apart so they wouldn't go into physical, and they would just try to get them into separate rooms to stop the verbal confrontation . . . and talk to them about [the issue].

One participant explained how BGC has changed how he handles conflict:

Before I started coming here, I would deal with drama through acts of violence, and I didn't much like it. . . . As I started coming here more, I learned that in order to deal with stuff, sometimes you have to just talk about it and deal with it. . . . You sort of learn how to deal with drama and issues with others, and how to deal with it in a positive way instead of fighting.

One respondent explained how the leaders helped resolve a particularly heated confrontation with the respondent's friend at the BGC:

I put [my friend] up against a wall and wanted to kick the shit out of him . . . [but the leaders] talked me through it and they helped us work out our issues. . . . [Me and my friend] were at the point where we probably would've never spoke again for the rest of our lives and it took a month, and we were back to where we were [before the conflict].

One youth expressed an opinion about conflict resolution that was slightly different from the majority of respondents. He described how it often took awhile for conflict to dissipate at the BGC:

The leaders usually [took] action . . . when a conflict [happened] here at the club [but] it just takes time for it to actually settle down. . . . Let's say . . . two people fought and there's that little chatter about it, and it keeps going on for awhile. . . . Everybody thinks they might just fight again, and then eventually it just dies down . . . [so] as slow as it may take, yes, it is always resolved.

The themes in this subcategory presented the respondents' experiences involving drama and conflict at the BGC. Based on the themes presented in this category, it

appeared that conflict and drama played a significant role in the respondents' experiences at the BGC, although the violent incidents that occurred during the interview period may have contributed to overreporting of these incidents.

*Activities at the BGC.* During their interviews respondents frequently described the types of activities that they engaged in during their time at the BGC. The activities often acted as the catalyst for meaningful interactions with peers and leaders; therefore, it is important to acknowledge the significant aspects of the activities at the BGC. Four subthemes emerged as the most commonly discussed topics regarding activities at the BGC: variety of activities, trying new or unfamiliar activities, contributing to the development of new activities at the BGC, and physical activities.

*Variety of activities.* Six of the respondents shared experiences concerning the variety of activities that were available at the BGC. The respondents were divided on this topic; most of the respondents were pleased with the range of activity options, while others identified a need for more variety in activities. The first group appreciated the selection of activities offered at the BGC because they could always find something that appealed to them or suited their mood for the day. Illustrating this point, one participant stated,

It's nice because you can come here and you can play the sports in the gym or play the games in the main room, go up on the computer, and so it makes it so you're not bored either, you know. You're active physically, mentally, whatever. And it's nice because you can come here to get things out . . . and there's always something to do because there's so many things always going on.

Another participant explained that activities are always happening at the club:

No matter what, there's something to do here . . . you know, come outside, come play dodge ball, come play belly baseball, come play air hockey, come play foosball, whatever. . . . You wanna get involved in the things that go on, . . . and you just feel a lot more open to go do things instead of just sitting around by yourself.

One participant described the variety of activities available: "There's a lot of different activities, so, like, different interests, you're gonna fit in somewhere, whether it's video games or sports, or just like, you know, sitting and relaxing." Another respondent explained that the variety of activities is part of what draws youth to the club:

There's variety in pretty much everything here. . . . [There are] a variety of games you can play. . . . You get more of the youth being happier and playing the game . . . and that variety is one of the things that keeps bringing me back.

Some respondents expressed different opinions about the diversity of activities at the BGC. Two respondents revealed that they thought the BGC could have offered more variety in their activities. In both cases, these participants drew a connection between the lack of engaging activities and the initiation of drama and conflict at the BGC. These participants' comments concerning the link between activities and drama or conflict at the BGC were presented previously in the Preventing Conflict and Drama section within this chapter. In this section, the focus is placed on identifying specific factors that linked youth disengagement to conflict and drama. For example, one participant stated,

Well, they have nothing to do so they pick on somebody else, 'cause I've noticed that because they'll be like standing there doing nothing and then somebody will

come along and then they pick on them . . . that's when all the drama comes, so I think they're just lost because they have nothing to do or nobody to talk to or something.

Another respondent explained,

After a while just doing the same thing over and over again, people get bored and just don't know what to do, or just end up seeing the little things in people that just make them angry. . . . It's really fun here, but if it just keeps going into the same thing everyday, like, even if it's . . . small activities that change throughout every week, if they just do [the same activities] all the time, people stop having fun here and probably just start starting confrontations.

The same respondent went a step further and actually offered suggestions for how to improve participant engagement at the BGC:

We're always, like, playing dodge ball, or basketball, or like regular sports, but that's pretty much the same as, like, something you could do in your backyard, but if they did something like took everybody rock climbing or something . . . it would be fun, and spontaneous. . . . If everybody's doing something big and fun together it'll just, like, diffuse the confrontation. . . . Instead of just sitting around playing video games, or just sleeping or whatever, come here and have a fun time and do all sorts of extra stuff that you probably wouldn't be able to do at a house.

The responses in this theme suggest that a good variety of activities is a factor that youth considered in their decision to return to the BGC. Regular attendance by youth is important to fostering social and emotional skills, and it appears that the selection of activities encouraged repeat visits. The respondents who indicated that there were not

enough choices in activities also highlighted the importance of variation in activities by drawing a link between a lack of engaging activities and negative interactions between youth.

*Trying new or unfamiliar activities.* Four of the respondents described experiences in which they were given the opportunity to try new or unfamiliar activities at the BGC. One participant stated,

The ping-pong table, and the air hockey table and the foosball table, we didn't have that in the summer. It makes it a better time for everybody, instead of just standing around now they have more things to do.

Another participant stated, "Like learning new things; I learned how to slack line and I turned out to be pretty good at it. That's pretty cool." One of the respondents explained how her role in the Keystone group exposed her to a variety of new activities:

All the conferences we've gone to . . . we've gone to Gull Lake and Toronto and Kamloops for . . . like building up our leadership. . . . We always get things like hockey tickets or baseball tickets, and whatever else that our sponsors donate to us . . . and last year every single weekend we had an opportunity to go volunteer somewhere new.

In the last year the BGC opened a concession as fundraiser for the Keystone group. The concession allowed youth to buy snacks without leaving the club, which was important since youth were only allowed to leave the club at the end of the night. Two respondents described the popularity of this new addition at the BGC, with one participant stating,

There's even a concession here if you get hungry or thirsty. . . . If a kid comes here with like two or three dollars, instead of going to buy some expensive thing [at the store], he can get like three pops with that [at the concession]. . . . So if somebody gets thirsty, they can just like buy something. If they get a bit hungry, they can buy something without having to walk and waste all our money. It's really convenient for it to be right there . . . [and] I enjoy the concession. I think that's a really good idea.

Another participant stated, "We have the concession now. We didn't have that before and everybody loves that cause now instead of just having . . . nothing, now you can get a snack."

*Contributing to the development of new activities at the BGC.* Youth at the BGC were encouraged to provide ideas and take part in the design of new activities at the club. In the most official form, the BGC required members of the Keystone group to create new activities and lead them during the Teen Stuff program. One respondent explained how his role in the Keystone group made him feel more involved in deciding what happened at the BGC:

I joined [Keystone], and I learned that they get to put in their own ideas, and hopefully get them to be used. . . . Being able to put my own ideas in, it's been really fun, because now I get to put my own ideas into what can go on here, and . . . see if other people would like that [as well].

Outside of the Keystone program, BGC youth were invited to initiate activities amongst their peers, but the expectations for creating activities were much less formal. Three respondents described how youth sometimes stepped up and took charge in starting

activities. The first participant stated, “When I first came up with the idea [to do a talent show] I just thought of it, and then I thought [the BGC] would be a perfect place to do it.”

The second participant said,

Well, [the other youth] always want you to join them . . . you know, if they’re playing sports, [they say], “Come on and join us.” . . . Even some of the people that weren’t staff just came up to me and told me, “You know, they’re playing sports if you wanna join.”

The third participant explained,

Me and my friend V, we came dressed like crazy things. The first day we’d come in like bright things, the second day we’d come in like onesies. . . . Having leaders being like, “Oh . . . what’s your theme next night?” Like, you know, trying to get a theme night started, that would be really cool, like I started something . . . I’d feel like I had an impact or I made my mark, like I did something good, something that I can remember forever.

*Physical activities.* Since the BGC of Lethbridge facility has a large gym space available, it is perhaps not surprising that respondents identified physical activities as a major part of their experience at the BGC. Four respondents described their experiences with physical activities at the BGC. The first participant stated,

I definitely enjoy the sports. . . . It gets me active, so I’m not sitting around on the couch all day. . . . Maybe [the BGC should] add a little bit more focus on sports, because there are the people that love to do sports, but the other people sometimes just sit around . . . [which is] not that good for getting fit and out of troubles, like obesity and stuff like that.

The second participant stated,

You could be sitting there doing nothing and one of the leaders . . . will come up to you and be like, “Hey, why aren’t you playing dodge ball? Come play dodge ball. We know you like dodge ball; come play dodge ball.” And so they’re trying to get you to go out there. . . . It’s nice because you can come here and you can play the sports in the gym . . . [and] it makes it so you’re not bored either, you know, you’re active physically [and] mentally.

Another participant described feeling excited about sports: “[I look forward to] playing sports . . . like whether it’s soccer, football . . . [or] dodge ball. . . . [And] outside activities, I like to be outside when it’s nice out especially.” One other participant said, “I’ve seen a lot of people like to play dodge ball . . . playing sports, and stuff like volleyball, [there is] lots of participation.”

Two respondents acknowledged how physical activities gave them a productive outlet for managing their emotions. The first participant stated, “It’s nice because you can come here to get things out, you know, or even when you go play sports, like dodge ball, it’s a good way to get aggression out, without doing something very stupid.” The second participant said, “[Playing dodge ball] you’re working your body so you’re releasing endorphins to make yourself feel better, and, like, you’re using up all your energy.” Considering the focus that respondents placed on activities at the BGC, it is clear they played a significant role in youth’s time at the club.

**Interpersonal connections.** Themes in the interpersonal connections category included experiences at the BGC that respondents reported were related to their willingness or proficiency to interact with individuals in and outside of the club. At the

BGC, opportunities for interpersonal connections included interacting with new peers, accessing social support, engaging in activities with a variety of people, and forming relationships with peers and leaders. Respondents regularly interacted with BGC leaders and other youth (i.e., peers). In this category, 13 themes were organized into three subcategories based on the individuals who interacted with the respondents. The three subcategories include connections involving primarily peers, connections involving primarily leaders, and connections involving both peers and leaders.

*Connections involving primarily peers.* At the BGC, youth were given the opportunity to interact with peers in a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment. Unlike other youth settings, such as school and work, the BGC is a youth-driven environment, which means youth were given a variety of activity options, had some input into what was offered at the club, and were encouraged to interact with the other youth at the club. The five themes in this subcategory emerged from interactions involving primarily peers.

*Learning from peers.* The respondents observed that their peers often dealt with issues differently from one another. In many cases the respondents reported that they learned from their peers, and as a result they had reconsidered the way in which they would handle their own issues in the future. Five respondents described how learning from peers was a part of their experiences at the BGC, with one participant stating,

You get a lot of wisdom from the different age groups. . . . Since you're around people of different age groups . . . you can sort of learn from how they deal with their stress. . . . The younger kids can sort of learn, and sort of have a role model

from the older kids. . . . If you want to find the right way to live your life, all you got to do is listen to the youth . . . and they'll tell you how to live a happy life.

Another participant stated,

You see other perspectives and you see how other people react to different situations. You can learn from it; you can see like what you're doing right, what you're doing wrong, what else you could do. . . . There's different ways to deal with things; I guess sometimes you don't see that on your own.

One participant shared her experiences of giving advice to others:

Lots of people think of me as like their big sister because I'm older than most people here, so I find it's just they know that they can come to me for any advice on anything because I've been there, done that. . . . They know that I've been through it, so they come to me for the advice, and then they usually know what to do. . . . I know that I can help somebody out because I've always been that type of person that will help somebody out. . . . Most people, if they're upset, they come to me . . . I'll keep their mind off it, and they're all so much better for the week.

One respondent explained how BGC enabled people to share diverse opinions:

When you're talking with someone [at the BGC] . . . if they say one thing and you believe in something else, you are just like, "You know what, this is how I see it [but] . . . there's other thoughts out there besides [mine]." . . . Once you started doing stuff with new people, you learned that not everybody does things the exact same way. . . . One time we were having, like, this discussion [in the Keystone group], and one guy said something, and I was like, "Hold on, hold on, hold on.

. . . That's not how it always works. . . . Not everybody has the same opinion as you; not everything works the same way as you think." And I went on this big thing about it, and he was like, "Oh, I guess that I should watch what I say once in a while and think that not everybody thinks the same way as I do."

Finally, one participant described learning from others and sometimes changing an opinion because of these experiences:

You learn who other people are, and, as I said, if they have a different mindset on something that you feel is better for you than what you already have on it, then you adapt to that new mindset, and so everyone here is taking something from somebody else, in a positive way. . . . Everyone has a new part of their life from just coming here that they would've never had.

The BGC offered one drop-in program for youth 14 to 18 years of age, and there was a wide range of ages, opinions, and personal backgrounds represented at the BGC. The responses indicate that the variety of BGC participants gave youth an opportunity to learn from each other. The data gathered in this theme highlighted the social awareness of the respondents (i.e., they recognized that they could learn from other youth) and demonstrated that the respondents were motivated to seek help from others.

*Peers initiating conversations.* Seven respondents noted that peers frequently initiated conversations with other youth at the BGC. One participant described interacting with new people and with people through working the concession stand:

Usually, [I am] not one to really interact with new people . . . but [at the BGC] . . . it feels comfortable going up to random people and being like, "Hey, you're new, welcome to the club. . . . [When I work at the concession] some people come up

and then they're like, "Hey, can I get a bag of chips?" You're like, "Yeah sure," and then they're like, "Ok." And sometimes they stay there . . . [and] we'll talk for like five minutes, or until somebody comes up and asks to buy something. It's quite fun.

Another respondent explained that people at the club are easy to approach and talk to:

You come somewhere like [the BGC] and you can talk to anyone . . . like, when you don't even try. . . . Even somebody just coming up to me and like needing to talk, and giving them advice or just talking to them, just being there for them . . . it feels good.

One respondent felt the need to connect with others, particularly if the respondent felt the other individual needed support:

If someone's feeling down, you know, I've had to go and talk to many people. . . . There are some people here where I am the only person who talks to them, or at least as far as I know.

A number of respondents described how it felt to be approached by peers when they were just starting out of the BGC. One participant stated,

When I first started coming here, I knew almost nobody, . . . and I sat down in the gym for five minutes and all of a sudden I had people that I'd never met before in my life talking to me just to talk because I was new, and it was a big change for me, but it was a good change . . . they came to you, because everyone here just wants to be friends with each other. . . . So they'd come to you and start talking to you . . . and everyone's asking me to come do stuff with them, you know, come

outside, come play dodge ball, come play belly baseball, come play air hockey, come play foosball, whatever.

Another participant shared a similar experience when first attending Teen Stuff:

When I first started coming to Teen Stuff I knew absolutely no one at all, and I just kind of sat in the corner by myself. But then people started like coming up to me and being like, “Hey, do you want to go and play video games or go make a bracelet, or go play hockey, or whatever?”

One participant described how quickly people adopt the culture of inviting others in and initiating conversations:

When there’s just a kid, like, sitting there . . . by themselves . . . people they don’t know walk up and it’s like, “Hey, how’s it going? What’s your name? How’s this? How’s that?” And when they’re new, they’re just kinda creeped out . . . about this random person walking up to them and asking them all these questions. When like, two months later they’re doing the exact same thing to someone else.

One of the respondents shared two examples from club-sponsored outings when she had felt more motivated to initiate conversations with peers:

If we go swimming, there’s only like a limited amount of people and sometimes your friends can’t make it . . . so you just turn next to the person, get to know them, [and] have fun while you’re on your trip.

This same participant stated,

Being in a van with people you don’t know for two hours is not a good thing because you’re just going to be sitting in the back all alone. . . . It forces you to talk to other people, because when you like open up to other people and start to

like be friends with people you don't know, it can get quite interesting. You can share the same interests, same kind of clothes, stuff like that, find out you have lots in common with that person.

These instances of peer-led interactions were meaningful to respondents because it demonstrated that their peers were interested in getting to know them better and wanted to include them in activities. The data gathered in this theme provides greater understanding about the potential benefits of peer-led interactions at the BGC.

*Meeting new peers at the BGC.* Five of the respondents described experiences related to meeting new peers at the BGC. Often, these new peers had similar interests to the respondents, and they seemed eager to spend time together at the BGC. One participant illustrated this point by stating,

If you wanna hang out with someone you can always meet new people [at the BGC]. . . . A lot of people, like, you'd meet them here, you'd have common interests, and you'd get to talking and, you know, you'd get to trusting. . . . You come somewhere like here and you can talk to anyone.

Another participant explained how meeting people at the BGC leads to a larger group of friends:

[Meeting people at the BGC] just like opens you up to like different people other than the people that you've been going to school with and hanging out with since you were in kindergarten. . . . I have a lot of friends I've met here that just had like good experiences with them, and they're pretty cool people.

Another participant shared,

When I joined Keystone, I really did get to know [one of the other members], and she's actually a really nice young lady. . . . She's there when you need a shoulder to cry on; she's there to have fun. . . . I'm glad I got to know her.

Similarly, a third respondent explained,

Well, last year we only had about 30 kids coming, but then a whole bunch more showed up. . . . It's amazing how many people you can meet here. . . . I usually go for the kids that are more like me, a little bit goofy . . . [and who] don't care what people think.

One of the respondents remarked how he met people at the club who he would not have even encountered in any other setting. He provided two examples to demonstrate how people are brought together at the club. In this first example, he described meeting his girlfriend at the BGC:

The girlfriend I have now I'd never met until I started coming here because I'd have never gotten to talk to her. She's a completely different person than me. I'm the total country-type boy, all about gettin' dirty, goin' muddin', drivin' trucks, stuff like that; and she's into "Dubstep Screamo" music, she colours her hair, stuff like that. . . . We were completely separate people, but because of coming here, it just brought us together.

This same participant provided a second example of meeting a friend who lived out of town:

Me and [my friend] would've never met each other 'cause we're an hour apart driving . . . [but] he started coming here, and now me and him are actually pretty

good friends. . . . Like, it's really nice, because we are very similar people that would've never met unless this place was here.

When describing their experiences meeting new people at the BGC, the respondents reported that the BGC gave them an opportunity to grow their social network and meet different types of people. The responses in this theme illustrate the important role of the BGC in regards to the promotion of new relationships.

*Friendships at the BGC.* All 10 respondents described experiences forming friendships at the BGC. The respondents described how relationships progressed from initially interacting with new peers to cultivating deeper friendships during their time at the BGC. Illustrating this point, one participant stated,

I started coming here with maybe three friends. I came here, been here for a while, and all of a sudden I've got lots of friends, lots of people that will talk to me, lots of people I can talk to, and lots of people that you can just do stuff with. . . . [At first] you're sitting in there going, "Wow, everyone hates me," . . . and then all of a sudden you're forming friendships, and sort of leading up to earning their respect. . . . [I enjoy] coming here, seeing all my friends . . . and the opportunity to gain even more friendships.

Another participant explained,

A lot of people you'd meet them here, you'd have common interests and you'd get to talking. . . . [Soon] you'd get to trusting, and then you'd just be able to be friends. . . . Once you hang out more, well, you're more close. . . . One of the guys here . . . I became good friends with him here . . . and now we hang out all

the time. . . . We're good friends now, and I'm glad; it's always good to have friends.

