Escape and Connection: A Phenomenological Interpretation of the Meaning of an After-School Program for Adolescent Boys

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Applied Health Sciences (Recreation and Leisure)

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological research is to explore the meaning of a YMCA-sponsored after-school recreation program in the lives of four adolescent boys. Listening to youth voice is important to the ability of others to design, implement and evaluate high-quality programs that facilitate learning opportunities that are meaningful to participants. Within the context of interviews, task-based activities were used to gather data. Guided by Creswell's analytic spiral (1998), data was analyzed according to van Manen's (1990) thematic analysis and Caeilli's (2000) creative narrative analysis. It was found that this after-school program provided these adolescents with the opportunity to escape from their monotonous after-school activities and the instability of their home and school environments. Also, they were connected with positive peers, caring adults and the wider community, opportunities that were limited in other aspects of their lives. Methodological issues are also discussed.
Acknowledgements

There are many lives that come together in the process of creating a thesis. I am sincerely grateful to the following individuals who have left an everlasting mark on this thesis. First, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of those who are associated with this research project. I am grateful for the commitment and dedication of the four adolescent boys in this study. Their enthusiasm and youthful spirit brought joy and meaning to my research journey. As well, for the unconditional support of the YMCA, and three individuals, Brandon, Jacqui and Farhia, who were a constant source of support and encouragement.

Secondly, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to my committee members, for their expertise and guidance: To Dr. Dawn Trussell, for her insights towards the latter stages of the thesis; to Dr. Nancy Francis, for guiding me towards a phenomenological understanding of human experiences; to Dr. Trent Newmeyer, for challenging my often mainstream ideology and inspiring me towards a more critical reflexivity. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Erin Sharpe, for her unwavering support and guidance throughout my entire Masters journey. Erin was more than a supervisor; she was a friend, who always had the right words in my times of despair. She was an expert in all of my evolving fields of interest. She was my biggest supporter, cheering me on in my many endeavors over the course of this academic journey. I am indebted to the many roles that Erin has performed as my supervisor.
Most importantly, I dedicate this thesis to my beautiful family. I am forever grateful to my loving husband, Ryan, without whose support and understanding, I could not have fulfilled this academic dream. Finally, I am truly blessed for the gift of my precious children, Aliyah and Ronnie, who have been and will always be my source of inspiration.
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We all have had meaningful experiences that shape our perceptions of the world. In sharing two anecdotes, I, as the researcher, hope to give readers more insight into the lived experiences that have shaped my passion towards this research topic — recreation programming for young people:

Running past the defender, I quickly ran towards the net to receive the pass. Instead of looking at the point guard, my gaze focused across the room to where a petite figure stood nervously at the door of the school gymnasium. The image of a tiny, frightened Asian girl made me stop dead in my tracks, oblivious to the friendly pick-up game of basketball that I loved so much. I found myself staring at a mirror image of myself, a mere two years ago, when I walked through those same gymnasium doors. How uncertain the world looked back then. How frightening it was for me to meet other people. I had just been pulled out of my family and dropped into a foster home. How lonely it was to feel as though I didn't belong anywhere! That was me then. Look at me now. Two years later, a complete transformation. I was now one of the leaders of the youth group, facilitating weekly meetings and organizing social events. I roamed the gym as though I lived here, trying to make everyone feel welcomed. Could this have been the same person? How could one after-school activity have such an impact on a person? I wish every adolescent could experience a place like this: a haven away from my so-called life; a place where I could be myself; a place where no one made fun of me; a place where I didn’t have to be the obedient, quiet girl my
parents expected of me; a place where I could discover who I was and who I
wanted to be; a place where I could forget about my problems; a place where
everything made sense, if only for a while.

* * * * * *

Tears filled my eyes as I watched the students march in unison around the
gymnasium. Athletes waved their flags proudly, as though each had single-
handedly won the 'mini-Olympics' competition. I felt so privileged to be given this
opportunity to organize a day of sports and games for students who had just
experienced a life-altering tragedy. It was two weeks after Hurricane Ivan had
left its mark on the beautiful island of Grenada. Today was the first day the
students returned to school since the natural disaster and it was heartbreaking to
see their grief-stricken, sorrowful faces as they began school that morning.
Hurricane Ivan not only stripped them of their homes and possessions, it had
demoralized their spirits and shattered their dreams. As the hours passed and as
they engaged in friendly competition with their peers, these students seemed to
temporarily forget about their desperate realities. For a couple of hours, they
didn't have to worry about their house, that was no longer standing, nor if they
were going to be fed when they got 'home'. They were relishing in the joy that
came from simple games. It was during this time that I realized how powerful
sports and physical activity can be, to make a difference in young people's life, to
give them joy and strength, if only for a moment, to endure the adversities that
they encounter in their every day lives. Strangely, I had organized this mini-
Olympic circuit many times before in different settings but never had I
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experienced such fulfillment in my role as a sports coordinator. In Canada, facilitating such an event would exude feelings of contentment, a job well done in entertaining kids for a couple of hours. In the wake of Hurricane Ivan, facilitating these games gave me more meaning to my selected career path. I felt as though I was making a real difference, giving kids a glimpse of hope in the midst of their tragedy.

* * * * * *

The above anecdotes refer to my lived experiences with youth programming, as a participant and as a facilitator. The first anecdote describes the meaning that a particular after-school program had for me, as a South-Asian female adolescent, struggling to find a sense of belonging in different aspects of my life. My home life was characterized by abuse and loneliness. School was even more dreadful for me, as I struggled to learn my third language and tried to assimilate to a culture that seemed completely foreign.

Participating in various after-school programs, such as a youth group and sports programs, were critical to my development as an adolescent. These settings provided me with opportunities to learn about my identity, as a Vietnamese immigrant and about my relationship with my physical and social surroundings. I spent my adolescent years in a foster home with a Caucasian family. This life experience resulted in much inner turmoil in trying to negotiate who I was in relation to my middle-class, predominantly 'white' surroundings. In retrospect, it is difficult to articulate why I experienced more learning opportunities in after-school programs than in other contexts. I just know that it was in these after-school settings that I was able to engage in learning opportunities that were meaningful and relevant to my own life, opportunities that I never experienced at home.
nor school. I was befriended by people who had faith in me and in whom I could trust. I was empowered to perform roles that I could never thought achievable.

The second anecdote relates to youth programming from a different perspective, as a facilitator, rather than as a participant. This episode has been critical in harnessing my passion for recreation and the potential that these activities have to improve quality of life, especially for young people. As I compare my experiences facilitating athletic events in different social settings, I have come to appreciate the role that culture and context plays in informing the ways that youth experience programs. As a practitioner, I can only make educated guesses as to how participants experience my programs, depending on their reactions and what they choose to share. I have often wondered what these programs really mean to participants. How does it fit within the context of their lives? What are the varying experiences within the same program? These questions have informed my desire to explore the lived experiences of youth in an after-school program. The following section provides an overview of the field of after-school youth programming, including the dominant approaches guiding practice and current gaps in our knowledge of the field.

1.1 Introduction to Youth Work in the After-school Context

Within the past three decades, research and practice of youth work in the after-school context has made tremendous progress in its efforts to service the needs of young people. These changes have been guided by three dominant approaches that have had much implication on theory and practice. Prior to the 1980s, the intervention/prevention approach dominated the youth programming industry, framing youth as ‘victims of social problems’ or ‘problems to be solved’ (Witt & Caldwell, 2005). From this perspective, youth programming focused on intervention and/or prevention for youth with social
problems, such as school drop-out, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy. However, as the number of youth with problems began to rise, practitioners and policymakers realized the modest effectiveness of these programs (Pittman, 2000).