One respondent described how easy it was to make friends at BGC:

[Other youth] came to you because everyone here just wants to be friends with each other, and so they'd come to you and start talking to you, and then you would start talking more and more, and then become friends. . . . When you come here, it doesn't matter the type of person, or the style that you have, everyone here is friends.

One participant explained how warm and accepting the youth at the club are:

You never feel like the lone person that nobody likes because there's so many people here that want to like you, and want to be your friend. . . . [New people] come in nervous, not knowing what's gonna happen . . . [but] by the end of the night, it's like they're a regular. They know everyone, they are friends with everyone. . . . When you come here . . . there's a level of respect, there's a level of friendship . . . you can develop a really good friendship just from being here.

Another participant affirmed that it is easy to make friends at BGC:

I think [the youth] feel the need to go be friendly to people so then they can make a lot more friends and may just have a good time. . . . I saw another kid making lots of friends, like, right off the bat. . . . You can make a lot of friends [at the BGC].

Another participant stated, "[The BGC] lets me make more friends, and you know, hang out with more people [my age]. . . . I don't have to worry about pretending around them; [I] can just be myself."

One participant discussed long-term friendships and how they are formed at the club:

The friends that you make here, you normally keep for a long time . . . four of my best friends I met here and we still hang out all the time. . . . One of my friends, we don't really talk . . . outside of Teen Stuff and Keystone, but, once I'm here we have the biggest heart to hearts, and we're like best friends.

Another participant stated,

This is where I've met most of my friends . . . [and] we just became really good friends since then. . . . It's just really nice hanging out with your friends once in a while . . . [because] we're really close, and we have lots of fun when we're here.

Three respondents described how they were often too busy to see all of their friends outside the club, so they appreciated that the BGC allowed them to visit with many of their friends all in one location. One participant stated,

It's just good to see your friends because I know lots of people don't see their friends that often . . . so I come here like Tuesdays and Thursdays to catch up with my friends and see how they're doing, and just have a great time and not worry about anything. . . . There's sometimes conflict at my house, so . . . just [talking] with friends, I find it much better for me.

Another participant explained,

All my friends here . . . I can't see when I'm at school, or at home, or at work. . . . They come from different schools, or even different parts of the city, where you can't get to easily, and everybody just comes [to the BGC], and you see them every Tuesday and Thursday.

Similarly, another participant stated,

I get to see some of my friends I don't see at school or regularly. . . . It's nice to see them because usually my other friends don't have time because they're busy with school, homework, or work. So I just come here and hang out with them.

Two of the respondents acknowledged that they had actually changed their approach to forming friendships since attending the BGC. The first participant explained, I've kind of learned who I am, and like, what type of people I like to hang out with more, and what types of groups I should hang out with. . . . [Many teenagers] stick to their comfort with their friends that they've known forever. . . . I've kind of like tried to push myself out of that little comfort zone because of [the BGC]. . . . [Now] I have a lot of friends I've met here . . . and they're pretty cool people.

The second participant stated,

I grew up on a theory from my dad that . . . either through fear or through love I will have your respect. And for a long time, I had to earn my respect through fear. But since I started coming [to the BGC] and I developed that respect in a friendship manner . . . a lot of the kids have started to give me that respect as more of a friend, instead of being scared of me.

Within this theme the respondents reported that the BGC was an excellent place to begin friendships and have them grow over time. The data collected in this theme suggests that the BGC provides youth with a supportive environment within which they are able to establish meaningful relationships with peers and gain proficiency in forming lasting friendships.

*Relationships outside the BGC.* In some cases relationships from the BGC extended beyond the program hours. Four respondents reported that their relationships from the BGC also existed outside the club, while one respondent reported she only saw her BGC friends during the drop-in hours. The first group of four respondents discussed the manner in which friendships initiated at the BGC transitioned to relationships outside the club. One respondent explained,

One of my friends . . . we both started coming here and it's like, "Hey we're having so much fun hanging out here, why don't we actually hang out like at school? I see you around all the time." . . . We just became really good friends at school and people are like, how do you know them? They're not like the same age as you, and it's like, I don't know, we're just friends. . . . It seemed pretty normal just to walk down the hall, just be like, "Hey, how's it goin'?" . . . Are you going to the club tonight?"

Similarly, another participant stated,

You talk to them more and more and more every time you come here, and you start to talk to them outside of the club, you know, whether through text, Facebook, phone calls, something like that, and next thing you know, you guys are hanging out at the mall, or hanging out after school.

One participant explained how a circle of friends grows through the BGC: "I knew a lot of old friends that came here . . . and then I brought my own friends [from outside of the BGC] . . . and then they meet new people and it just keeps spreading." Lastly, one participant explained how friendships grow beyond the BGC:

I've actually noticed how [friendships at the BGC] will transition out into other parts of life, because people that I wouldn't talk to at school started talking to at school. . . . I was hanging out with their friends and . . . they would come hangout with me and my friends, stuff like that, and it helped develop a unity there as well. . . . I'm now well-known in every school in Lethbridge, and I don't even go to school!

One respondent provided a different experience in regards to friends at the BGC: I don't hang out with [the BGC friends] outside of the club, and I come here to see them. That's one of the reasons I come here. Because I have like my regular friends that I always hang out with, and then I come here and I'm like, ooh my other friends! Let's go spend some time with them, and, you know, some time away from my other friends.

The respondents reported that their social networks grew considerably as a result of the relationships they started at the club. This was a notable finding because it suggests that many youth were actively seeking friendships both at the BGC and outside of the club. The data gathered in this theme also indicate that respondents may have acquired skills at the BGC that helped them cultivate friendships beyond the program hours.

***Connections involving primarily leaders.*** Included within the design of the Teen Stuff program was an emphasis on promoting meaningful interactions between adult leaders and youth participants. The themes presented in this section are comprised of experiences that the respondents reported involved mostly interactions with leaders.

There are two themes included in this subcategory: relationships with leaders at the BGC and guidance and advice from leaders.

*Relationships with leaders at the BGC.* Nine of the respondents reported that their relationships with the leaders were a meaningful part of their time at the BGC. Within this theme the respondents shared the most impactful elements of their relationships with leaders. One participant stated,

With the staff leaders, you respect them and they respect you. . . . The leaders keep pressing that if you ever have a problem you can talk to them, and it's true. I talked to [the staff] all the time. And they don't judge you based on your opinions, and that's one thing that I find no other youth group has. . . . To be able to talk to people and sort of handle things is amazing. It's really helpful, and more of a bonding experience . . . between the leaders and youth.

Another participant explained,

For once I have a positive role model instead of one where you're thinking, "I'm going to get into doing drugs because this person does it," or "I'm going to get into drinking because this person does it." [At the BGC] it's, you know what, I'm going to start being nice because these people do it. . . . [The leaders] that used to do drugs, or drink, are now helping youth and [are] being . . . positive role model[s].

One respondent described how leaders interact with youth:

[The leaders] join in on activities . . . [and] just go, like, chat and play cards with us. . . . I like the part where it's like leaders against the kids if there's enough leaders that day. . . . It's a challenge because some of [the youth] are more skilled

and others aren't and you want to figure out if the leaders are good at sports, [or] if they're good at the certain game you're playing, if you have an advantage in it or not. . . . It shows that [the leaders] care about us because they're like, "Oh, yeah you guys are cool; I'm going to join your game."

Another participant said,

I talk to [the leaders] a lot. They will come talk to me . . . [and] I can ask them something or ask them to do something and they will go do it on the spot. There's no hesitation, no nothing, and it's nice knowing that I have that respect here.

One respondent stated, "[The leaders] always want you to join them, whatever they're doing even if it's just talking. . . . If they're playing sports [they say], come on and join us . . . [I like] how the leaders are always positive, . . . friendly, caring, [and] helpful."

When describing relationships with leaders, another participant said, "Well for me . . . [there are] lots of leaders I'm really close to and I got a good relationship with. . . . [The leaders] actually cared about us, and [they are] not just like, 'Oh, I'm here to get paid to watch you.'"

Some of the respondents also described how they were able to form close friendships with the leaders:

You get to be like friends with [the leaders]; it's pretty cool. . . . When I'm friends with the leaders, it's like they're not just people here to supervise me. . . . I can have fun with them. We can talk about anything, [and] we can goof around with each other. . . . I think that if the leaders were more strict, and didn't know how to have fun, and they were all grumpy all the time, then most people wouldn't like coming here because usually when you're around people who are

grumpy, you become grumpy. . . . [If] they're always like, "Hey, don't do that, no, stop," and they don't know how to have fun, and you're going to be like, "Well I'm sorry, I'll leave then."

Another participant described the leaders as friends:

Right now, sometimes the staff and the volunteers are more friends to me than most of the youth in the club. . . . Just some of [the leaders] I prefer to talk to. I've talked to [one of the leaders] about things that I wouldn't talk to any of the youth about, ya so there's trust. . . . If I'm willing to tell [personal information to] . . . a staff member, rather than the majority of the youth, then clearly there's friendship between the leaders and some youth that could be stronger than friendships among youth and other youth.

Participants also described the mutual respect between leaders and youth:

With a lot of the leaders here, it's nice that there's a ton of respect and there's a relationship between the leaders and the kids that come, because I know all the leaders by name. I know who most of them really are, talk to them a lot, learn about their lifestyles, what they do with their life, stuff like that and it's kinda nice knowing that it's kinda more like another friend, rather than a supervisor over you.

This theme presented two factors that promoted meaningful connections between youth and adults at the BGC. First, the respondents suggested that youth were actively seeking out relationships with the leaders, which is an encouraging result considering the positive impact that adult role models could have in adolescent development. Second,

the leaders appeared eager to foster these relationships, and leaders at the BGC have successfully facilitated caring relationships with the respondents.

*Guidance and advice from leaders.* Besides having a strong relationship with the leaders at the BGC, eight respondents recognized that the leaders also provided guidance and advice that helped youth solve problems in their lives. Often, respondents acknowledged that it was particularly valuable to receive guidance from older, more mature adults. One participant stated, “[At the BGC] I’ve learned to trust [the leaders] easily . . . they’ve been through a lot of experiences so they know how to help.” Another participant explained how a leader helped her resolve problems:

When I first started coming here, I pretty much only talked to [one leader], and it was great. She helped me with a lot of my problems, and helped my family and as the staff changed a bit, I came to talk to [three other leaders] a lot. And whenever you talk to them, all you get is positive feedback, and life tips. . . . The more you talk, the more that [the leaders] understand from your point of view, and they can sort of go, “Wow, I really feel for that kid,” or they can go, “I’ve been there, I know how to help you.” . . . It helps a lot, because when you’re a youth, you don’t really know what to do, and to be able to talk to someone who’s a little older, has a little more experience with the problem, it teaches you a lot.

Another participant explained that leaders speak from their lived experiences:

I know from talking with a few of the leaders that even some of them have had problems in the past; some were drinking, some were doing drugs . . . it goes to show that if you want to change your life around for the better, you can. . . . If

you want to find the right way to live your life, all you got to do is listen to . . . the leaders, and they'll tell you how to live a happy life.

Many respondents valued leaders' opinions and advice, with one participant stating,

I think it's good to have like older people that you can go to and like, you know, talk because they're gonna have different advice, they're gonna have different life experiences. . . . They might have gone through something different, or more, like they might have seen something that you haven't and they might have like a different view, like, of advice or wisdom on it. . . . It's nice to come, and, like, be able to talk about anything. . . . You can pull anyone aside and chances are they've been through something, or they can offer advice, or support, or whatever you need.

Some youth found it easier to open up to leaders:

Coming [to the BGC] I found it really easy to open up to the leaders 'cause they're just nice, and they offer a lot of advice and help. . . . [The leaders] tell you what would be better than self-harm, how to stand up for yourself . . . [or] how to take care of a bully if you're being bullied. It's really nice. . . . [Since] they've lived longer than I have . . . they probably understand things better than I do 'cause I'm still pretty young.

One participant described the leaders as available and always ready to help:

[The leaders] like help you out all the time. . . . Whenever you need to talk, [or] need help with something, they're there to listen . . . [and] they help you out with what's right and what's wrong, like, if you should do something or you shouldn't do any something.

The supportive, trusting relationship that exists between many of the youth and leaders made the respondents feel more confident about the advice being given:

I was dealing with . . . “mental issues” and . . . I talked about them with [one of the staff members] and he actually advised me on certain things. . . . There’s probably not a single [youth] within Teen Stuff . . . that knows what happened [to me] . . . but you know, I’m willing to tell [a staff member].

Another participant stated,

You can always go to [the leaders] and say, “Hey, can we talk for a minute?” and they’ll sit you down in an office, just you and them, and they’ll listen to what you have to say, and then they actually try to give you advice on it. . . . They’re not the type of people where it’s in one ear, out the other. They actually try to help you get through what’s going on.

During their interactions with leaders at the BGC, the respondents described forming caring relationships, in which they sometimes received the support of a friendship, as well as guidance on resolving issues in their lives. Respondents also stated that they often valued the advice from these older and more mature adults.

***Connections involving both peers and leaders.*** During the Teen Stuff drop-in participants spent time with both peers and leaders. Sometimes these interactions occurred one on one, while other times a number of youth and leaders came together for one activity. The following section includes themes of interpersonal connections that occurred during interactions with both peers and leaders. This category is comprised of the following six subthemes: social support at the BGC, teamwork and collaboration at

the BGC, diversity at the BGC, a lack of bullying at the BGC, giving back to the community, and receiving recognition for positive behaviour.

*Social support at the BGC.* The respondents were quite forthcoming with the types of issues that they faced in their lives. Some of the respondents described living with mental health concerns, such as depression or anxiety, whereas others described frequent conflicts at home or with significant individuals in their lives. The respondents considered the BGC to be one place where they could access social support from both the leaders and their peers. The respondents described the qualities that they appreciated in the social support they received at the BGC:

It's a good support system, because if you've ever had family problems you might feel like you have a broken support system, or like if you were bullied . . . you might feel like you have a broken support system. . . . To come here and have like all different leaders . . . it's good to have like a strong support system, and a lot of people need that, and like I've had times where I needed it too, and it definitely pays off. . . . I've had several occasions where I just talk to a leader, like they sit down [and say], "Oh hi," and I just say, "I'm not so good," [and they reply], "Oh, do you wanna talk about it?" [Then I'll say], "Sure." . . . Like, you can just talk about it, you know. It's a good thing. (Participant)

Another participant shared how when support was needed it was always there:

[Coming to the BGC] makes your day so much better, makes you happy and gives you someone to talk to when you need to. . . . It means a lot; it means that I no longer have to get as angry as I do sometimes. I can just go, "Hey, I need

someone to talk to,” and right away it’s a one-on-one talk, and everything’s better in the next five minutes.

Leaders are there for the youth, as one respondent stated,

If you need to talk about something more serious, you can talk to someone who’s older and can probably help. . . . I was just really down low one day, and you know, I pulled one of the [leaders] aside and we talked and it helped out. . . . [The leaders] were there for me, and I felt reassured almost that, you know, it wasn’t my fault, that you know, things happen you can’t help that.

Another respondent affirmed that leaders are always available to help:

If you’re having a major issue, you can always go to one of the leaders. . . . You can always go to them and say, “Hey, can we talk for a minute,” and they’ll sit you down in an office, just you and them, and they’ll listen to what you have to say . . . [and] they actually try to help you get through what’s going on. . . . When you come here all the leaders talk to you, and try to help you with your problems. . . . It’s a big thing for me knowing that there’s so many different people here that I can go to with my problems, and they’ll help me instead of just turning their backs to me.

One participant explained that although he had not needed direct support, the participant had seen others receive that kind of support and it is good to know it is there:

I enjoy talking to [the leaders because] they’re someone to talk to that isn’t a youth. . . . I haven’t personally gone into an in-depth conversation with one about something important . . . but they’re there to help you with stuff if you need to talk. . . . I’ve seen them talking to people that have problems, and helping them

out the best that they can . . . [and] the people that I know that have had problems and talked to the leaders, they come out helped.

The interview responses indicate that when youth required social support it was easily accessible from leaders at the club:

You're guaranteed to talk to [a leader] as soon as you come in because there's a leader that sits at the door for the sign-in sheet or they ask you how your day's going. If you say you've had a bad day, they'll ask you why and next thing you know, a half hour will go by 'cause you'll have been sitting there talking to them, venting because they just, they wanna try to help you, and they love talking to the kids here.

Another participant explained,

[The leaders will] take you aside if you need space, they'll take you where there's no one else. . . . If you need to cry, like, they'll let you cry. They're not gonna let anyone, you know, judge you on what you're going through.

One respondent explained why it is easy to open up to leaders:

[The leaders were] always nice and they're always there for you when you need to talk to someone about troubles. . . . Coming [to the BGC], I found it really easy to open up to the leaders 'cause they're just nice and they offer . . . [to] help. . . . I've talked to the leaders all the time about stuff that's going on in my life. . . . I come here, and if I have something on my mind I'll go talk to them about it, and they'll turn my mood right around.

One participant explained how speaking with leaders about concerns helped the participant to see another (often brighter) perspective:

[The leaders] really make me see the better side of things . . . [and] that's always a good way to go because some things lead to depression, [and] depression leads to feeling like bad about yourself . . . so talking [about] stuff, getting all of it out, it just feels good.

The respondents acknowledged that they had greater trust in the leaders than their peers. Specifically, when the respondents talked privately with the leaders, they felt more confident that their personal disclosures would not be shared with other youth:

The leaders here are trustworthy, and, you know, when I'm having a bad day, I know I can go talk to them. . . . [When I talk with the leaders it] makes me feel better, makes me feel more confident . . . [and] happier.

Another participant stated,

Whenever you need to talk, [or] need help with something, [the leaders are] there to listen. . . . They're not going to go around and be like, "Hey, this person did this, and that person did that," which most of the youth would normally do. . . . With [the previous Teen Stuff manager] . . . we would go and have like really deep talks no matter what. And, if I was having family problems, then I was allowed to come here like any night, even if it was [the night for] . . . the younger kids.

One respondent affirmed that leaders are easily accessible to the youth:

I like the leaders. They're always nice and they're always there for you when you need to talk to someone about troubles and stuff . . . [I have] quite a few good

connections with [the leaders], where we became really close, and I [could] talk to them about anything on my mind. . . . When they see me in a bad mood, they get worried and they're like, "Oh hey, what's going on?" And we go somewhere more private to talk. . . . I have a hard time opening up with my dad because he has so much stress, and I really don't want to put that much more stress on him. So I come here and if I have something on my mind, I'll go talk to [the leaders] about it, and they'll turn my mood right around.

One of the respondents recalled an activity at the BGC in which the leaders showed a video about depression and then led a dialogue about the impact of mental health in adolescence. The respondent disclosed that he struggled with depression, and he shared the significance of this activity on his feeling of support at the BGC:

[Watching that video] was the first time someone's actually tried to help me or my friends deal with depression, and it means a lot because now all of a sudden instead of people labelling you as having depression, they're actually trying to do something about it. . . . The conversations [about depression] got really personal, but it wasn't an invasive personal, it was like a mutuality of sharing past experiences. . . . The youth and the leaders both shared personal experiences, and both learned from them.

In some cases the peers and leaders actually worked together to provide social support:

Everybody works as a team just to make that one person happy again, and they . . . make somebody happy, or give them a hug, or talk to them, or go outside and

that's usually better. . . . [The helpers] just try to make [the upset person] feel comfortable, just like sit by him, and just make him relax.

Another participant shared,

I actually have more people I can talk to now, just more people that I get to see and have a good time with. . . . Growing up I had one person the entire time, so it's nice to actually have a variety of people that I can go to, and talk to, and hangout with. . . . A couple months ago, I was having issues with my best friend. . . . [The Teen Stuff manager] came out and kinda talked to me about what they were, tried to calm me down, [and] stuff like that. . . . If someone comes here upset . . . there's so many people that wanna talk to them, help them, make them feel better, that by the time they go to leave, they don't even remember what they were upset about because they're just a lot happier.

One participant explained that youth can come in with a variety of issues and receive help:

You can come in with any sort of issue and people don't just leave you alone. They wanna help you work things out, whether it's leaders or the kids. . . . They don't like seeing people upset here because this is a place meant for everyone to be happy, and so they do their best to get you in a better mood. . . . It's nice knowing that I can come here when I'm upset to just relax, because I know I can come here and there's gonna be something for me to do, or someone for me to talk to no matter what.

Many participants spoke of how positive leaders are:

I enjoy how the leaders are always positive. They're friendly, caring, helpful, and a lot of the [youth are] also same thing . . . [I have seen] people just helping each other out a lot. Like even if it's just they're having a hard time and someone's been talking to them. . . . Some of the people I noticed had a couple of problems . . . but it seems like they were getting a lot a help by [the leaders] and their peers.

Three respondents described the type of social support that peers provide without the assistance of leaders. The first respondent reported that she felt best approaching a peer when she needed support with more minor issues:

If you need to talk about having a bad day, like, you can talk to one of your friends . . . I'm sure if I ever needed to talk or anything like some of [the other youth] would be there. . . . Other people have been through things too and I think everyone that comes here has been through something and we understand [it helps us support others].

One respondent described the role that she had played in providing support to her peers at the BGC:

Usually I sit them down and then I'll give them a hug or whatever. . . .

[Afterwards] they usually just calm down, and then they'll talk to me about how much stress they're on, and then I talk to them, and then they feel better because they got stuff off their chest.

Another participant stated, "Me and my friends, we have promoted positive change by trying to . . . make things positive here at the club. . . . We'll go and if someone's feeling down, you know, I've had to go and talk to many people."

The responses in this theme support a positive outlook on the BGC as a source of social support for youth. First, the experiences from this theme demonstrate that youth actively seek social support and that leaders were easily accessible to provide support. Second, the social support offered both from peers and leaders seemed to be beneficial for the respondents, which is promising considering that these youth appeared motivated to accept the help.

*Teamwork and collaboration at the BGC.* The respondents frequently described how the BGC youth and leaders worked together as a team and collaborated with one another. Eight respondents shared their experiences with teamwork and collaboration at the club. Six respondents reported that it was common for youth and leaders to work together, whereas two respondents believed there was not enough teamwork and collaboration at the BGC. The respondents identified drop-in sports as an activity at which teamwork commonly occurred at the BGC:

The teamwork's actually really good [at the BGC]. . . . Teamwork is just like working together, like playing a game of dodge ball. . . . [The players] usually work together to defeat the other team . . . and then most people have fun and just are having a great time. . . . [Then] the leaders get involved and they're so much better, so everybody works as like a team just to have a great time. . . . If people are working together . . . even playing a game or something, [then] nobody's arguing or anything.

Another participant stated, "A lot of people like to play dodge ball and . . . I've seen quite a bit of teamwork. . . . It looks good!"

One respondent discussed teamwork and sports:

If we're playing on the same team, you sort of lose yourself in the game and forget about rivalries, and that's something that I like. . . . Pretty much no matter what, as soon as you walk in that front door, you're leaving your rivalries outside.

One participant talked about collaboration through respecting the right of other youth to use the equipment:

Throughout the night, I normally like to play probably five different games. So, as I progress one to the next, if you want to start a new game, you have to clean up the first one. . . . You can sort of build on cleaning up after yourself because, you know, someone else might want to play something different.

Another participant explained that teamwork and collaboration does not necessarily mean that everyone taking part in the activity are close friends: "Even if someone doesn't like you in their own mind, they'll get along with you if you're playing a game. They won't try to single you out as the weakness of the team; they'll try and help you." Similarly, one participant stated, "I've seen a lot a teamwork being done . . . especially when we were playing the sports. . . . It is promoted by [the leaders] of course [and] . . . here and there when we do team-related activities [with other youth]."

One of the respondents recalled a time that she had witnessed especially strong teamwork at the BGC:

We were all like in the gym for an activity. It was . . . four teams I think, and we all had so many straws and we had to build this really tall tower. . . . Yeah, everybody was working together to get the highest tower and it had to stand up.

. . . I think we did pretty good, but it fell over so we didn't win, but I think our teamwork was pretty good.

The interview responses indicate that collaboration seemed to be part of the culture at the BGC. One respondent described the factors that motivated the youth and leaders to work together around the BGC:

If you help [the staff leaders] then they help you. It's pretty much from the recommendation box. . . . You just have to clean up, help, do positive things around the club, and every month or so you get your name in the recommendation box, and [the leaders] do a draw out of everyone that's involved, and you have a chance to win . . . a gift card.

One participant explained how the BGC fosters a culture of collaboration and teamwork:

Everyone has that mindset of the pay it forward, you know, come here and people are always doing things for you here, and it's almost, it's almost like subconsciously you go do things for other people. . . . People will do things for you here . . . and because people have helped you here . . . you just feel obliged to go help them, or you even offer to help more.

Two respondents expressed opinions that opposed the common perspective about teamwork and collaboration at the BGC. One participant stated,

There are the some [youth] that go with it . . . and learn how to respect each other and cooperate . . . [but] then there's the people who don't [cooperate] or try to mess with the other people that are respecting each other. . . . This is what [the leaders are] going for, to like help [each other], but it doesn't seem like it's

working with everybody. Like, people getting in fights, not respecting each other, and not helping each other.

Another participant stated,

It's very rare that we see teamwork here, but if there's any teamwork seen anywhere it would be in the gym . . . but even then that's a rare occasion. That's only one activity. We need it, you know, more spread out [around the BGC]. . . . In the meeting games [the leaders] promote teamwork, but we need something at a grander scale. . . . We need to stretch it out, gotta have something big. . . . Among me and my friends [cooperation] happens, [but] among everybody else it kind of depends on who you're talking to. . . . It's not exactly [as common as] looking out the window and seeing a bunch of houses; it's [more] like seeing a house every mile.

The responses in this theme demonstrate that teamwork and collaboration were important factors in promoting reciprocal relationships between youth and leaders at the BGC. These characteristics of a unified group seem to be important factors in developing and maintaining cohesion within a group setting and the lessons learned about collaboration appear to promote awareness about the wellbeing of others at the BGC.

*Diversity at the BGC.* Five respondents described experiences involving diversity at the BGC. In some cases, diversity was used to refer to the array of different social (e.g., home conditions), racial, and religious backgrounds represented by members of the BGC:

Sometimes difference can lead to a different outcome. Like, if you're getting angry at someone just for their religion or their race, maybe you should try to talk

to them and learn more about it before you judge them. Just cause someone's black, and looks like a hoodlum, doesn't really mean that they are a hoodlum and don't do good.

Another participant referred to diversity in sexual orientation,

I've had a lot of different experiences here with like a lot of different people . . . like, some of the guys I know, they're like gay and they come here. . . . [At the BGC] they're just like, "You know what? . . . I'm just going to be me."

The theme of diversity also included the respondents' descriptions of the "different types of people" they met at the BGC:

It's nice to actually have a variety of people that I can go to and talk to and hangout with. . . . It's a wide variety of people that come here, and so it's never the same thing over and over and over again. There's always something different going on . . . [and] it's nice to actually have a variety of people that I can go to and talk to and hangout with.

Another participant explained how BGC differs from other youth environments in that the diversity is accepted and respected and the environment is not age segregated:

There's no cliques [at the BGC] it's just like everyone together. . . . Even though people are different than each other—have different personalities, dress different, have different interests—we can all just come together. . . . I've always hung out with like a variety of ages, so, to have different maturity levels, or to have different like wisdom levels [as well].

For two of the respondents diversity was sometimes a challenge, particularly when they struggled to interact with certain groups of youth at the club. The first

respondent described how the mix between different groups of youth had become unbalanced at the BGC:

It's a good place to be, [but] to me it could be changed kind of depending on the group of people we have coming here. . . . [Currently] you got your jocks, that's like the sport guys, and you got your nerds . . . and then you got your . . . weed smokers, you know, those are the guys causing trouble. . . . The weed smokers they come and like grew [in numbers] . . . [and] it's kind of like, you know, you're in a war and all of a sudden half your men just died and [the other group is] outnumbering you two to one. . . . [I] just can't stand [the weed smokers]. . . . It's kind of like, it could be better if we had [more variety of] groups coming in.

One respondent was especially frustrated by the groups of younger youth (i.e., 14 and 15 years of age) that were becoming more prominent at the BGC:

The age group [when I first started] was, like, all around my age. . . . But now that I'm older all the younger kids are coming in, and they're different than the younger kids when I was younger, and it's just they're not as good as the old kids. . . . The generations to me seem like they're just getting worse and worse, they're starting to do bad habits earlier . . . things that anybody's not supposed to do underage, like drinking and partying. . . . Now they seem to just hate a lot of people and just start confrontations, and trying to prove themselves to their friends, and be better than anybody else. . . . Some of [the younger youth] do manage to make the place a little bit worse.

In this theme the respondents recognized the diversity of members at the BGC.

The data gathered suggests that this type of exposure to youth and leaders from different

personal, racial, and religious backgrounds provides the participants with opportunities to learn more about people. This exposure enabled respondents to become more familiar with the broad scope of viewpoints that exist in their community.

*A lack of bullying at the BGC.* Bullying amongst youth has become a growing area of concern for adolescents, parents of adolescents, school staff, and youth workers. News stories about the emotional distress of bullying victims and reports of bullying-related suicides have become far too common. With the increasingly severe nature of online and face-to-face bullying, it appears youth are especially challenged to negotiate negative social pressures and manage their emotional reactions to recurring victimization. Three respondents shared their view of bullying at the BGC, with one participant stating,

I don't think I've ever had a problem here, with getting treated with respect or like being bullied. . . . If someone's being bullied, or someone's being picked on, it's stopped right away, like, no questions asked. . . . Whereas, at the school or outside of here it just goes on and on and on. . . . [At the BGC] I'm not gonna get bullied or picked for like what I'm wearing, like how I act, [or] like my personality.

One participant who experienced a lot of bullying has experienced more respect at BGC: "Growing up, I didn't have much respect from my peers. I got bullied a lot, nobody really talked to me, nothing like that. . . . [But] coming here, there's a lot more respect for me in this building."

One participant stated that, although she has not experienced bullying at BGC, the leaders have explained to youth how to handle that situation at the club:

I was bullied when I was in Grade 6 for being short. Everyday on the bus [people would say], “Hey, you’re a midget. Hey midget, midget,” and I’d cry . . . so that’s one of my bad experiences. . . . Nobody’s really called me a midget [at the BGC], but if they do . . . [the leaders] tell you how to take care of a bully . . . [and] I’m like, “Hey, stop, I hate that word,” and they usually stop.

One of the respondents had a slightly different outlook on bullying at the BGC. He acknowledged that there were certain participants who did target other youth at the BGC:

A couple of [youth] . . . seem to be the kids that have more trouble at home or something . . . kind of like kids that get bullied [themselves], then they’re pushed into bullying, either by their parents or other people at school, and they just bring it here. . . . They feel like they need to be better than the other people. . . . The way they were bullying each other [is] calling each other names, hitting each other, trying to bring them down to their level, or even lower.

Considering the public focus towards finding solutions to bullying during adolescence, the participants’ responses in this theme are significant because they provide some insight into the role of youth programs in bullying prevention. Since the majority of respondents in this theme said that bullying was not an issue at the BGC, this theme indicates that there may be elements of the BGC that act as protective factors against bullying.

*Giving back to the community.* Since the BGC is a community agency it is not surprising that some of the respondents mentioned the importance that was placed on giving back to the community. Three respondents discussed how the BGC encouraged participants to engage in service to the community:

Keystone as a whole actually has an obligation to do [community service]. [We are] giving back to the community . . . [and] promoting positive change. . . . Teen Stuff the program . . . does give back to the community [also] by giving . . . teens a place to go, you know, not being out on the streets doing what should not be done.

Another participant explained,

In Keystone . . . we used to do a lot of things around the community. . . . Last year, every single weekend we had an opportunity to go volunteer somewhere new. . . . We've done things like Homeless Connect [handing out food and clothes] and . . . it made me gain respect for people that don't have everything handed to them. . . . [We also did] volunteering with Sears [wrapping gifts for charity], and Lethbridge Family Services.

One participant explained how the BGC culture encourages youth to give back:

People are always doing things for you [at the BGC], and it's almost like subconsciously you go do things for other people outside of here. . . . Because people have helped you here, like, when you go to the mall and someone needs your help with something, you just feel obliged to go help them. . . . It's really helped getting me that mindset for the rest of [my] . . . life, instead of just here. . . . You start it here, and then it transitions into the rest of your life.

At the BGC, the Keystone members were given the most formal opportunities to engage in community service, yet one non-Keystone member described how the BGC inspired him to give back to members of his community as well. The experiences presented in this theme suggest that youth are interested in supporting those around them,

and the responses indicate that the BGC may have played an important role in cultivating this quality within these respondents.

*Receiving recognition for positive behaviour.* Four respondents described the type of recognition they had received for positive behaviour at the BGC. Three respondents described how much they appreciated when the other youth and the leaders acknowledged their positive actions, whereas one respondent expressed confusion about the type of recognition that he had received at the BGC. The first group of respondents valued the encouraging feedback they received from other members of the BGC. One participant stated, “I had a lot of positive feedback [when I handled a situation responsibly]. People were sitting there going . . . you handled it respectably; you handled it like a man.” Another participant explained,

Me and my friend . . . came dressed like crazy things . . . and everyone was like, hey that’s really cool . . . we should get in on this. . . . To have people come up to me and be like, “Oh, hey you’re really sweet,” “You’re really down to earth, like we should hang out.” . . . It’s cool that people notice me and they want to like interact with me.

Another participant described being recognized for musical ability: “People [have] appreciated the concerts I’ve done . . . [and] the last time I did a concert it was even bigger. . . . It’s amazing. I don’t know how else to explain it, but it feels good!”

One of the respondents provided a divergent perspective about the type of recognition that youth received at the BGC. Specifically, the type of recognition he had received was confusing for this respondent:

I gain some respect for supporting a good idea that was not my own, so it doesn't make sense [to me]. . . . [I believe] one should gain support and be more noticed if they made the idea. I shouldn't be more noticed and respected if I'm supporting things. . . . If someone makes an idea just because this other guy supported it doesn't mean you go [recognize] the guy who supported it. . . . No, you should go for the person who made the idea. . . . I think if someone's actually willing to bring out an idea, [and] if someone's willing to push it, that should get them respect, not supporting something.

**Personal development.** Themes in the personal development category included experiences at the BGC that respondents believed had an impact on their personal growth. Within the context of the BGC experiences that fostered personal development included taking part in formal leadership opportunities, as well as engaging in activities that promoted self-confidence, personal responsibility, and coping skills. The following six subthemes fell within the theme of personal development: developing self-confidence, developing coping skills, promoting personal responsibility, formal leadership opportunities, a sense of independence at BGC, and displaying individuality at BGC.

***Developing self-confidence.*** Six respondents reported that experiences from the BGC promoted self-confidence. The responses in this section present the specific factors at the BGC that respondents believed helped them increase their sense of confidence. One participant stated,

I've gotten more confident I think. . . . After getting bullied it puts you down pretty low. . . . But, being able to come here and like . . . have people tell you like, "You're really great girl." . . . I don't know, it just feels good to be

appreciated . . . [I am] happier . . . more confident, more carefree, and more myself.

Another participant explained how the BGC helped increase her ability to speak with confidence: “[The BGC] made me more confident. . . . I’m not afraid to talk to people anymore. . . . I open up to people easier, . . . I stand up for myself more, and I don’t take bad behaviour from anyone.” One participant explained how self-confidence related to self-esteem:

[Before the BGC], I had no confidence in my body. . . . I’ve been through relationships where I’ve just been putdown so low, and . . . I lost all my confidence, but, having the compliments [at the BGC], or you know, [people] just saying like, “Oh, you look nice today,” or “That it was really fun to hang out with you,” it puts your confidence up. . . . You’re not scared to go out there [and] you don’t hide anymore.

Another respondent described being less shy at BGC:

Usually, [I am] not one to really interact with new people because I’m all shy and stuff. . . . I can’t seem to help it because whenever somebody comes around, I’m just like, “Nope, I’m going to stay quiet.” . . . I guess I’m scared of people judging me. . . . But [at the BGC] . . . it feels comfortable going up to random people.

One participant explained how he gained self-esteem at BGC:

You sort of gain more self-esteem [at the BGC] . . . because the more [other people are] asking to do stuff, the more you realize, “Hey, these people like me. Maybe this time I’ll just join instead of them having to ask.” . . . [Other youth]

ask, “Hey, would you like to play a game of soccer? Hey, would you like to play a game of dodge ball,” [and] instead of that aspect where you’re being forced, you’re being asked. . . . In your mind, it’s sort of like, “They’re asking me if I want to play, . . . I’m not that little kid in the corner slouching anymore, . . . I’m one of the people they are requesting to play their game. I mean something.”

One respondent explained how the Drop’n Beats program helped improve her self-confidence:

When the Drop’n Beats program came, yeah that boosted up my confidence . . . because I never knew I could record a song and have it put on a CD. . . . I’ve become more confident in singing, and performing . . . [and] I’ve just been able to sing in front of people without being so nervous. . . . Now more people know that I can sing, and I’m confident about it.

Two of the respondents described how their role in the Keystone group helped them feel more confident interacting with other youth at the BGC. One participant stated, Normally, I wouldn’t go and just confront somebody and tell them to stop doing something, but now . . . I have a little bit more authority and . . . [I don’t] have any consequences of doing that . . . [so] I feel confident now.

Another participant said,

I didn’t talk very much when I first started coming here . . . [but the leaders of Keystone] kind of forced me out of my little shell. . . . They’re like, “You know what? You have to talk in front of everybody today . . . [because] we are going to build up this skill of yours, and you’re going to eventually become comfortable with it.” . . . [In my time at the BGC] I’ve watched not just myself, but a lot of

other people come out of their little tiny shells. They're so quiet, and it's like you know what? You're going to have to speak up your voice . . . that's not gonna work [at the BGC].

In his conceptualization of identity formation in adolescence, Marcia (2002) posited that the development of self-confidence was an essential task for young people to complete prior to entering adulthood. The experiences presented within this theme suggest that respondents believe the BGC is one setting in which youth are given the necessary supports to establish a stable sense of self-confidence.

*Developing coping skills.* During their time at the BGC, three respondents described learning coping skills, such as choosing stress-relieving activities and developing strategies for avoiding self-harm or managing feelings of depression. Two respondents explained how the BGC helped them utilize coping skills when they were feeling particularly frustrated or angry. One of these participants stated,

A couple months ago, I was having issues with my best friend, and [one of the leaders] came out and kinda talked to me about what they were, tried to calm me down. . . . It's nice knowing that I can come [to the BGC] when I'm upset to just relax because I know I can come here and there's gonna be something for me to do, or someone for me to talk to no matter what. . . . [I have found] when you go play sports, like dodge ball, it's a good way to get aggression out, without doing something very stupid.

Another participant said,

If you get into a fight [at the BGC] there's a bunch of people that are going to go, "Listen, this isn't going to happen again, I'll tell you how to handle your stress."