Since the 1990s, the dominant approach in youth programming has been the asset-building approach. Also called the ‘positive youth development (PYD) framework,’ the asset-building approach focuses on developing positive attributes in young people to prepare them to become "fully functioning adults" (Witt & Caldwell, 2005, p. 26). Working from a philosophy of ‘problem-free is not fully prepared,’ policy makers and practitioners emphasize the development of young people, in a way that views them as "resources to be developed, rather than problems to be solved" (Witt & Caldwell, p. 25). In this approach, practitioners have a responsibility to provide the supports, opportunities and challenges that young people need to experience developmental outcomes as a result of their participation in community-based youth programming such as after-school programs. Through this lens, after-school programs are seen to be especially salient in the lives of young people perceived to be living in the margins of society, such as low-income youth, ethnic minority youth and youth who are disabled. Due to the perceived negative effects of their disadvantaged position on their development (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Garrett, Ng’andu & Ferron, 1994; Halpern, 2002; Rasmussen, Aber & Bhana, 2004), after-school programs are seen as an especially important context in which to promote developmental outcomes in the lives of these youth.

Although the PYD perspective continues to guide much of youth programming, a third approach has recently emerged as a critique of the mainstream PYD framework. Informed by a critical perspective, these researchers argue that despite the ‘positive’
nature of PYD, the asset-building paradigm reaffirms the constructing of the development of vulnerable youth as deviant and abnormal (Ashcroft, 2008). Proponents of a more critical social work practice promote alternative conceptualizations of young people and the meaning of social programs in their lives. For example, Coussé, Roets and De Bie (2009) suggest that one of the goals of youth work should be to foster the conditions in which young people themselves can learn and give shape to their social life, opportunities that I refer to in this thesis as ‘opportunities for learning.’ Contentious debate among proponents of these three approaches has resulted in a plethora of empirical research conducted on after-school programs.

While the research on after-school programs has been beneficial in building an understanding of youth work in this context, there remain a number of gaps. First, research has tended to privilege the voices of practitioners and researchers, who are primarily concerned with identifying the conditions that facilitate the successful implementation of different approaches. Current literature has not included much input from participants, a key stakeholder in programming (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Researchers and practitioners have recently begun to recognize the importance of exploring the perspectives of participants in this social setting (Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003; Strobel, Kirshner, O’Donoghue & McLaughlin, 2008). However, the main focus of this empirical research has been on the developmental outcomes and processes of youth programs. Few have taken a phenomenological approach in order to listen to the lived experience of participants in these programs. Such an approach would inform a better understanding of the components of a program that are meaningful to participants that may be different from developmental outcomes.
In addition to the silence of youth voice, current literature also lacks recognition of the differing experiences among youth. The literature on asset-based programs is dominated by the experiences of white, middle-classed children and youth (Roffman, Pagano & Hirsch, 2001). While there is increasing empirical research that focuses on the experiences of urban or minority ethnic youth (Fredricks, Hackette & Bregman, 2010; Shin, Morgan, Truitt, Buhin & Vera, 2010), this research often collapses their experiences into one, resulting in a loss in our understanding of the differences among participants (Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman & Davidson, 2010). According to Roffman and colleagues, the “distinctions between the experiences of disadvantaged youth, and those of Hispanic and black youth, need to be teased apart from the bulk of literature that exists on white, middle-class children and adolescents” (p. 88). These authors recognize the pervasive influence of culture and social context, as it affects the ways in which different participants experience youth programs. Understanding the context of participants’ lives gives us a window in which to understand the meaning that they attribute to their participation in youth programs.