. . . [It makes me think] is this going to matter in the future? . . . I shouldn't be getting this mad over something so small.

The respondents provided several examples demonstrating how their time at the BGC had helped them develop skills for handling the overwhelming sadness associated with depression:

If I'm having a bad week, this place always cheers me up. . . . [The leaders] tell you what would be better than self-harm . . . [and encourage seeing] the better side of things. [Looking at the better side is] always a good way to go because some [negative] things lead to depression, depression leads to feeling bad about yourself, which leads to self-harm most of the time. And if it gets to that point, where it leads to self-harm, it could also lead to suicide, so . . . getting all of it out, it just feels good. (Participant)

One participant described a situation in which people at BGC helped the participant to feel better:

[I arrived feeling sad and] I had five different people talking to me, trying to lighten my mood or get me to do something that took my mind off of things. . . . [The leaders are always] trying to get you to go out there and actually do something, and interact with the other people here instead of moping on your own.

BGC helped one participant to better deal with challenging situations:

As I started coming here more, I learned that in order to deal with stuff, sometimes you have to just talk about it and deal with it. . . . It's really helpful . . . to be able to talk to people [at the BGC] and sort of handle things. . . . The

more you open up, sort of the more that you realize how much can make you happy . . . and the more you talk, the more you realize, “Wow, I have a lot of things that make me happy, and only a few things that make me sad. Why don’t I stick with the happy things, instead of dwelling on the negatives?” A lesson I’ve learned here is that if you dwell on the negatives, you’re not going to go anywhere in life. If you keep thinking about yesterday, or the day before, you’re going to forget about today, or tomorrow. . . . Yesterday is the past—forget about it. Today is the present [and] you can change the way that you want to live your life. You know, yesterday is history; today is the present, and then tomorrow is a mystery.

Another participant explained how the BGC helped him to deal with depression:

Since watching the video about depression, I’ve been a lot happier, because it shows me how to sort of deal with myself if I don’t have someone to talk to. . . . Instead of [thinking], “This guy punched me, and now I’m sad,” or “This girl broke up with me, now I’m sad,” you can sort of think to yourself, “You know what, it’s her loss,” or “You know what, it’s his fault.” . . . Things like that, where they show you the video, and show people with depression that have moved on with their life, [it] can inspire you to do the same.

One of the respondents also described how the BGC provided her with suggestions for alternative behaviours to self-harm:

[Playing dodge ball is] definitely a better alternative than like self-harming, or like bad thoughts because like you’re working your body so you’re releasing endorphins to make yourself feel better. . . . When you cut yourself it releases

endorphins, [which] makes you feel happier, but also when you throw a ball really hard or scream into a pillow, it also releases endorphins to make you feel better. Ya, I would say that [learning alternatives to self-injury] was something I learned at the club. I remember talking about that with a leader one night, because I was like, “I cut myself last night and I don’t know what to do, and I want to get over this. I wanna stop doing it.” . . . [One of the leaders] gave me a bunch of different ideas to do [avoid self-injury] while I was [at the BGC], as well as at home and it was very helpful.

During their time at the BGC all three respondents developed skills for effectively managing their feelings. They also acquired strategies that allowed them to avoid negative thoughts and choose alternatives to risky behaviours. The coping skills that these youth have acquired at the BGC will likely serve them beyond their time at the club. The responses presented in this theme are essential because they demonstrate that the BGC may play a role in providing youth with the skills necessary to manage their emotions and make decisions that consider the long-term consequences of their actions.

***Promoting personal responsibility.*** Seven respondents commented that the leaders and youth at the BGC promoted responsible actions from all participants at the club. The respondents shared specific experiences that illustrated the sense of personal responsibility that was fostered within the club:

[Before coming to the BGC], I had to get into a lot of fights to protect what I had. . . . [But at the BGC] you’re going to have to change your ways, or else you’re not going to get friends, [and] you’re not going to get peoples’ respect. . . . [One time] someone was starting stuff about me, and I thought about it, and I’m like, “I

am either going to get kicked out of the club, and not have something fun to do, or I am going to handle this responsibly?" . . . [I thought,] "Don't start a fight; watch your mouth, and you're golden."

One participant explained how sharing equipment at the BGC helped him to become more responsible:

The cleaning up after yourself aspect, like, you'd take out a ball to play basketball, or you take out a game system to play games. You can sort of build on cleaning up after yourself because, you know, someone else might want to play something different. . . . It's been sort of promoted, because you know, some of the staff will say, "You're not going to be able to play this game until you clean up your last one."

One participant described youth stepping up to deal with situations even though they were not at fault:

This one time, someone vandalized the van outside with Vaseline, and other [youth] they were like, "Oh, we didn't do it, but we'll go and clean it up." . . . That's a major part of responsibility. . . . [These youth were] mature enough to take on responsibility, like, stand up, own up to it, even though they didn't do it. . . . It's about us coming here, and if we don't take care of it, they're going to stop Teen Stuff, so it's showing that other people want to continue to come here.

Another participant explained how the BGC helps increase responsibility by providing health outlets for youth:

I've seen a lot of people around my hometown . . . getting into trouble with police because, you know . . . they have nothing to do. But, I haven't seen a lot of that

going around [the BGC]. . . . It gives you a healthy thing to do . . . [and] for the people that are in here . . . it gives them something to better themselves. . . . If some people weren't here, they'd be doing other stuff, like it could be illegal activities, or whatnot.

One of the respondents described how her role in the Keystone group had increased her perceived level of responsibility at the club:

Having this [Keystone] name tag . . . you gotta tell people not to swear and stuff . . . and enforce the rules. . . . Before we got the nametags, I used to be like, "Hey, watch your language," and then [some of other youth would] just swear at me again. And I'm like, "Hey, excuse me, watch your language," [but] they'd be like F-U, and then walk away. . . . Now when I say it, they're like, "Oh, I'm sorry; I said fudge," and then I'm like, "There you go; say that word next time." . . . All my life I've been one of those small people, and everybody's like, "I won't listen to you," . . . so it means a lot to me because it makes me feel like people actually listen to me now.

A respondent provided a specific example and described a time that he walked away from a confrontation because he wanted to demonstrate that youth could make responsible decisions at the BGC:

I found [my friend] in the gym and I was ready to just go nuts on him, [but] . . . as I told him, I have a respect for this building and people that are here, that I will not do stuff like that here. . . . [I have noticed] that people . . . have enough respect in a certain place to not cause issues there. . . . Anywhere else they would

[start confrontations], but there's something in that person's body that they have the respect for [the BGC] to not do it here.

Another group of respondents noted that the youth at the BGC seemed more mature than their peers who do not attend the club:

I find some people maturing, like, they don't fight [and] they don't argue. They just mind their own business like a mature person, and then you know they're maturing because they're not being involved in conflict. . . . People are starting to have a great time and there's no cops so far or ambulances, or anything, so I'm starting to think that people are more maturing now.

Another participant stated, "[I] come [to the BGC] to get away from all the drama of high school and . . . I feel like people are more mature here."

The respondents' believed the sense of responsibility and level of maturity were higher in youth at the BGC. The experiences presented in this theme demonstrate that a positive youth setting, like the BGC, may instil within youth a greater sense of social awareness and concern for others.

***Formal leadership opportunities.*** Four respondents described experiences that involved formal leadership opportunities at the BGC. All four respondents who shared their experiences in this theme were members of the Keystone group. The respondents first described what they believe they had gained by being a member of this group:

Being a participant of Keystone, it's expanded my outlook on the Boys and Girls Club. Being able to put my own ideas in, it's been really fun. Because now I get to put my own ideas into what can go on here, and some changes to make it better. . . . I joined Keystone before they got the concession going . . . so I was

just there for . . . pretty much the end of [the planning] . . . [but I] help out with that [at the BGC]. . . . Outside of the club . . . for Pink Shirt Day, or Anti-Bullying Day, [Keystone] went out to stores and we tried to get them to put a bunch of pick stuff around the store to support anti-bullying, and then give a prize to whoever won. . . . At the Home and Garden Show, we were selling raffles for a patio set to raise money for [the BGC] so that it can continue to happen.

Another participant stated,

Keystone really does bring other kids together, because if you're just one of those kids that doesn't really feel like doing anything or participating, I think Keystone would be a great thing because it really does get you involved, and it really opened me up a lot.

The respondents also explained how their leadership skills had improved since joining Keystone:

I'm kind of trying to be more like a support type of guy. . . . So let's say we're all sitting there [in a meeting] and . . . [someone] decides to present a good idea, I support it, and all of a sudden it kind of magnifies it. . . . [Keystone has] been more of like a union type of thing . . . you know, we support each other's ideas and it gets us far.

One participant stated,

[Keystone] really opened me up a lot. . . . [Before Keystone] people didn't really listen to me because they're like, "Oh no, I'm not going to listen to you. You're just another dumb kid." . . . [But now] if we tell them to watch their language or

whatever, they gotta listen to us because we're up there with the leaders . . . [so] people actually listen to me now.

Another participant explained,

We learned . . . types of leadership, and how it is to work with new people. . . . Some people are so used to working with like the same people so they know how to work with those people, but once you started like doing stuff with new people, you learned that not everybody does things the exact same way. . . . Learning not just about your own leadership—like the type of leader you are—but like other people's leadership skills [too]. . . . There's not just like the leaders that are standing up front, there's the ones that do like all the behind scene stuff. . . . Before I was more behind the scenes. I would do like writing up the things that we have to cover, or . . . making the posters for an event we're holding. . . . [Now], I'm the one that stands up front and tells everyone what to do, and if we need like a speaker, I'm the one that speaks. . . . Not everyone has the same leadership skills, but everyone's can change.

At the BGC, the Keystone leadership group was the primary source of formal leadership opportunities. Within this group youth were encouraged to take on more responsibility at the BGC, and the respondents described how they were encouraged to develop their personal leadership skills. Even though the Keystone members comprised only a small portion of the total BGC population (only about 10% of BGC members are involved), the experiences presented in this theme suggest that the opportunities for formal leadership have made a positive impact on the development of leadership skills in these youth.

*A sense of independence at the BGC.* Five respondents described their views on the level of independence given to youth at the BGC. Respondents expressed differing experiences with a sense of autonomy at the club. Some youth believed they were given plenty of room for independence, whereas others thought there could be more freedom at the club. The first group of respondents described how participants were free to choose from a variety of activities, and they reported having few restrictions on their actions at the BGC:

[The Boys and Girls Club] gives me more freedom to just be me. More freedom to do what I like to do, and the freedom to say no if I don't want to do a certain thing. . . . You got all the time to do whatever you want to do. There's games set up, you can play or you can not play. . . . As long as it's legal, you can pretty much do whatever you want. . . . If we're having a game and all of a sudden half of the people aren't playing, we can go, "You know what, let's play a game that more people would enjoy instead of having, you know, six people that are really into it, and forty that aren't." You can start a game where all of a sudden there's thirty people into it, and . . . you get more of the youth being happier and playing the game.

Another participant stated,

You can come with someone, but you don't like stick by their side . . . you go off, you do your thing with other people and meet up with them [later]. . . . I come with my closer friend like everyday, but you know [we say], "I'm gonna go over here." "Ok, that's cool, I'll be over there."

One respondent described the freedom provided by BGC as a good option:

[The BGC] gives you a viable option, like, something good that you know you're gonna have at least a little bit of fun with and . . . it always gives you something to do 'cause they'll always be [open] Tuesday, [and] Thursdays, and if you're ever . . . free, you can go there. . . . Not a lot a people really care what you do as long as you're within reason, like, not doing anything bad.

The second group of respondents described the perceived limits that the leaders placed on their access to the club during drop-in times. In both cases the respondents commented that the change in the rules concerning in and out privileges (see the Conflict and Drama section in this chapter for a full explanation) played a role in their critical view of independence at the BGC. In general, the new policy drastically decreased outside confrontations during drop-in hours; however, these respondents were not pleased with the changes: “[I would enjoy] a little bit of freedom, like we're always . . . trapped in here; we're not allowed to go outside. . . . I had a lot more fun a year ago . . . [when] we had more freedoms.”

Another participant mentioned the limits on drop-in hours:

I've noticed that some people got annoyed with . . . not being able to go to the park and then come back here. . . . I find that it's just better [when we could leave and come back] because then you can just sign out so the leaders know that you're . . . out, but if you're signed in, then you can go outside and in whenever you want. . . . If there's somebody outside that's a really close friend of yours, and that means you can just go outside, say hi to them and . . . still come inside and do the things you wanna do right after they leave.

The same participant elaborated upon how the previous drop-in rules that allowed more freedom were better:

I think it's actually much better [if] you can just leave. . . . Last year I found it really relaxing, you know, . . . I'd sit by the parking lot, or go in the parking lot and visit with my friends. . . . I just find it really better because then people can run around, and suntan, or whatever depending on the weather. . . . Some people like Slurpees, so they go out for a Slurpee, and then they come back.

Within this theme the respondents were split in their perceived sense of independence at the BGC. Two respondents expressed a desire for more freedom to venture outside the club, but overall the experiences in this theme suggest that the BGC gave youth an opportunity to make independent decisions and to choose activities without unnecessary intervention from the leaders.

***Displaying individuality at the BGC.*** Four of the respondents reported that they were able to display their individuality at the BGC. This was similar to previous themes that described the welcoming environment, and the feeling of nonjudgment at the BGC. However, I considered the responses in this theme to be different because they outlined how the ability to display individuality at the BGC affected respondents' sense of personal development. The responses included in this theme present the respondents' experiences displaying individuality at the BGC:

I got treated with no respect in [high school], like, girls were just so cliquey . . . you know, if you didn't meet what they thought you should be then you weren't included, you know. You were different, you were left out, and it's not, I don't know, a bad thing to be different, and so then coming here and seeing like

everyone's different, I don't know, it's good. . . . You can be anyone [at the BGC] . . . it wouldn't matter. . . . Not everyone has the same personality, or like the same outcomes, or the same reactions to people; not everyone has, like, the same outview [*sic*] on life. . . . Being able to be myself, and just let loose and . . . grow as a person, it's nice for once.

Another participant affirmed,

[Time at the BGC is] a chance for you to be yourself and not anybody else. . . . I know that's the biggest problem in high school is everybody wants to be like [the popular] kid and that's how it goes, but . . . you're not really apart from the group [at the BGC]. You're with them; it doesn't matter who you are, what you do, or what you look like. It's all the same.

One participant described how diversity is accepted at BGC:

Some of the guys I know, they're like gay, and they come here. And then they're just like, "You know what? I don't care what people think of me, I'm just going to be me." . . . It's like [you realize], oh there's actually like other people in this world that aren't the exact same as you.

Lastly, one respondent explained how the BGC gives youth the freedom to be who they really are:

[The BGC is] an area where you can be yourself, and that's something I like. . . . It gives me more freedom to just be me, more freedom to do what I like to do, and the freedom to say no if I don't want to do a certain thing. . . . They allow you to, sort of, be yourself. If you smoke, you're allowed to smoke, and the skate program and all that; they really are out there for the youth.

The respondents acknowledged that it was acceptable to be unique at the BGC. Not everybody at the BGC had the same personality, or the same interests, yet people were not looked down upon for being different. The experiences expressed in this theme suggest that the BGC provided participants with a space where they could test out different “selves” amongst their peers and work towards establishing their personal identity.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I presented the major research themes of this study. The themes are separated into three categories related to the respondents’ experiences at BGC: social setting at the BGC, interpersonal connections, and personal development.

The first subcategory in the social setting at the BGC provided a glimpse into the day-to-day experiences of respondents at the BGC. The first theme was the presence of a positive and welcoming environment at the BGC. Respondents reported that the BGC felt like a family, providing them with the comforts of a second home, free of sexist or racist behaviour. In the second theme the respondents described the elements of the BGC that made it a fun place to visit. The respondents were able to spend time with friends, and take part in enjoyable activities that enticed them to return week after week. Third, respondents described feeling little or no judgment at the BGC, and they felt like they were a member of a cohesive group. The fourth theme demonstrated that the BGC promotes inclusiveness, and participation is open to all individuals, regardless of personal differences, such as social, racial, or religious background. In the fifth theme respondents described a feeling of safety at the BGC. Besides the rare instance in which there were threats of fighting, the respondents were confident that their emotional and physical well-

being were protected at the BGC. In the final theme of this subcategory, the respondents reported that the BGC provided a space to relax. Respondents said they were given the freedom to spend time on their own, or with just a few peers. This sense of being in an unstructured environment offered a calming, comforting space for respondents to relax.

The second subcategory described the social setting focused on respondents' experiences involving conflict and drama at the BGC. The respondents commented that conflict at the BGC was most often initiated by small groups of youth who did not mix well together, and by participants who came to BGC with the intention to start confrontations. Drama frequently followed instances of cheating in a romantic relationship or the break-up of a relationship. At the BGC, conflict was prevented most effectively when there were clearly stated rules to address confrontation, when leaders provided timely interventions into conflict and when participants were offered engaging activities. The respondents reported that conflict was often resolved before the end of the evening, and did not carry over outside the BGC. The respondents reported that youth sometimes intervened during conflict between peers, but in most cases the leaders took the lead in conflict resolution.

The third subcategory included a description of the activities at the BGC. The majority of respondents believed there were a good variety of activities at the BGC. The activities catered to many different types of youth, and participants were often able to find crafts, sports, or games that engaged several aspects of their personality. At the BGC, respondents were encouraged to engage in unfamiliar activities. By trying new activities the respondents learned new skills and were exposed to novel experiences. Respondents were also able to contribute to the development of new activities at the

BGC. Members of the Keystone group must suggest ideas for activities, but other participants were also invited to initiate activities amongst their peers. Respondents emphasized a particular interest in physical activities at the BGC. They expressed enthusiasm about the drop-in sports offered at the BGC, and for some of the respondents there was an emotional catharsis that occurred when they engaged in physical activities.

The second category of themes described the respondents' interpersonal connections. First, by observing other youth at the BGC, the respondents acknowledged that they acquired new approaches to handling their own issues. Second, respondents noted that peers initiated conversations at the BGC. For the respondents, these invitations to interact with peers represented a meaningful connection because they demonstrated that the peers wanted to include them in their social group. In the third theme, respondents described how the BGC provided an opportunity for youth to meet new peers. They were given an opportunity to expand their peer group, and interact with youth whom they may not have met outside the BGC. Fourth, respondents remarked that there was a quick transition from feeling like an outsider to forming friendships at the BGC. There were many opportunities to engage with a variety of youth, which helped the respondents choose the peers they wanted as their friends. In the fifth theme the respondents explained how their friendships from the BGC sometimes continued outside the club. In many cases, the respondents noted that their social networks outside the BGC expanded considerably as a result of the relationships they formed at the club.

The second subcategory of themes in interpersonal connections focused on interactions with leaders. The two themes that emerged in this category included relationships with leaders and guidance and advice from leaders. First, the respondents

noted that they received respect and caring from the leaders at the BGC. Often, these youth described that their relationships with leaders felt more like a friendship than a supervisor-supervisee relationship. Second, the respondents said that leaders listened to their issues and were able to offer suggestions for solving a wide range of concerns. The respondents also noted that leaders often provided a more mature perspective than their peers.