1.2 Exploring Youth Experiences in After-school Programs: 

Studying the Gully Project

This research study attempts to address these gaps in literature by exploring the experiences of a diverse group of youth who participated in an after-school program called the Gully Project. The Gully Project is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the participants of the study. The impetus for this program was initiated by the residents’ committee of a subsidized housing complex in Ontario, Canada. Due to concerns over the well-being of the youth of this complex, the committee requested the help of the YMCA
and a local church to provide programming for the young residents. In response to this request, the YMCA agreed to design and implement a program and administrators of the church sponsored the use of its gymnasium, which is located inside the spacious church. The program was introduced to the young people of the community as a weekly 'drop-in' recreational program that ran from May to September, 2009. These sessions enabled facilitators to develop rapport with the youth and for facilitators to better understand their programming needs. In September of 2009, a formal youth program, named the “Gully Project” by the program participants, began to service the needs exclusively of the adolescent participants. This after-school program has been offered to youth on a weekly basis since September 2009 throughout the school year and biweekly during the summer vacation. Although the program was offered to both male and female adolescents, only male participants attended on a regular basis, and chose to participate in the study. As such, this thesis explores the experiences of adolescent boys in the “Gully Project” after-school program.

1.3 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of some of the adolescent boys who participated in the Gully Project over the 2009/2010 school year through a phenomenological approach. The purpose of a phenomenology is to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the individual’s perspective (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology is based on the premise that the most meaningful reality is what a person perceives it to be (Creswell, 1998). The following research questions guided this phenomenological investigation:

a) What did it mean for adolescent boys to participate in the program?
b) What aspects of the program were the most and least significant to them? How did participants experience these components?

c) How did each participant view this program as fitting into the context of their lives?

To explore these research questions, a multiple methods approach was used for data-collection. In the context of individual interviews, research participants engaged in various task-based activities that were used to prompt discussions pertaining to their lived experiences of the program. More specifically, participants engaged in photo-elicitation, drawing-elicitation, and completed a timeline in the context of three or four separate interviews to discuss the research questions. Similarly, a multiple methods approach was also used to extract phenomenological meaning from participants' lived experiences. A creative narrative analysis was combined with van Manen's (1990) thematic analysis to render meaningful descriptions of participants lived experiences of the program, as it was seen to fit within the context of their lives. This analytic process was guided by Creswell's (1998) analytic spiral.

1.4 The Value of Listening to Adolescent Boys

Exploring the experience of an after-school program in a phenomenological way facilitated a better understanding of the meaning of this context in the lives of four young boys. Listening to the voices of adolescent boys are not only important to our understanding of their experiences but also to the ability of others to create, implement, and evaluate high-quality youth programs that promote the learning opportunities of this demographic. However, we should not underestimate the challenges of listening. As I describe in this thesis, I experienced many methodological challenges in my attempts to
listen to these youth, in light of what Pollack (as referenced in Cronan & Witt, 2005) referred to as “the Boy Code.” The insights gained from this study will inform after-school programming in a way that is meaningful to adolescent boys. Listening to the diversity in young people’s experiences will also enhance dialogue on the importance of contextualizing their experiences, rather than treating them as a homogeneous group. Finally, this study will further promote the recognition that young people have important perspectives to share and have the potential to significantly contribute to the production of knowledge, if only we would listen.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

The literature on after-school youth programs has increased exponentially over the past two decades. This chapter presents a review of this literature. Divided into three sections, the first section provides an overview of after-school programs, as it pertains to marginalized youth. The second section discusses theoretical approaches that guide youth programming. The final section provides an overview of the empirical research conducted on after-school programs, with a focus on the experiences of participants.

2.1 History and Context of After-school Programming

Over the past two decades, public concern for the well-being of young people during the after-school hours have increased due to the prevalence of many social issues: child-care needs for working parents, concerns about low academic achievement and the negative impact of unsupervised time for children (Larson, 2000). Increasing evidence have suggested the potentially negative outcomes of unstructured leisure time for children and youth (Osgood, Anderson & Shaffer, 2005; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). For example, a study conducted by Snyder and Sickmund revealed that juvenile arrests were heavily concentrated in the after-school hours between three to six. Youth advocates and policy-makers have turned to after-school programs as a way of addressing these social concerns. In keeping with public demand, government, community agencies and private funders have devoted considerable resources to the creation of out-of-school time programs (Pittman, Tolman & Yohalem, 2005). This funding has resulted in a wide range of organized activities available to young people.