The third subcategory included themes of interpersonal connections that developed during interactions with both peers and leaders. This subcategory had six themes: social support at the BGC, teamwork and collaboration at the BGC, diversity at the BGC, a lack of bullying at the BGC, giving back to the community, and receiving recognition for positive behaviour. In the first theme respondents shared that they had received social support at the BGC. Participants acknowledged that social support was easily accessible at the BGC, and they said the youth and leaders often worked together to provide support. The second theme described teamwork and collaboration at the BGC. The respondents acknowledged that teamwork occurred most commonly during the drop-in sports. Participants noted that collaboration was an integral part of the BGC culture, and by attending the club they acquired a sense of responsibility to help others. Third, diversity at the BGC was explored. The respondents acknowledged that participants came from a variety of racial, religious, and social backgrounds. They also identified diversity in regards to the array of individuals with different interests, personalities, and clothing styles. The fourth theme addressed bullying at the BGC. For the most part, respondents stated that bullying was not a major issue at the BGC. Participants pointed to the high level of respect that people had for each other at the club, and they suggested

that this reciprocal caring usually prevented bullying. In the fifth theme respondents described how the BGC promoted giving back to the community. At the BGC, Keystone leadership team members were given the most formal opportunity to engage in community service. The respondents who engaged in community service described feeling like they were making a positive change in the community, and they expressed an increased sense of responsibility to help individuals outside the BGC. In the final theme, respondents shared their experiences receiving recognition for their positive behaviour at the BGC. In general, the respondents appreciated when they received encouraging feedback for their positive actions at the BGC. One of the respondent expressed confusion about the type of feedback he had received, but the majority of individuals were motivated by the positive recognition they were offered.

The third category of themes contains experiences that the respondents believed had an impact on their personal development. Six themes emerged in this category. In the first theme respondents described how they were able to develop self-confidence at the BGC. Within this theme the respondents identified specific activities and relational factors at the BGC that helped foster the development of self-confidence. The second theme addressed the types of coping skills that respondents developed while attending the BGC. The respondents reported that the BGC supported them in developing strategies for effectively managing difficult feelings and choosing alternative activities that helped them avoid hazardous behaviours like self-injury. In the third theme respondents described how the BGC helped promote a sense of personal responsibility in its participants. Respondents acknowledged that the BGC expected mature and responsible behaviour from the participants, and they provided examples of formal roles that allowed

youth to enhance their personal responsibility. Fourth, formal leadership at the BGC was explored. At the BGC respondents described how their experiences with formal leadership made them feel more involved in the day-to-day operation of the BGC. Following their exposure to formal leadership the respondents said that their knowledge about leadership styles had also improved. In the fifth theme respondents described their sense of independence at the BGC. There was divergence amongst the respondents in this theme. One group reported that participants were given a lot of freedom at the BGC, and the sense of independence increased their level of comfort at the club. The second group wanted more independence, especially in respects to the in-out privileges of participants. Within the final theme respondents discussed how the BGC encouraged individuality. The respondents explained that individuals were allowed to be unique at the BGC, and they noted that this invitation to express individuality made them more likely to be true to themselves at the club.

## **Chapter 5: The CASEL Model and the BGC**

Through identifying themes that emerged from the BGC youth respondents' experiences, this research developed a deeper understanding of the current aspects of youth programs that foster the development of social and emotional competencies in adolescents. In this chapter each of the core social and emotional competencies from the CASEL framework are presented individually, and evidence from the respondents' accounts of their experiences at the BGC are used to demonstrate how these skills may have been fostered at the BGC.

### **Literature Supporting the Benefits of Social and Emotional Competencies**

In the previous chapter the respondents' experiences were grouped into themes that emerged during data analysis. These themes were divided into three categories based on the primary focus of the experiences described: the social setting at the BGC, interpersonal connections, and personal development. In this chapter I place these themes within the context of the CASEL model of SEL development (CASEL, 2011) to demonstrate how the respondents' experiences at the BGC may have fostered development of the five core competencies of the social and emotional development. I begin this chapter with a review of the literature that demonstrated the importance of social and emotional development in positive outcomes for youth.

As presented in Chapter 2, Durlak et al. (2011) identified five core SEL competencies for healthy social and emotional development. The one area that has yet to be addressed fully in the literature is the specific factors that facilitate the acquisition of these competencies in a youth program setting. The connection between SEL skills and positive future outcomes does not occur in isolation, rather it is believed that social and

emotional development is “influenced by several environmental factors and systems” (Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 5). Presented in the next section are two characteristics of youth programs that promote development of the core SEL competencies.

Durlak et al. (2011) found that programs had more positive outcomes when they took place in the context of a supportive social setting and when they focused deliberately and explicitly on promoting specific social and emotional skills, such as collaborating with others and developing strategies for managing difficult emotions. In effective programs, youth were also given opportunities to apply these skills within the program setting (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al. found that efforts to promote social and emotional development were most effective when skills were “taught, modeled, practiced, and applied to diverse situations so that [individuals] use them as part of their daily repertoire of behaviors” (p. 406). Essentially, simply teaching skills is insufficient if participants are not given an opportunity to practise and develop those skills on their own.

The current study provided evidence that the BGC promoted particular social and emotional skills. Many of the themes in the personal development category were examples of particular skills that were promoted at the BGC. Specifically, respondents described the ways in which the BGC helped them develop effective coping skills, fostered personal responsibility, facilitated increased self-confidence, and promoted a greater sense of independence. Respondents also indicated that the BGC provided youth with opportunities to apply these skills. For example, respondents reported that the BGC encouraged meaningful interactions with peers and older leaders, and respondents acknowledged that this range in age groups and maturity levels allowed them to access

social support from individuals with new perspectives on their issues. The respondents also recognized the importance of diversity at the BGC, which included participants with various racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Interacting with individuals who were unlike themselves gave respondents plenty of opportunities to learn about unfamiliar values or viewpoints. Cooperation amongst members was encouraged and respondents acknowledged that this approach promoted a feeling of togetherness at the BGC. Finally, meeting new people at the BGC and having peers initiate conversations enabled youth to form and sustain meaningful relationships.

Durlak et al. (2011) suggested that a supportive social setting was the second factor that played an important role in fostering social and emotional development. It was crucial for programs that promoted social and emotional skills to be immersed in “safe, caring learning environments” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 407). Programs that combined an emphasis on teaching specific SEL skills with an opportunity for youth to practise these skills in a nurturing environment allowed participants to feel “valued, experience greater intrinsic motivation to achieve, and develop a broadly applicable set of social-emotional competencies that mediate better academic performance, health-promoting behavior, and citizenship” (p. 407).

Results from the current research suggest that the BGC provides some of the conditions necessary for the development of social and emotional skills in youth. Respondents reported that the BGC provided an inclusive and welcoming environment for participants, and that they did not feel judged at the club. Respondents also described a sense of personal safety—both physical and emotional—when they were at the club. The BGC was described as a place to have fun, and respondents recognized the

opportunity to engage in a variety of novel activities. Although conflict was present at the BGC, respondents reported that the youth and leaders implemented strategies that reduced conflict, and youth and leaders worked together to resolve altercations when they occurred. Thus, the evidence suggests that the BGC provides participants with a supportive social setting and demonstrates a deliberate focus towards promoting social and emotional skills development.

### **CASEL Core Competencies at the BGC**

The CASEL model of social and emotional development suggests there are five competencies that appear to be beneficial in supporting youth's success in school, in the community, and in life (CASEL, 2011). These "five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies" (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406) provide youth with the personal and interpersonal skills necessary to "handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically" (Mart, Dusenbury, & Weissberg, 2011, p. 38). Based on the accounts of respondents in this study, I provide evidence in this section to demonstrate how the BGC has fostered development in each of the five CASEL core competencies.

**Self-awareness.** Self-awareness is the first social and emotional competency in the CASEL model (CASEL, 2011). Self-awareness involves "accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; [and] maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence" (CASEL, 2011, para. 2). Like all the social and emotional competencies, self-awareness develops over time. In middle school youth may be expected to demonstrate the capacity to "analyze factors that trigger their stress reactions" (CASEL,

2011, para. 7). By high school, youth are expected to demonstrate the ability to analyze how their “expressions of emotion affect other people” (CASEL, 2011, para. 7).

The first aspect of self-awareness requires individuals to develop the ability to “accurately [assess] one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths” (CASEL, 2011, para. 2). One area of the BGC that may promote the participants’ awareness of their interests and values is the introduction to new activities. Respondents described that they were presented with a variety of unfamiliar activities, which they suggested helped them to determine their strongest interests. One of the respondents commented, “I learned how to slack line [at the BGC] and I turned out to be pretty good at it,” and another respondent stated that she learned a lot by “[attending] all the conferences [she had] gone to [for Keystone].” By being exposed to novel activities at the BGC, the respondents began to recognize areas of unknown strengths, and they discovered interest in areas that had never appealed to them before.

The wide selection of activities was another element of BGC that respondents reported encouraged youth to assess their current emotional state and gauge their interest before choosing an activity in which to participate. The respondents described how the variety of activities made it easier for them to choose activities that met their needs for the day. One respondent stated, “There’s a lot of different activities, so, like, different interests, you’re gonna fit in somewhere, whether it’s video games or sports, or just like, you know, sitting and relaxing.” Another respondent said, “There’s variety in pretty much everything [at the BGC] . . . [so] you get more of the youth being happier and playing the game.” These responses suggest that the activities the BGC offers to youth span an array of interest areas and cater to an assortment of energy levels and moods.

The diversity of participants at the BGC appears to be another factor that promotes the assessment of one's own values. Meeting people with different backgrounds seems to challenge the respondents to check their attitudes and biases. One of the respondents described how she learned more about her own beliefs following conversations with other members at the BGC:

When you're talking with someone [at the BGC] . . . if they say one thing and you believe in something else, you are just like, "You know what, this is how I see it [but] . . . there's other thoughts out there besides [mine]."

Individuals also described adjusting their perspectives when they learned about values that differed from their own: "If [other youth] have a different mindset on something that you feel is better for you . . . then you adapt to that new mindset, and so everyone here is taking something from somebody else, in a positive way." Based on the respondents' self-assessment of values, there is evidence that respondents were willing to adjust their values after learning more about the perspectives of others, and this was especially true when the new mindset seemed to enrich their existing values.

The BGC also encourages an assessment of one's interests and values by allowing youth to express individuality at the club. Respondents suggested that they were able to "be themselves" at the BGC, which they believe helped them develop a clearer sense of self. One respondent said, "You can be anyone [at the BGC]. . . . Not everyone has the same personality . . . or the same reactions to people. . . . [Just] being able to be myself, and . . . grow as a person." Respondents were also given opportunities to assess their interests by having the option to engage in only the activities that attracted them the most:

[The BGC is] an area where you can be yourself. . . . It gives me more freedom to just be me, more freedom to do what I like to do, and the freedom to say no if I don't want to do a certain thing.

The responses suggest that youth were given the opportunity to express individuality at the BGC and to engage in activities that were aligned with their interests. The respondents were not pressured to behave in a certain manner, which provided them with opportunities to define their personal values and work towards establishing a clear set of interests.

The second aspect of the definition for developing self-awareness skills requires individuals to maintain “a well-grounded sense of self-confidence” (CASEL, 2011, para. 2), which implies that an individual develops a positive sense of self and also recognizes limitations. In the current study the respondents emphasized that the BGC played an important role in supporting their development of self-confidence. Based on the respondents' comments, it appears that members of the BGC were given opportunities to be successful and were supported in cultivating confidence about themselves and their abilities. Respondents shared the ways in which the BGC promoted development of self-confidence. One participant stated, “I've gotten more confident I think . . . being able to come here and . . . have people tell you, like, you're really great girl. . . . [I am] more confident, more carefree, and more myself.” Another participant explained, “You sort of gain more self-esteem [at the BGC] . . . because the more [other people are] asking to do stuff, the more you realize, ‘Hey, these people like me.’” The responses also highlight particular areas of growth that respondents recognize in themselves after attending the BGC: “I've become more confident in singing and

performing. . . . I've just been able to sing in front of people without being so nervous, . . . [and] now more people know that I can sing, and I'm confident about it." The interview data indicate that youth benefitted from a number of elements at the BGC, and in particular the respondents described an increase in self-confidence when they believed their needs were met by their experiences at the BGC.

The opportunities for formal leadership seemed to be another aspect of the BGC that contributed to increased self-confidence. Formal leadership opportunities at the BGC occur mostly in the Keystone group, as members of this group are encouraged to contribute to program planning and take on additional roles around the club. The respondents outlined the positive impact of formal leadership on the youth. One participant stated, "Being able to put my own ideas in, it's been really fun. . . . Now I get to put my own ideas into what can go on [at the BGC], and [suggest] some changes to make it better." Another respondent explained, "I was told that I should go into Keystone and I said, you know, this could be my one chance to kind of help things out [at the BGC], and make a bigger difference." These responses indicate that youth are proud that their ideas matter to others at the club. The data suggested that this sense of pride inspired the respondents to feel better about themselves and to recognize their value to the BGC.

Respondents reported benefitting from receiving recognition for positive behaviour at the BGC. Individuals provided examples of instances in which they received encouraging feedback following prosocial acts: "I had a lot of positive feedback [when I handled a situation responsibly]. People were sitting there going . . . you handled it respectfully; you handled it like a man." Another respondent described how she was

recognized for taking a risk by starting a theme night at the BGC: “Me and my friend . . . came dressed like crazy things . . . and everyone was like, ‘Hey, that’s really cool.’ . . . [It feels good] that people notice me, and they want to, like, interact with me.” These responses suggest that the youth were inspired by the positive feedback because they earned recognition. From the data gathered, I believe the BGC fosters self-confidence by providing respondents with positive feedback only when they deserved recognition, rather than providing positive feedback routinely.

There appear to be two environmental factors at the BGC that respondents suggest may cultivate self-confidence. First, respondents commented that the club fosters a sense of belonging amongst the youth and the leaders. This element of the BGC appears to inspire a confidence that participants are appreciated simply for being themselves. Participants are considered worthy because they make positive decisions and treat others with respect at the BGC, unlike other settings in which they are admired for being the best player on a sports team or highest achieving student in school. Respondents expressed how this feeling of unconditional acceptance seemed to increase their sense of self-confidence: “[Spending time with other youth] makes me feel like I fit in. . . . It makes me happier, and makes me feel like I actually belong.”

The third factor at the BGC that seemed to increase self-confidence was the non-judgmental environment within the club. The interview data suggest that youth’s increase in self-confidence may result from feeling comfortable at the BGC and being able to become more authentic while attending the club. One respondent described “a sense of almost carelessness” that develops as a result of gaining the confidence that he would not be judged. Other respondents shared a similar message: “[The BGC is] not a

very judgmental place so you can just be who you are and not have everyone be staring at you constantly and hearing people whisper about you.” Another respondent said, “It’s like an enlightening experience to finally step out of the zone of labels. . . . No one really cares how you are in life; they just care that you’re there to have a good time.” These responses suggest that the BGC provides an environment that fosters a sense of security in participants. The comfort in this setting allows respondents to feel good about themselves and promotes engagement in activities that contribute to an increased sense of self-confidence.

**Self-management.** The second SEL competency is self-management, which encompasses “regulating one’s emotions to handle stress, controlling impulses, and persevering in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; [and] expressing emotions appropriately” (CASEL, 2011, para. 3). The skills included within self-management are also sometimes referred to as executive processes or executive function. Specific skills associated with executive function include: deliberate or focused planning, self-evaluation, and self-control (CASEL, 2007). Research evidence suggested that development of the executive processes intensify during adolescence and do not peak until early adulthood (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). In middle school, adolescents could be expected to “make a plan to achieve a short-term personal or academic goal” (CASEL, 2011, para. 8), whereas high school students should have developed the ability to “identify strategies to make use of available school and community resources and overcome obstacles in achieving a long-term goal” (CASEL, 2011, para. 8).

The first aspect of self-management involves “regulating one’s emotions to handle stress, controlling impulses, and persevering in overcoming obstacles” (CASEL, 2011, para. 3). The youth identified some of the ways that the BGC helps them manage their stress: “If you get into a fight [at the BGC] there’s a bunch of people that are going to go, ‘Listen, . . . I’ll tell you how to handle your stress.’” The respondents also described how the BGC helps them control impulses, specifically how to avoid potentially risky behaviours such as self-harm:

When you cut yourself it releases endorphins, makes you feel happier, but also when you throw a ball really hard, or scream into a pillow it also releases endorphins to make you feel better. . . . I would say that was something I learned at the club. . . . [The leaders] gave me a bunch of different ideas [for avoiding self-harm] to do while I was here, as well as at home, and it was very helpful.

The coping skills that respondents say they acquired at the BGC can serve as the foundation for emotion regulation and stress management skills in the future.

The respondents indicated that the BGC provides participants with a space to relax. Since relaxation is one strategy for managing stress, this element of the BGC may be important for helping youth to release tension and to regulate their emotions. The respondents described their experiences of relaxing at the BGC: “Sometimes you just need to relax . . . it’s nice to just come in [the BGC] and be able to sit, and like chill.” Another participant stated, “Coming here just relaxes me. . . . It’s like a getaway, you know, when things are just getting hard, you can just come here and you don’t worry about the stresses of life.” The respondents acknowledged the importance of having a place to escape from the pressures of their lives. The participants’ responses indicate that

youth recognize the relaxing environment at the BGC may help to reduce stress and allow them to regain the energy required to deal with challenges they face beyond the club.

The guidance that respondents received from leaders at the BGC is another factor that may contribute to the development of self-management skills. The responses suggest that when youth needed assistance, leaders offered information and coping strategies. The respondents provided examples of instances in which they received advice from the leaders: “[The leaders] like help you out all the time . . . they help you out with what’s right and what’s wrong, like, if you should do something or you shouldn’t do something.” Another respondent stated, “I was dealing with . . . ‘mental issues’ and . . . I talked about them with [one of the leaders] and he actually advised me on certain things.” The respondents indicated that youth consult with leaders at the BGC. Participants’ responses during the interviews indicated the advice youth received at the BGC was effective in helping them to deal with potential obstacles and to persevere in the face of challenges.

The second part of self-management includes developing skills required for “setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals” (CASEL, 2011, para. 3). Participants’ responses indicated that one area of the BGC that may promote an ability to set goals is the formal leadership opportunities made available to youth at the club. Participants in the Keystone leadership program are given increased responsibility in regards to ensuring that the Teen Stuff program operates efficiently. The members are asked to create activities and help enforce the rules at the BGC. Respondents described how their leadership opportunities in Keystone motivated them to contribute to the betterment of the BGC: “Being able to put my own ideas in, it’s been really fun. Because now I get to put my own ideas into what can go on here, and some changes to make [the

BGC] better.” However, none of the Keystone members explicitly stated the goals that Keystone set in regards to improving the BGC.

Respondents did not describe their personal or academic goals during the interviews. This is perhaps due to the design of the interview questions, which asked youth to report on their past experiences at the BGC, rather than describe their future objectives. However, previous literature regarding out-of-school-time programs offered evidence that goal setting and the development of goal attainment strategies are sometimes a part of community youth programs (Larson, 2000). Further research is, therefore, necessary to determine whether the BGC is effective in facilitating goal setting among participants.

The third element of self-management requires individuals to develop the ability to express “emotions appropriately” (CASEL, 2011, para. 3). For the purposes of the current study, appropriate emotional expression may occur during interactions with peers and adult leaders. The first area of the BGC that may foster development of appropriate emotional expression is youth’s access to social support from leaders. The respondents said that leaders at the BGC are willing to offer social support whenever participants need it: “[The BGC] gives you someone to talk to when you need to. . . . I can just go, ‘Hey, I need someone to talk to,’ and right away it’s a one-on-one talk.” Another respondent stated, “To come here and have like all different leaders . . . it’s good to have like a strong support system, and a lot of people need that, and like I’ve had times where I needed it too.” Participants’ responses suggested that youth recognized one-on-one support was instrumental in helping them to feel less troubled by their concerns. Furthermore, the respondents’ willingness to request assistance from leaders and peers

indicates that the youth recognize how seeking emotional support is an effective outlet for appropriate emotional expression.

The BGC also encourages participants to develop strategies that help them release emotions in a controlled manner. Specifically, respondents noted how the BGC offers activities that allow youth to manage intense feelings of anger and overwhelming sadness. One of the respondents described how the BGC provided activities that offered a substitute for angry outbursts: “[I have found] when you go play sports, like dodge ball, it’s a good way to get aggression out, without doing something very stupid.” Another respondent shared that he struggles with depression, but his time at the BGC has taught him the benefits of avoiding isolation: “[The leaders are always] trying to get you to go out there and actually do something, and interact with the other people here instead of moping on your own.” Respondents felt positive about being able to express their emotions constructively, but felt that prior to attending the BGC they may have lacked the necessary skills.

**Social awareness.** The third SEL competency is social awareness, which is defined as “being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; [and] recognizing and using family, school, and community resources” (CASEL, 2011, para. 4). Individuals with social awareness skills have the ability to acknowledge how specific situations and actions will affect others, and they demonstrate the capacity to modify their behaviour based on the needs of those around them (CASEL, 2007). Social awareness requires real-world practise in social situations, and individuals can become more socially aware over time. During middle school, youth may be able to recognize “others’ feelings and

perspectives in various situations” (CASEL, 2011, para. 9). In the high school years, adolescents become more proficient in social settings and learn to evaluate “their ability to empathize with others” (CASEL, 2011, para. 9). With this more sophisticated state of social awareness, youth are also expected to have the ability to monitor their own emotional states, in addition to the feelings of those around them (CASEL, 2011).

The first part of the definition for social awareness outlines the need for individuals to learn how to “take the perspective of and empathize with others” (CASEL, 2011, para. 3). The interview data suggest that there were two areas of the BGC that helped respondents to learn to take others’ perspectives and to develop empathy for others. First, respondents described providing support to their peers at the BGC. In these situations, providing support may have fostered the development of an individual’s skills in adopting others’ perspectives and having empathy for others. In the role of helper, the youth had to work to understand the issues presented by their peers: “Everyone here is taking something from somebody else, in a positive way. . . . Everyone has a new part of their life from just coming here that they would’ve never had.” In this role, youth implied they were also able to develop a sense of empathy: “Other people have been through things too, and I think everyone that comes here has been through something and we understand [how to support others].” Youth were exposed to how the other individuals perceived personal issues, and, as listeners, they were able to practise supporting peers through difficult times. Respondents observed how their peers handled situations, and they reported learning how to provide assistance when peers needed support.

Second, the participants’ responses that described the prevention and resolution of conflict at the BGC suggest that this part of the club may have promoted perspective-

taking skills. Respondents described how leaders wanted to hear both sides of the story when conflicts arose: “[When conflict is escalating] one of the leaders will come talk to you and get your side of the story, and then go to the other person, get their side of the story.” The practice of having both parties talk through the argument enabled respondents to understand the perspective of the other individual, and understand how to resolve the issue going forward: “[The leaders] sit both of you down and go over like what happened and why it happened and what can be done to make sure it doesn’t happen again.” Respondents reported that these meetings with leaders expose youth to another way of viewing the conflict situation, which may have enhanced their ability to avoid similar conflicts in the future.

The second element of the definition for social awareness is “recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences” (CASEL, 2011, para. 3). An element of the BGC that appeared to promote this part of social awareness was the diversity of leaders and peers. The BGC is open to anybody who chooses to attend, and there is always a mix of people of different races, religions, and opinions. Respondents implied that the variety of individuals’ backgrounds at the BGC exposes youth to new perspectives and helps them to develop empathy and understanding for others’ differing viewpoints. One of the youth explained, “Sometimes difference can lead to a different outcome. Like, if you’re getting angry at someone just for their religion or their race, maybe you should try to talk to them and learn more about it before you judge them.” The respondents stated that the wide age range of participants allowed youth to consider the perspectives of individuals with varying levels of life experience. One of the youth said, “You get a lot of wisdom from the different age groups . . . [and] you see other

perspectives and you see how other people react to different situations.” These types of responses suggest that the exposure to different perspectives contributed to a youth’s ability to consider whether he or she wanted to incorporate others’ perspectives into future planning process.

At the BGC, youth were encouraged to give back to the community. This element of the BGC may have promoted social awareness by showing the respondents that people have different abilities and opportunities from their own. The respondents noted that BGC members were often given opportunities to participate in formal community service, such as volunteering in community agencies. Respondents highlighted how community service changed their perspectives of others in the community, “[Volunteering] made me gain respect for people that don’t have everything handed to them.” The responses in this area suggested that respondents also gained a sense of responsibility to help community members in other settings: “Because people have helped you [at the BGC], like, when you go to the mall and someone needs your help with something, you just feel obliged to go help them.” The interview data concerning service to others indicate BGC youth reconsidered their position relative to others in the community and become more aware of how they could support other people in the community.

The respondents explained that there was a relative lack of bullying at the BGC. One of the youth explained, “I don’t think I’ve ever had a problem here, with getting treated with respect or like being bullied.” The participants’ responses suggested that behaviours such as teasing and threatening were actively discouraged at the BGC, “[Whenever] someone starts calling each other names . . . the leaders will try to stop it.

. . . [They] would step in, and keep [the participants] apart.” Referring to the lack of bullying at the BGC, one respondent noted, “If someone’s being bullied, or someone’s being picked on, it’s stopped right away.” The youth reported that if participants did engage in bullying they were given consequences from leaders, such as being removed from the club. The enforcement of these rules at the BGC appeared to encourage respondents to appreciate the differences between members, rather than exploiting them by teasing or discriminating against other youth.

The third component of social awareness is “recognizing and using family, school, and community resources” (CASEL, 2011, para. 3). At the BGC, participants stated that they had access to leaders who were willing to listen and provide support. As one of the respondents explained, “If you’re having a major issue, you can always go to one of the leaders . . . [and] they actually try to help you get through what’s going on.” Having open access to leaders encouraged respondents to look for supports when needed, and the respondents noted that the youth who “talked to the leaders [often] come out helped.” The respondents were aware of the support that was available at the BGC, and their responses suggested that youth did seek out help at the BGC. In addition, the respondents believe the support they received at the BGC helped them to feel better, which gave them confidence that “[the leaders are] there to listen . . . whenever you need to talk, [or] need help with something.”

The respondents also indicated that they perceived their peers to be valuable resources. Two youth explained the role that other members played in giving them ideas about how to deal with their own issues: “Since you’re around people of different age groups . . . you can sort of learn from how they deal with their stress.” Another

participant stated, “[Other youth] might have seen something that you haven’t and they might have like a different view of advice or wisdom on it.” This recognition about the value of learning from peers suggests that respondents understood how they could benefit from listening to their peers, and they made an effort to reach out to other youth as positive resources.

**Relationship skills.** Relationship skills development is the fourth competency in the CASEL model of social and emotional development (CASEL, 2011). Relationship skills development involves “establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; [and] seeking help when needed” (CASEL, 2011, para. 4). The development of relationship skills has been shown to be an important element of positive youth development. CASEL (2007) reported that youth who engaged in a program that promoted social and emotional skills displayed increased “social engagement” (p. 1), and, compared to controls who were not involved in an SEL program, these youth showed reductions in “problem [behaviours] such as drug use, violence, and delinquency” (p. 1). During middle school youth should have the ability to engage in “cooperation and teamwork to promote group-wide goals” (CASEL, 2011, para. 10). In high school, adolescents “are expected to evaluate uses of communication skills with peers, teachers, and family members” (CASEL, 2011, para. 10). Specifically, adolescents in this stage should be able to adapt the way they communicate so that it is appropriate to their relationship with the listener (CASEL, 2011).

The first element of relationship skills involves “establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation” (CASEL, 2011, para. 4). The

interview data suggested the BGC encouraged members to form relationships that were based on cooperation and teamwork. One respondent explained, “If we’re playing on the same team, you sort of lose yourself in the game and forget about rivalries, and that’s something that I like.” Another respondent described how the caring environment at the BGC promoted taking care of others: “Everyone has that mindset of the pay it forward, you know, come here and people are always doing things for you here and it’s almost like subconsciously you go do things for other people.” The participants’ responses suggested that individuals were motivated to establish mutually respectful relationships at the BGC; as a result, the youth behaved in a manner that promoted friendship.

Access to new peers was another element of the BGC that may contribute to the development of relationships skills. Clearly, an important element of forming relationships is having access to a variety of people who are potential friends. Respondents described how they quickly became acquainted with new people at the BGC: “If you wanna hang out with someone you can always meet new people [at the BGC]. . . . A lot of people you’d meet them here, you’d have common interests and you’d get to talking and . . . trusting.” The participants’ responses also suggested that youth were able to interact with peers whom they would not meet in other settings: “[Meeting people at the BGC] just like opens you up to different people other than the people that you’ve been going to school with and hanging out with since you were in kindergarten.” Another respondent stated, “Me and [my friend] would’ve never met each other because [we live] an hour apart driving . . . [but] he started coming here and now me and him are actually pretty good friends.” The study findings indicated that the BGC has successfully broadened the scope of participants’ social networks.

The interview data suggested that youth were able to form strong friendships within the context of the BGC. Reflecting upon the transition from meeting new people to forming meaningful relationships, respondents explained how they established friendships at the BGC: “Everyone here just wants to be friends with each other, and so they’d come to you and start talking to you. . . . [Soon] you would start talking more and more, and then [you] become friends.” Another respondent explained, “I started coming here with maybe three friends . . . [but, after being] been here for a while . . . I’ve got lots of friends.” The respondents reported that friendships formed at BGC feel sincere and seem to be long lasting: “[The BGC] lets me make more friends, and you know, hang out with more people [my age] . . . I don’t have to worry about pretending around them, [I] can just be myself.” Another respondent stated, “The friends that you make here, you normally keep for a long time. . . . Four of my best friends I met here, and we still hang out all the time.” In regards to developing relationship skills, the participants’ responses suggested that the BGC provides the social environment necessary for youth to establish relationships that grow into meaningful relationships over time.

The interview data indicated that connections with adult leaders may also promote relationship skills. At the BGC, leaders were encouraged to engage with the youth, and the respondents stated that they felt a strong bond to the leaders: “With the staff leaders, you respect them and they respect you. . . . They don’t judge you based on your opinions, and that’s one thing that I find no other youth group has.” Another respondent stated, “[The leaders] actually care about us. . . . [There are] lots of leaders I’m really close to, and I got a good relationship with.” The study findings indicated that the

relationships between leaders and youth provide a model for establishing and maintaining healthy relationships:

For once I have a positive role model instead of one where you're thinking, "I'm going to get into doing drugs because this person does it," or "I'm going to get into drinking because this person does it." [At the BGC] it's, "You know what, I'm going to start being nice because these people do it."

The respondents indicated that leaders at the BGC act in a manner that encourages relationships with the youth. It appears that the leaders offer more mature friendships that provide youth with the experience of being a member in responsible relationships.

The second element of relationship skills development requires individuals to develop strategies for avoiding "inappropriate social pressure" (CASEL, 2011, para. 4). The respondents' description of bullying prevention was one aspect of the BGC that seemed to promote resistance to negative social pressures. Respondents suggested that bullying exists in other settings, but at the BGC they have witnessed very little victimization between youth: "Outside of here [bullying] just goes on and on and on. . . . [But at the BGC], I'm not gonna get bullied or picked for like what I'm wearing, like how I act, [or] like my personality." Another participant stated, "Growing up . . . I got bullied a lot, nobody really talked to me. . . . [But] coming [to the BGC], there's a lot more respect for me in this building." The study findings indicated youth are encouraged to demonstrate respect for other youth at the BGC, and it appears that this sense of positive regard serves as a protective factor against bullying. Furthermore, these responses imply that the BGC provides a positive, welcoming environment in which

youth did not succumb to potential negative peer pressure to tease or intimidate their peers.

Another aspect of the BGC that may contribute to a motivation to resist negative influences was explicit recognition of the participants' positive behaviours. The participants' responses suggested that youth were motivated to engage in positive acts in order to receive an encouraging response from their peers and the leaders: "[If you] clean up, help, do positive things around the club . . . [then] every month or so you get your name in the recommendation box, and [the leaders] do a draw [for] . . . a gift card." The study findings suggested the public acknowledgement of prosocial behaviour at the BGC creates a context of treating others well and encourages caring relationships between members.

The third part of the relationship skills development suggests that individuals should become proficient at "preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict" (CASEL, 2011, para. 4). The responses suggest that conflict prevention and conflict resolution were important focal points at the BGC. The respondents stated leaders often demonstrated how to prevent conflict before it escalated:

[When conflict escalates] one of the leaders will come talk to you and get your side of the story and then go to the other person, get their side of the story. And then they'll sit both of you down and go over like what happened and why it happened, and what can be done to make sure it doesn't happen again.

The BGC provided all members with a set of guidelines that were designed to reduce conflict. On their first visit, members were required to agree to the *BGC Standards for Participation* (Boys and Girls Clubs of Lethbridge, n.d.; see also Appendix

A). These behavioural guidelines include treating others with respect, being a positive role model, and demonstrating a positive attitude (Boys and Girls Clubs of Lethbridge, n.d.). One of the respondents described her perspective on the impact of these guidelines:

If you do anything, like, let's just say try to start a conflict, you're out for the rest of the night, and I find that helpful because maybe that's a lesson saying you don't do that in a public place. . . . It just teaches them, and then when they grow up like 17, 18 [years old] they learn, and then they know better.

Participants explained that when conflict escalated from verbal threats to confrontations, BGC had strategies to deal with it. The respondents stated that the leaders often intervened and resolved conflict very quickly. Participants implied leaders' responses helped them to learn how to play a role in preventing and resolving conflict at the BGC. Respondents described the conflict resolution strategies that they have acquired at the BGC:

Before I started coming here, I would deal with drama through acts of violence, and I didn't much like it. . . . As I started coming here more, I learned that in order to deal with stuff, sometimes you have to just talk about it and deal with it. . . . You sort of learn how to deal with drama and issues with others, and how to deal with it in a positive way instead of fighting.

Another respondent stated,

Normally, I wouldn't go and just confront somebody and tell them to stop doing something, but now . . . that I have a little bit more authority [within the Keystone group] . . . I feel confident [stepping in]. . . . Everybody [is] supposed to respect

each other, and when that doesn't happen somebody's gotta try and stop it, and either break it up, or try to get them to talk it out.

Participants' responses in this section suggested that respondents were given support in resolving conflicts, and it appears the participants had become more proficient at resolving issues on their own. After learning effective conflict resolution strategies, respondents reported feeling more confident settling conflict on their own, and they were less hesitant to intervene in conflicts.

The fourth aspect of relationship skills development required individuals to engage in "seeking help when needed" (CASEL, 2011, para. 4). Respondents mentioned that leaders and peers provided social support whenever they needed to talk. The respondents often highlighted the social support of leaders in particular, and they described how the help from adults at the BGC changed their outlook on the challenging issues in their lives. One participant stated,

I've had several occasions where I just talk to a leader, like they sit down [and say], "Oh hi," and I just say, "I'm not so good," [and they reply], "Oh do you wanna talk about it?" [Then I'll say], "Sure." . . . Like, you can just talk about it, you know. It's a good thing.

Another respondent explained,

[One time], I pulled one of the [leaders] aside and we talked and it helped out. . . . They were there for me, and I felt reassured almost that, you know, it wasn't my fault, that you know, things happen you can't help that.

Participants' responses indicated that the youth are willing to approach leaders when they need help and that the assistance was valuable for the respondents. The

respondents reported that leaders listen attentively and they believe their concerns genuinely matter to the leaders. The respondents explained that they also receive support from peers at the BGC: “Everybody works as a team just to make that one person happy again, and they . . . give them a hug, or talk to them, or go outside and that’s usually better.” Another participant reported, “If you need to talk about having a bad day you can talk to one of your friends . . . I’m sure if I ever needed to talk, or anything, some of [the other youth] would be there.” Participants reported receiving social support from both peers and leaders. The BGC seems to provide a setting in which youth are comfortable seeking help from a variety of sources, and participants’ responses revealed that the quality of support they received motivated them to continue to seek help in the future.

The respondents described how they appreciated receiving advice, and instructions from the more mature leaders at the BGC:

The more you talk, the more that [the leaders] understand from your point of view, and they can sort of go, . . . “I’ve been there, I know how to help you.” . . .

It helps a lot, because when you’re a youth, you don’t really know what to do, and to be able to talk to someone who’s a little older, has a little more experience with the problem, it teaches you a lot.

As the respondents gained more insight from their conversations with the leaders, it seems they also became more comfortable seeking out the advice of the leaders: “[The leaders are] not the type of people where it’s in one ear, out the other. They actually try to help you get through what’s going on.”

Research has shown that adolescents identify their peers, more than any other group of potential supports (e.g., parents, teachers, or counsellors), as the primary target

of help-seeking behaviours (Boldero & Fallon, 1995). Although, peer support was acknowledged as an important element of the BGC, respondents considered the guidance from leaders to be of higher quality than advice from peers: “If you need to talk about something more serious, you can talk to someone who’s older and can probably help.” Another respondent stated, “If you’re having a major issue, you can always go to one of the leaders.” These responses indicated that youth are eager to seek out guidance from leaders, and it appears the advice they received often contributed to more positive outcomes for the youth.

Another factor that the respondents noted contributed to their willingness to ask for guidance from the leaders was the openness that leaders demonstrated about sharing their own struggles:

Even some of [the leaders] have had problems in the past; some were drinking, some were doing drugs . . . it goes to show that if you want to change your life around for the better, you can. . . . If you want to find the right way to live your life, all you got to do is listen to . . . the leaders, and they’ll tell you how to live a happy life.

Respondents indicated that leaders’ openness encouraged youth to see leaders as dependable sources for obtaining information. The study findings revealed that trust between the leaders and youth also contributed to the help-seeking behaviour: “I know all the leaders by name. I know who most of them really are, talk to them a lot, learn about their lifestyles, [and] what they do with their life.” The bond between the youth and leaders seemed to increase the likelihood that the respondents would seek out guidance,

and the data suggested that these relational factors also made it more likely that the youth would actually follow leaders' advice.

**Responsible decision-making.** The fifth competency in the CASEL framework is responsible decision-making, which includes

making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; [and] contributing to the well-being of one's school and community. (CASEL, 2011, para. 5)

Decision-making skills develop with age (CASEL, 2011) and typically evolve during adolescence. In middle school youth should demonstrate an ability to “evaluate strategies for resisting peer pressure to engage in unsafe or unethical activities” (CASEL, 2011, para. 11). High school students live within a more sophisticated social world; thus, youth in this stage should be able to look ahead in their life and evaluate how their current decisions affect “their college and career prospects” (CASEL, 2011, para. 11).

The first aspect of responsible decision-making involves “making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions” (CASEL, 2011, para. 6). The data gathered suggested that youth perceive leaders at the BGC to be willing to provide guidance and advice to the members of the club. When considering the outcomes of the advice that they had received, respondents acknowledged that the leaders usually offered a mature perspective on situations, which the youth found beneficial in their decision-

making processes. One respondent shared how guidance from leaders assisted her in solving important issues:

[Advice from leaders] helps a lot, because when you're a youth, you don't really know what to do. . . . To be able to talk to someone who's a little older, [and] has a little more experience with the problem; it teaches you a lot.

Participants' responses also suggested that leaders sometimes helped the youth consider ethical considerations associated with their decisions: "[The leaders] help you out with what's right and what's wrong, like, if you should do something or you shouldn't do something." Respondents indicated that they receive guidance from leaders that encourages them to consider the possible long-term consequences of issues they are facing. The study findings revealed that leaders are competent problem solvers, provide support to youth, and challenge youth to reflect upon how their decisions fit with their own personal values and ethics.

The interview data suggested that other youth sometimes played a role in the respondents' decision-making processes as well. Respondents described how, at times, peers provided specific advice about an issue, and youth also learned new problem-solving approaches by observing the actions of their peers:

You get a lot of wisdom from the different age groups. . . . The younger kids can sort of . . . have a role model from the older kids. . . . If you want to find the right way to live your life, all you got to do is listen to the youth.

Another participant stated,

I think it's good to have older people that you can go to. . . . They might have gone through something different, or . . . they might have seen something that you haven't . . . [and it is] like a different view of advice or wisdom on it.

Respondents reported that youth gained insights from the experiences of their peers that would help them make informed decisions. These findings indicated that youth are looking for ways to improve their decision-making skills, and they seem to be aware that their peers are a good source of information. One of the factors in responsible decision-making involves taking one's social norm into consideration (CASEL, 2011), and study findings revealed that the BGC provides youth with an opportunity to identify social norms and incorporate these norms into their decision-making process.

Some of the respondents described how the BGC helped them to develop strategies for managing the expression of emotions and controlling impulses. One of the respondents stated that he learned how physical activities were a more constructive choice than violence for releasing anger: “[I have found] when you go play sports, like dodge ball, it's a good way to get aggression out, without doing something very stupid.” Another respondent shared her thoughts about how strong feelings of sadness could progress to self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts, if not dealt with properly:

[The leaders] really make me see the better side of things . . . [and] that's always a good way to go because some [negative] things lead to depression, depression leads to feeling bad about yourself, which leads to self-harm most of the time. . . . If it gets to that point where it leads to self-harm, it could also lead to suicide, so . . . getting all of it out [through talking], it just feels good.

Participants' responses suggested that youth were often able to identify the long-term consequences of their behaviours, and this foresight allowed them to avoid impulsive decisions. The data revealed that the BGC promotes the consideration of consequences by encouraging youth to think about all possible outcomes before engaging in risky behaviours. Respondents reported feeling supported when making healthy decisions in the context of the club. This positive reinforcement may be another factor that motivates participants to engage in more responsible decision-making.

The second aspect of responsible decision-making involves learning how to apply "decision-making skills to academic and social situations" (CASEL, 2011, para. 5). In this study, respondents reported that attending the BGC had impacted their decision-making skills in social situations. The focus that the BGC placed on preventing and resolving conflict seemed to have the most lasting impact on choices youth made in the context of peers. Respondents described that leaders often initiated conflict resolution and encouraged youth to "talk it out", rather than resorting to violence. When conflict did escalate, respondents explained how leaders walked them through a set of steps on how to avoid similar escalation of conflict in the future. Specifically, respondents explained that leaders separated the individuals involved in the conflict; spoke to them individually, and then brought them back together to open a dialogue between the youth:

Leaders try to deal [with issues] as quickly and quietly as [they] can. . . . That's probably the best way to deal with [issues, because] then you don't have people fighting about it, and . . . you avoid the confrontation . . . [or] people trying to take the other people's side.

Another participant reported, “Whenever something [confrontational] breaks out . . . the leaders will try to stop it . . . and talk to [the participants] about it. . . . [Then] they bring them back together and try to get them to talk it out.”

Participants’ responses suggested that youth were familiar with the leaders’ common practices for conflict resolution. The techniques leaders applied were relatively effective, which in turn inspired the respondents to improve their own conflict resolution strategies.

Respondents noted that their peers did play a role in conflict resolution at the BGC, and there is evidence to suggest that youth may have applied the leaders’ suggestions for how to intervene in confrontations:

[There have been] a couple fights with drama between the youth, where you know, the fellow youth will break it up before the leaders get there, and everyone’s like, “Okay, talk it out, talk it out.” It’s much better to talk it out than to do something violent, because if you do something violent, it’s not going to get you anywhere.

The interview data gathered suggested that the respondents were interested in learning how to handle conflict more effectively, and the influence of the leaders at the BGC provided youth with skills that they could employ when they encountered altercations between individuals.

The third element of developing responsible decision-making skills requires individuals to be “contributing to the well-being of one’s school and community” (CASEL, 2011, para. 5). The BGC staff who run the Teen Stuff drop-in program expect responsible behaviour from participating youth members. Leaders discouraged actions

that threatened personal safety or the safety of others, and these guidelines were presented to all youth when they signed the *BGC Standards for Participation* (Boys and Girls Clubs of Lethbridge, n.d.; see also Appendix A) during their first visit to the BGC. Participants' responses suggested that the social norm within the club encourages individuals to consider how their behaviour will impact their peers, the leaders, and the BGC property. The respondents expressed that the youth and leaders often work together to promote responsible choices at the BGC, and two of the respondents shared specific examples of responsible decision-making in the club. The first respondent stated,

Someone vandalized the van outside with Vaseline, and other [youth] they were like, "Oh we didn't do it, but we'll go and clean it up." . . . That's a major part of responsibility. . . . If we don't take care of [the BGC], they're going to stop Teen Stuff, so it's showing that other people want to continue to come here.

Another respondent explained,

You can sort of build on cleaning up after yourself because, you know, someone else might want to play something different. . . . It's been sort of promoted, because . . . some of the staff will say you're not going to be able to play this game until your clean up your last one.

The BGC appears to encourage responsible decision-making by communicating that responsible choices were a requirement for attending the club. Participants' responses indicated that youth recognize that they must continue to make responsible decisions to ensure that the BGC remains open to youth, and this motivates them to choose actions that sustain the prosocial environment at the BGC.

The data suggested that youth at the BGC are presented with opportunities to contribute to the well-being of the community beyond the BGC by engaging in volunteer activities outside of the club. The Keystone leadership group organizes volunteer opportunities that allow youth to interact directly with members of the public. Two members of Keystone shared their experiences of supporting the community: “Keystone as a whole actually has an obligation to do [community service]. [We are] giving back to the community . . . [and] promoting positive change.” Another participant stated,

[Keystone helped with] Pink Shirt Day, or Anti-bullying Day. We went out to stores and we tried to get them to put a bunch of pink stuff around the store to support anti-bullying, and then give a prize to whoever won. . . . At the Home and Garden Show, we were selling raffles for a patio set to raise money for [the BGC] so that [the programs] can continue to happen.

The study findings indicated that BGC youth are willing to engage in community service and understand the importance of their role in contributing to positive outcomes within the community. The data revealed that the BGC exposes youth to the benefits that come from helping others, and youth recognize how much they can offer to the community.

Respondents indicated that the BGC also gives youth opportunities to support the well-being of the club community, including all of youth and leaders who attend the club. Specifically, youth in the Keystone group are required to take on additional duties during the Teen Stuff drop-in program to ensure that the club operates efficiently. Amongst their responsibilities, Keystone members are asked to design and implement new activities, and they are encouraged to enforce club rules. The responses imply that these

responsibilities had an influence on the types of choices that these youth made while at the BGC. Two respondents described how their positions in the Keystone group impacted their decision-making processes: “I’m part of Keystone so I have to, like, enforce the rules . . . and I can’t go against the rules because that just . . . makes Keystone look bad.”

Having this [Keystone] name tag you gotta tell people not to swear . . . and enforce the rules. . . . Before we got the nametags, I used to be like, “Hey, watch your language,” and then [the other youth would] just swear at me again. . . . Now when I say it, they’re like, “Oh, I’m sorry.” . . . It means a lot to me because it makes me feel like people actually listen to me now.

Respondents’ revealed that youth who are given additional duties during the Teen Stuff drop-in gain a greater awareness about the operation of the BGC. These respondents recognized that they are in a position of authority, and they adjusted their decision-making accordingly. Participants’ responses indicated that the formal leadership opportunities offered to youth at the BGC increase their sense of responsibility and these roles inspire them to carefully consider the type of behaviours that are necessary to contribute to the well-being of the community at the BGC.

### **Summary**

The chapter began with a description of two elements that have been shown to be necessary for successful SEL programs: (a) deliberate focus on promoting social and emotional skills, and (b) an opportunity to practice these skills in a supportive environment. For the remainder of the chapter I provided evidence from the research themes to demonstrate how the BGC may foster social and emotional skills in each of the

five SEL competencies from the CASEL model (CASEL, 2011). In Chapter 6, the discussion of the results will shift towards the significance of this research in out-of-school time theory and practice in community youth programs. I will also present potential limitations and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusions

The goal of this study was to identify specific elements of youth's experiences at the BGC that appear to support the development of social and emotional skills. This was accomplished by conducting interviews with 10 respondents who regularly attended the BGC. These youth were asked to reflect on their experiences at the BGC and describe aspects of the program that were most meaningful for them. This chapter presents the implications of the research, potential limitations, and suggestions for future research.

### Implications of the Research

The results of this study have implications for the theory of social and emotional development in the context of youth programs that run outside of school times. I also specify practical implications for onsite leaders, future planning in community youth programs, and counsellors working with adolescents in therapy.

**Implications for theory.** Durlak and Weissberg (2007) acknowledged the need for future research to focus on identifying specific factors of out-of-school-time programs that were associated with positive outcomes. Previous research has been important in measuring the impact of community youth programs on the development of particular skills, such as giving and receiving feedback and emotion regulation (Benson et al., 2004; Gullone et al., 2010). However, the specific factors that promote positive development have not been identified.

The current study addressed this issue by highlighting particular elements of a youth program that participants considered most important to their personal development. Through gathering in-depth perspectives of participants from the BGC, this study provided well-defined features of a community youth program that contribute to

beneficial outcomes, and the results present a wide range of developmental outcomes that respondents experienced during their participation in a youth program. These results are also linked to the acquisition of skills within the individual social and emotional competencies, which is a connection that will provide greater insight into the role of community youth programs in future positive developmental outcomes.

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, the respondents mentioned four elements of the BGC most often related to the development of the CASEL (2011) SEL competencies. First, receiving and offering social support was particularly important to youth's development of social awareness skills. Providing social support to peers helped the respondents learn to take the perspective of others and to develop empathy for the struggles of their peers. Leaders' willingness to listen and provide support was another factor that facilitates the development of social awareness. Respondents identified leaders as important resources, and they felt confident approaching leaders with their issues at the BGC. Social support at the BGC also contributes to the development of self-management and relationship skills. Participants' responses indicated that youth appreciate how social support helped them feel better about their issues, and they received support to develop appropriate emotional outlets for their concerns. The respondents also reported that the BGC was a setting in which they felt comfortable seeking support from a variety of sources, and the easy access to social supports motivated these youth to consider seeking help in the future.

Second, acquiring successful coping skills helped facilitate the development of the CASEL (2011) self-management and responsible decision-making competencies. The respondents explained that the BGC helps them manage their emotions better by

suggesting strategies for controlling impulses, handling stress, and avoiding potentially risky behaviours such as self-harm. The interview data suggested that the BGC also promotes a consideration of safety concerns and possible consequences by encouraging participants to consider the potential outcomes of their decisions before engaging in risky behaviours. For instance, respondents managed feelings of anger by engaging in physical activities and chose stress-relieving activities when they felt an urge to self-harm. Participants' responses indicated that leaders and peers support the youth in making healthy decisions in the context of the BGC.

Third, engaging in formal leadership opportunities contributes to the development of the CASEL (2011) self-awareness, responsible decision-making, and self-management competencies. In regards to developing self-awareness, respondents are given opportunities to play a role in improving the BGC through formal leadership within the club. As the respondents gained more insight into the operation of the BGC, they began to recognize how their ideas matter at the club, and they reported feeling an increased sense of value at the BGC. Participants' responses also suggested that youth enhance their responsible decision-making skills by engaging in community service. The data indicated the BGC exposes youth to the benefits of helping others, and through practicing formal leadership the youth begin to understand the role they play in contributing to positive outcomes within the community. Participants' responses indicated that youth also develop self-management skills when they are given increased responsibility within the BGC. The respondents stated that they feel a sense of obligation to improve the BGC, and through the Keystone group youth are able to contribute to the effective operation of the Teen Stuff program. Although it appears that the respondents were

interested in bettering the BGC, they did not describe specific goals for how to improve the club. This area of self-management skills development was predicted by the literature (Larson, 2000), but did not emerge in this research. The respondents acknowledged that they wanted to improve the BGC, but they did not spontaneously identify that the BGC contributed to goal setting, so further research is required in this area.

Fourth, developing conflict prevention and resolution strategies helped facilitate the development of social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Participants' responses indicated that BGC youth were encouraged to practice perspective-taking skills during conflict resolution. BGC leaders modelled how to listen to both sides of a confrontation, and this exposure to another way of viewing the conflict situation (i.e., the other member's perspective) helped respondents improve their social awareness. CASEL (2011) suggested that an important aspect of relationships skills development is the ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts. At the BGC, youth are required to follow a set of behavioural guidelines that discourage conflict, and participants' responses suggested youth also acquired strategies to prevent and resolve conflicts between peers. In regards to responsible decision-making, respondents indicated that leaders often initiate conflict resolution by asking youth to "talk it out", rather than resort to physical aggression. Respondents found the conflict resolution techniques leaders used to be effective, and this inspired participants to engage in responsible decision-making by integrating the leaders' tactics into their conflict resolution strategies.

**Implications for youth development in a Canadian setting.** This research also added to the existing literature about developmental outcomes from out-of-school-time

programs in Canada. The majority of research looking at social and emotional development in the context of community youth programs has been performed in the United States (e.g., Arbreton et al., 2009; Catalano et al., 2004; Dworkin et al., 2003; Larson et al., 2004; Larson et al., 2006). Schonert-Reichl (2007) provided the first study in Canada linking out-of-school-time activities and youth development. The current study added to the relatively lean body of knowledge on the social and emotional benefits of participation in community youth programs in Canada. The results of this study allow for the consideration of similarities and differences in results from studies conducted with youth in out-of-school-time programs in American settings. Given the importance of this type of research in understanding the role of community programs in fostering social and emotional development, this study also expanded the scope of community youth program research to include Canadian locations. This research may represent a small step forward towards inviting future research about social and emotional development in Canadian youth programs.

**Implications for practice.** The results of this study have implications for both onsite leaders, and administrative staff involved in program planning. I also discuss implications for the planning of youth programs and implications for counsellors in this section.

***Implications for onsite leaders.*** Staff and volunteers in community youth programs are provided with a variety of focus areas that respondents reported were particularly significant to their experiences at the BGC. At the BGC, leaders usually begin volunteering without any training in counselling skills (e.g., non-judgmental listening skills and suicide prevention training), or previous experience working with

youth. Given that youth programs often recruit volunteers from the community, rather than looking specifically for trained professionals, this is likely a similar experience for volunteers in youth programs across Canada and the United States. As a result, new volunteers often express hesitation or doubt about the best way to initiate interactions with participants (J. Schellenberg, personal communication, September 20, 2013). The following potential areas of emphasis are based on the important elements of the program identified by respondents in this study:

- initiating conversations with youth,
- acknowledging when a participant displays positive behaviour, and
- offering readily available access to social support.

In practice, these focus areas provide new leaders with some ideas for reliable starting points for types of interactions that were most beneficial for promoting social and emotional development in this study. Considering the implications for training future volunteers, the focus areas could be incorporated into a leaders' handbook. This training tool could be given to new staff and volunteers, and it could highlight some of the areas that have been identified as the most important for establishing meaningful relationships with youth. Providing volunteers with a better understanding about how to initiate meaningful conversations with youth would immediately enable leaders to be more confident in their new role.

For leaders who have already established trusting relationships with participants, the results of this study provides recommendations for guiding more deliberate interventions with participants, such as leading discussions about feelings of depression or self-harm. In this study, several respondents reported that they struggled with mental

health concerns. In each case the respondent acknowledged the critical role of leaders in helping them develop coping skills, such as playing sports to manage difficult emotions and engaging in alternative behaviours to self-harm. Considering the importance that the respondents placed on this aspect of their interactions with leaders, the BGC should provide staff and volunteers in youth programs with guidelines for referring youth to mental health resources in the community and all leaders should attend training on suicide prevention.

The results of this study provide leaders with greater insight into the types of interventions that were found to be most beneficial for youth in these programs. Respondents appreciated receiving advice from the leaders, and they acknowledged that the leaders often provided a more mature perspective on their issues. For example, respondents described how leaders gave them guidance about ways to settle disagreements with friends or handle the end of romantic relationships. The findings indicated participants placed the leaders in the role of mentor. Considering the positive impact that leaders could have in this role, staff and volunteers should be encouraged to listen for opportunities to share their own experiences during conversations with participants. Knowing that youth are willing to receive guidance from leaders presents an ideal opportunity for staff and volunteers to provide youth with appropriate community resources or facilitate a systematic approach to decision making.

***Implications for the planning of youth programs.*** In this section I provide administrative staff with recommendations on how to design programs that are the most effective in fostering development of social and emotional competencies in youth. Future programs should apply the results of this study to highlight specific target strategies that

were found to be the most meaningful for respondents during their time at the BGC. Whitlock (2004) suggested an effective approach to organizing recommendations for program enhancement and highlighted 13 “ACTion items” (p. 8) that were the most important “strategic recommendations” (p. 8) based the research summarized in the report. One of Whitlock’s ACTion items was to “promote linkages between school and community to promote/facilitate learning partnerships” (p. 8). Whitlock’s ACTion items are effective because each item is stated concisely, yet it clearly outlines the focus area. Considering the results of this study, I have identified four potential ACTion areas for promoting social and emotional development in community youth programs: (a) cultivate a welcoming, nonjudgmental environment; (b) offer a variety of fun, novel activities; (c) prevent conflict through clearly stated and enforceable standards of participant behaviour; and (d) provide opportunities for interactions that facilitate meaningful connections between youth, their peers, and the leaders.

ACTion items may be condensed to fit on a single page, which would allow for copies to be displayed around the building. This is an effective method for communicating with a number of stakeholders (i.e., staff, volunteers, and contract employees offering specific programs) all at one time. These items could also be used to build a connection between youth programs and the larger community. For instance, these ACTion items could be applied as a set of guidelines within educational workshops with families and school personnel. If a need for parent or teacher training arises in a community, these ACTion guidelines would be beneficial for highlighting the most important strategies that appear to promote social and emotional development in youth.

*Implications for counsellors.* The results of this study provide some direction for counsellors who want to promote social and emotional development in their adolescent clients. Since this study was conducted in a relatively unstructured, nontherapeutic group setting, these suggestions are not focused on specific interventions. Instead, these recommendations are designed to provide counsellors with a better understanding of areas that are important for social and emotional development, and the information presented provides counsellors with information about adolescent development that they may consider as they prepare for future work with youth clients.

The first important element of promoting social and emotional development is to provide youth with a welcoming environment and to foster emotional safety. Although this is an area that is considered important for counselling with all clients, the results from this study indicated that youth are particularly sensitive to their environment and are much more receptive to the influence of adults' intervention when they feel comfortable within their environment. In the counselling setting, these results suggest that counsellors allow extra time for building rapport with an adolescent client before beginning therapy. Counsellors should also clearly explain anonymity and limits to confidentiality (e.g., disclosures about suicidal ideation, and harm to self and other people) prior to beginning therapy to protect against a perceived breach of trust if the counsellor is required to break confidentiality. Providing a safe environment for adolescent clients offers the setting necessary to foster social and emotional skills development in therapy.

These results also have implications for counsellors in a school setting. As school counsellors have regular contact with youth they are in an ideal position to facilitate a deliberate focus towards fostering social and emotional development in students. In this

study, respondents described the importance of relationships with leaders, and they mentioned that these connections were particularly meaningful when the leader demonstrated genuine caring and expressed empathy towards the challenges of adolescence. Shifting to a setting outside a youth program, these findings suggest that school counsellors should make an effort to take on the role of a supportive, caring adult in the lives of these youth. The support role that counsellors adopt also allows them to provide youth with a dependable community resource, which would grant the counsellor greater knowledge about the areas that are troubling students. If creating connections between the students and community supports is not already a part of a counsellor's role within the school, school counsellors should also facilitate referrals to community resources, such as local counselling agencies or 24-hour distress lines.

In developing a trusting relationship with students, counsellors have the ability to teach youth specific coping strategies. In the results of the current study, respondents acknowledged the personal significance of the coping skills they acquired at the BGC. Counsellors have the ability to provide similar skills for students within the school setting. Although some school counsellors may already teach strategies for handling the challenges of adolescence (e.g., how to handle bullying), I suggest that teaching these strategies should be made a mandatory component of the counsellor's duties within their school. Coping skills could be taught in one-on-one meetings between the counsellor and student or the school could offer workshops for groups of students focusing on specific strategies. This type of explicit skill-based instruction could be integrated into existing Career and Life Management classes in the secondary school curriculum, and these skills

would be beneficial in the development of self-management and responsible decision-making competencies in the students.

### **Limitations**

Five limitations constrained this research and warrant recognition. First, I conducted the research with participants from only one program at the BGC in a mid-sized Western Canadian city. Although, I believe that the respondents represented a reliable sample of participants from the Teen Stuff youth program at this BGC site, it must be acknowledged that their experiences may not be characteristic of the experiences for all youth participants in the BGC nationwide. The sample size of 10 respondents was also relatively small, which was another factor that potentially limited the ability to generalize findings beyond participants at the club where this research was conducted. A larger sample size would have provided more opportunity to capture a greater diversity of participant experiences. I designed this study to gather an array of respondents' experiences from the participants at one specific BGC site; therefore, I expect that these experiences will resonate with the experiences of participants from clubs across Canada.

The age range of respondents was another potential limitation in this research, as the male respondents were generally older than the female respondents; therefore, it is challenging to determine whether the variations in reported developmental outcomes was due to gender differences, age differences, or perhaps a combination of both factors. The uneven distribution of 16-year-old respondents across genders was also a limitation. In this sample all three 16-year-old respondents were female. Even though this gender spread closely mirrored the actual population of youth at the BGC, the distribution of the

sample made it impossible to compare findings for 16-year-olds BGC members across genders.

Two potential limitations arose from my dual role as researcher and volunteer at the BGC selected as the research site. First, many of the respondents described the positive role of leaders in their time at the BGC, and, as the researcher, I was mindful of the possibility that respondents may have mentioned the benefits of leaders because they wanted to please me as a leader. To protect against this potential limitation, the respondents were reminded before each interview that my roles as a researcher and as a leader were separate, and that I was interested in hearing about both positive and negative elements of their experiences. Respondents were also assured that their responses would not be shared directly with any other leaders at the club. It is believed that the respondents understood my different roles, and when the respondents did mention leaders they were able to provide specific examples to support their statements about the benefits of leaders.

Second, during the interviews I noted that I occasionally agreed with statements from the respondents. For instance, I found that it was encouraging to learn that respondents identified areas of personal growth during their time at the BGC. Revisiting the notes written in my research journal following each interview, I recognized that I sometimes felt a sense of gratification knowing that my role as a leader may have played a part in providing a rewarding environment for these youth at the BGC. In order to avoid guiding the respondents towards these types of responses, I intentionally avoided affirming statements such as “right” or “good” when conducting the interviews. I also made an effort to use probes such as “tell me more about . . .” or “please elaborate on

...” to collect greater detail about the respondents’ perceptions, rather than revealing my personal perspective.

Finally, this study was only intended to gather participants’ perceptions of social and emotional development as reported by the youth respondents. Since there was no reliable measure for gauging developmental change, the study relied solely on respondents’ descriptions of change within themselves. Gathering the youth perspective was a primary research objective, yet it must also be recognized that the accounts presented within this thesis are not objective truths. As a result, the subjective nature of interpretations represented a limitation within this research.

### **Future Research**

This study revealed several opportunities for future research. First, some of the recommendations for future research arose from limitations in the current research. The current research was limited to a sample of respondents from one BGC site. Future research has the potential to extend beyond a single site, and there are possibilities to broaden the scope of focus to include youth from diverse backgrounds. Future inquiries could collect perspectives of other key figures in the development of social and emotional skills in youth, such as adult leaders in community programs and community counsellors, to better understand their attitudes towards fostering social and emotional development in adolescents.

The current research limited the scope of study to one location. In considering future research, a larger and more diverse sample of respondents would allow for greater understanding of the specific factors that foster social and emotional development in youth. Specifically, recruiting respondents from different BGC sites in Alberta, or other

parts of Canada, would increase the ability to generalize the findings. A larger scope of focus would also provide greater insight into differences that exist between locations, such as large cities versus small towns. Future research could also target subgroups of participants in community youth programs. Considering the population of youth at the BGC that served as the research site, two groups that warrant further investigation are Aboriginal participants and at-risk youth (i.e., youth who are homeless, live in a poor home environment, or are engaging in drug abuse or other risky behaviours). Individuals in these groups could require different services than the majority of participants, and further research would enhance researchers', club staff's, and counsellors' understanding about the specific factors that influence social and emotional development in a more diverse pool of participants.

Future research could also study the development of social and emotional competencies from the perspective of adult leaders. Previous research has considered the role of adults in fostering positive youth development (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2004; Larson et al., 2005), but it would be revealing to utilize one-on-one interviews to better understand the intentionality of leader's actions in regards to the development of social and emotional skills in youth participants. In this study respondents placed an emphasis on the beneficial role of leaders in fostering their development. In future research it would be valuable to follow up with leaders to gauge how much these adults actually know about promoting positive youth development and to determine whether adult leaders were deliberate in providing support that promotes social and emotional competencies.

Considering future research beyond the setting of youth program, counsellors represent another important stakeholder group with a role in fostering social and emotional competencies that would be worthy of future study. Counsellors who work closely with adolescents, either in schools or community agencies, are in an ideal position to support the development of social and emotional competencies. Consequently, future research could explore counsellor's knowledge about social and emotional skills, and investigate whether these helping professionals purposefully instil these skills in their youth clients. Learning more about counsellors' attitudes towards promoting social and emotional skills in youth would be a step towards building supportive community networks that include youth programs and helping professionals in the community.

This study provided a variety of factors that helped youth foster social and emotional competencies. In future research it would be interesting to gather more information about individual factors that promoted positive youth development and to determine how these specific qualities work in fostering social and emotional development. For example, interactions with peers were found to be an important aspect of the respondents' time at the BGC, yet in this study the role of these peer associations in social and emotional development was not explored further. Asking youth to identify their closest friends in the youth program and learning more about these friendships may provide clarity about the beneficial qualities of meaningful peer relationships in youth programs.

Another area that seems worthy of further study is the connection that emerged between physical activities and coping skills. In this study two respondents acknowledged the stress-relieving benefits of engaging in sports, especially in relation to

managing difficult emotions and avoiding self-harm. In future research it would be worth exploring whether this connection between sports and coping is present in other settings, or whether this finding was unique to only the two youth who reported this association in their interviews. In addition, it would be interesting to identify the specific elements of sports that enabled these individuals to handle difficult emotions. Specifically, it would be worth investigating whether sports were simply a distraction from these feelings, in which case other activities would be equally effective, or alternatively whether there were identifiable physiological or psychological effects that provided relief from difficult emotions. Answers to these questions may provide insight for planning future youth programs, particularly for programs serving at-risk youth.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the interview data, categories of experiences at the BGC were identified that appeared to foster the development of social and emotional competencies. First, respondents described how the social setting at the BGC provided a nonjudgmental environment that allowed youth to feel welcome and provided a sense of belonging and personal safety. Second, the responses suggested that youth also engaged in interpersonal connections with both their peers and the adult leaders. Some of the benefits they derived from these interactions included meeting new peers, developing strong friendships, receiving social support, and forming relationships with leaders. Third, individuals implied that they achieved personal growth while attending the BGC. Respondents described how they participated in activities that allowed them to express their individuality, gave them opportunities to give back to the community, taught them effective coping skills, and cultivated an increased sense of self-confidence. Based on

the data gathered, the youths' experiences at the BGC fostered development in all five competencies from the CASEL (2011) framework of social and emotional development. The four elements of the BGC that were mentioned most often in relation to the development of SEL competencies included receiving and offering social support, acquiring successful coping skills, engaging in formal leadership opportunities, and developing conflict prevention and resolution strategies.

This study contributes to existing literature on the benefits of out-of-school-time settings, informs current practice in community settings, and provides direction for future research. The results address a gap in the literature by identifying specific elements of the BGC that youth report to be most beneficial during their time in the program. These elements of the BGC were also connected to the development of social and emotional competencies, which offers more insight into the role of community youth programs in promoting positive youth development. This research also adds to the relatively new body of knowledge on the benefits of out-of-school-time programs in a Canadian context. One of the key contributions of this study is the implications for practice. Youth respondents point to key factors at the BGC that influenced them positively. This information can guide onsite workers to focus on these specific aspects in their interactions with youth. The findings from this study provide a foundation for future research in the study of developmental benefits of community youth programs. Prospective research should gather the experiences of youth from a variety of social backgrounds and consider the importance of fostering social and emotional development from the perspective of key stakeholders, such as youth workers and counsellors. By giving youth an opportunity to voice their experiences and share their lessons learned,

this study has presented the elements of the BGC that appear to be most beneficial for promoting social and emotional development in community youth programs. It is my hope that this research will directly benefit the youth in BGC programs by facilitating enhanced leader training to provide further support to young people.

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**Appendix A: Boys and Girls Clubs of Lethbridge: Standards for  
Participation**

**Expectations of TEEN STUFF Participants:**

- 1) Treat others the way you expect to be treated
- 2) Be a positive role model to everyone around you
- 3) Respect yourself, staff, volunteers, and all other participants
- 4) Respect the club and equipment...you will be held responsible for anything you damage
- 5) Come to the club with a positive attitude. If you are having a bad day and are having difficulties with your attitude and maybe need someone to talk to...no problem...let us know and we will try our best to help.
- 6) Push yourself to try new things...AND...Enjoy yourself!!

**FYI:**

**Anyone who is mean, disrespectful, bullying, threatening, damaging property, stealing, excessively swearing... will be asked to leave the club immediately.**

**So...long story short, if you want to be here...you MUST behave yourself and treat others with respect.**

By signing below, you agree to the above rules and expectations:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix B: Recruitment Poster**

# *Volunteers Wanted for a Research Study!*



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We want to hear from Boys and Girls Club  
participants like you!

*Are you 16, 17 or 18 years old?*

*Have you been coming to the Boys and  
Girls Club for at least 6 months?*

*Do you visit more than twice a month?*

Interviews will be happening at the Boys and Girls Club of Lethbridge at a time that works best for you.

Volunteers will receive a reward (\$10 gift card for Park Place Mall) for participation

If you want to share your experiences about coming to the Boys and Girls Club, please **contact Matt** at **[email address]** for more information

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

**Interviewer:**

**Respondents name:**

**Date:**

**Preamble:**

**-- Introductions**

- Part of the research that I am doing for my Master's degree
- I am interested in hearing about **your experiences at the Boys and Girls Club.**

**-- Rights of participants/confidentiality**

- Protecting your privacy as a participant
- Withdrawing consent
- Time commitment
- Agreeing to be contacted for a follow-up interview

**-- Sign assent form**

- Your signature on the assent form indicates that you understand the conditions of participation in this study, that you've had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher, and that you consent to participate in the study.

1. The Boys and Girls Club say that **their programs promote three core values:**

- a) Mutual respect** (for example, treating others with respect, and getting respect in return)
- b) Teamwork** (for example, working with others to reach a common goal or outcome)
- c) Social responsibility** (for example, promoting positive change, giving back to community and participating in service to others).

**-- Based on your experiences at the Boys and Girls Club, how do you react to that claim?**

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2. Is there anything you would like to add? Were there any other experiences at the Boys and Girls Club that you thought about while we were talking, but that you haven't shared yet?

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## Appendix D: Parent Consent Form

### **Finding Their Voice: Youth's Perspectives on Their Participation at the Boys and Girls Club of Canada**

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your son/daughter is being invited to participate in a study entitled *Finding Their Voice: Youth's Perspectives on Their Participation at the Boys and Girls Club of Canada*. The purpose of this research project is to better understand the benefits and weaknesses of the Boys and Girls Club from the perspective of the participants.

The amount of time required for your child's participation will be about 2 hours. This will include two meetings: the first interview meeting takes 90 minutes, and the follow-up meeting takes 30 minutes.

There are no known risks associated with this research. By participating in this research your child may help us improve youth programs in the future. For participating in the study your child will receive a \$10 gift card for Park Place Mall.

**Their participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If they do decide to participate, they may withdraw from the study at any time. Your child's involvement at the Boys and Girls Club will not be affected, and their ability to take part in the Club activities will remain the same.**

To protect their anonymity (privacy) identifying information will not be included in the research report. Your child will be told all their rights and responsibilities as a participant prior to the interview. They will also be asked to complete a consent form prior to the interview.

Their confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by keeping the audio files on a secure, password-protected computer, and storing the typed interviews in a locked filing cabinet. Only the main researcher, and his supervisory committee will have access to the typed interviews and the audio files.

The results of this study will be shared with others in a Master's thesis, presentations at conferences or other professional meetings, in a published article or a presentation to the Boys and Girls Club.

The research is being conducted by Matt Haberlin. Matt is a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge and you may contact him if you have further questions by email at [email address]. This thesis project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Robert Runté. You may contact him by email at [email address] or by phone at [telephone number]. You or your son/daughter may also verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you or they might have, by

contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge ([telephone number]).

**I have read this parental permission form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my permission for my child to participate in this study.**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please return this form to a staff or volunteer at the Boys and Girls Club.**

## Appendix E: Youth Assent Letter

### Finding Their Voice: Youth's Perspectives on Their Participation at the Boys and Girls Club of Canada

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled *Finding Their Voice: Youth's Perspectives on Their Participation at the Boys and Girls Club of Canada*. The purpose of this research project is to better understand the benefits and weaknesses of the Boys and Girls Club from the perspective of participants.

The amount of time required for your participation will be about 2 hours. This will include two meetings: during the first meeting you will be asked about your experiences at the Boys and Girls Club, this will last about 90 minutes. You will also be invited back for a second meeting about 2 months later to confirm that your experiences at the Boys and Girls Club were understood correctly. This meeting will take 30 minutes.

There are no known risks associated with this research. By participating in this research you may help us improve youth programs in the future

To protect your anonymity (privacy) identifying information will **not** be included in the research report. Audio files from the interview will be stored on a secure, password-protected computer, and the typed interviews will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Only the main researcher, his supervisory committee, and professional consultants (e.g., transcriber) will have access to the typed interviews and the audio files. All information will be destroyed after 5 years.

**Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you do withdraw, your involvement at the Boys and Girls Club will not be affected, your ability to take part in the Club activities will remain the same, and you will be allowed to keep your \$10 gift card.**

The results from this study may be presented in a Master's thesis, a scholarly report, journal article and conference presentation. If you would like a copy of the thesis, you may contact the researcher at the email address listed below.

If you require any information about this study, or would like to speak to the researcher about the study, please email Matt at [email address]. This thesis project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Robert Runté. You may contact him by email at [email address] or by phone at [telephone number]. If you have any other questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact the Office of Graduate Studies and Research in Education at the University of Lethbridge by email at [email address] or by phone at [telephone number].

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

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*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

**A copy of this consent will be left with you, and the researcher will take a copy.**

## Appendix F: Conceptual Framework for Analysis: CASEL Core

### Competencies of Social and Emotional Development

CASEL Core Competencies	Research Objective/ Conceptualization	Examples from the Boys and Girls Club	Expected development/ behaviour for high school age youth <sup>2</sup>
Self-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Recognizing one's own emotions and values</li> <li>-An accurate understanding of how one's emotions and thoughts affect behaviours</li> <li>-Recognizing how one's behaviour or words affect others</li> <li>- An honest assessment of personal strengths and weaknesses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Apologizing for negative comments towards others</li> <li>- Recognizing anger or frustration during an activity and seeking out support or changing activities to avoid further aggravation</li> <li>- Acknowledging an aptitude for one activity/task over others (i.e., one youth is good at knitting so she asked if she could lead a knitting activity.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Students in high school are expected to analyze how various expressions of emotion affect other people.</li> </ul>
Self-Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Controlling and regulating emotions and behaviours</li> <li>- Able to identify strategies to make use of available resources and overcome obstacles in achieving a long-term goal.</li> <li>- Practicing goal-setting and managing oneself to facilitate perseverance towards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Walking away from an argument/fight rather than yelling or becoming physical</li> <li>- Recognizing when a task is too demanding to handle on their own, and knowing strategies for seeking assistance</li> <li>- Setting goals for oneself in roles/leadership positions at the Club</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High school students should be able to identify strategies to make use of available school and community resources and overcome obstacles in achieving a long-term goal.</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://casel.org/why-it-matters/what-is-sel/skills-competencies/>

CASEL Core Competencies	Research Objective/ Conceptualization	Examples from the Boys and Girls Club	Expected development/ behaviour for high school age youth <sup>2</sup>
	goals	(i.e., regularly attending leadership club meetings knowing that the most senior members travel to a national retreat)	
Responsible Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Considering ethical, moral and social consequences during decision-making</li> <li>- Making positive, rather than negative, choices about personal and social behaviour</li> <li>- Contributing to the well-being of one's school and community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refusing to engage in illegal or risk-taking behaviours (i.e., walking away if peers suggest stealing Club supplies, refusing drugs/cigarettes being offered by peers)</li> <li>- Volunteering to participate in clean up at the end of the evening</li> <li>- Reminding peers to obey the rules of the Club/ helping leaders enforce the Club guidelines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High-school students should be able to analyze how their current decision making affects their future prospects (i.e., college, career, family).</li> </ul>
Relationship Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict (i.e., using appropriate verbal interventions rather than physical conflict resolution)</li> <li>- Establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation</li> <li>- Resisting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Using clear communication skills to make requests of leaders and peers (i.e., asking a peer to share the supplies/ equipment rather than using physical intimidation)</li> <li>- Mutually beneficial sharing (i.e., one youth teaches baking skills, and her peer reciprocates by helping her learn to shoot a</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High school students are expected to evaluate uses of communication skills with peers, teachers, and family members.</li> </ul>

CASEL Core Competencies	Research Objective/ Conceptualization	Examples from the Boys and Girls Club	Expected development/ behaviour for high school age youth <sup>2</sup>
Social Awareness	<p>inappropriate social pressure (i.e., using positive strategies to avoid peer pressure)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Valuing and practicing prosocial qualities such as empathy</li> <li>- Listening respectfully to others to develop a deep understanding of others' points of view</li> <li>- The ability to assess and determine how situations as well as one's words and actions affect others</li> <li>- Recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences (i.e., respect/tolerance for peers who are different from oneself, such as racial, cultural, gender differences)</li> </ul>	<p>basketball)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stepping in to stop/mediate an argument between peers</li> <li>- Initiating a conversation with a peer who is sitting by him/herself</li> <li>- Supporting a peer who is being teased or bullied</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High school students should be able to evaluate their ability to empathize with others.</li> </ul>

*Note.* CASEL = Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.