Organized programs are defined by Larson (2000) as activities that are characterized by structure and adult-supervision, with an emphasis on skill-building.
Whether labeled as extracurricular, community-based, after-school, out-of-school programs, organized activities, structured activities or youth programs in general, organized activities share an overarching goal of servicing the needs of young people within a social space outside of school and home. The increased demand to cater to the needs of different youth has resulted in a plethora of youth programs that vary in content, structure and goals. They include nationally sponsored youth organizations and federally funded after-school programs (such as the Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCA), community-based organizations, schools and locally organized programs. These programs can also be conceptualized according to their activity-related goals and content (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles & Lord, 2005). The potential benefits of participating in after-school programs have been well documented and will be presented in the empirical research section of this chapter.

After-school youth programs hold a different meaning within the discourse of youth who are labeled as having low socio-economic status in Canada. Before proceeding with an overview of this literature, it is important to “unpack” many value-laden labels that are often used to categorize and pigeonhole young people. Youth who fall under the categories of ethnic minority, youth of colour, low- to moderate-income, and disabled have also been constructed as ‘at-risk,’ ‘under-classed,’ ‘disadvantaged,’ or ‘marginal.’ These labels are used to classify a group of individuals who are perceived to lack the cultural and material resources that promote normative development in young people (Clarke, 2008). While these labels were pervasive and used relatively unexamined throughout the 1990s, recent criticism implicating the problematic use of these labels as
implicitly racist, classist, sexist and ableist, have substantially reduced the prevalence of these labels (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

Rather than looking at problems or pathologies in individuals, families and communities, researchers have been increasingly examining institutional structures that create and maintain inequality (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990). In this effort, terms such as 'disadvantaged,' 'vulnerable' or 'marginalized' have emerged that implicate institutional inequalities in the lives of these youth. Marginalization occurs when a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and relegated to living on the economic, legal, cultural, geographic and/or racial margins of society (Smith, 2000). These groups typically have no political or cultural power in mainstream society. This social status causes members to be potentially subjected to severe material deprivation. Much literature has been devoted to describing the negative impact of institutional inequities on the well-being of low-income youth. Within this literature, well-being in young people is traditionally measured in terms of developmental outcomes. For example, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) showed how young people living in low-income families experience diminished physical health, delays in their cognitive abilities and suffer from emotional and behavioural problems more frequently than their wealthier counterparts. Researchers also documented some mediating factors that contribute to this association: home environment, parental interactions and neighbourhood conditions (Garrett, Ng’andu & Ferron, 1994; Kohen, Dahinten, Leventhal & McIntosh, 2008). For example, Garrett and colleagues discussed how higher levels of income are connected to enhanced home environments, such as opportunities for learning and parent-child interactions. Finally, low-income families are associated with living in poor
neighbourhoods characterized by social disorganization, such as crime, and neighbours not monitoring the behaviour of youth (Rasmussen et al., 2004) and few resources for youth development, such as recreational facilities and after-school programs (Halpern, 2002). For example, Halpern found that low-income youth are more likely to live in communities where there are fewer structured after-school contexts and greater prevalence of violence and delinquency than their middle-classed counterparts. Along with home and neighbourhood settings, institutional inequalities have also been discussed in the context of schools, whereby the high drop-out rate among low-income students in schools is evidence of the lack of connection some of these young people have with academic curricula and teaching practices (Marquez-Zenkov, Harmon, van Lier & Marquez-Zenkov, 2007).

Due to these documented disadvantages that some youth are forced to negotiate, researchers and practitioners have begun to focus on programs that serve youth with low socio-economic status. Low-income youth who participate in after-school programs are said to gain developmental outcomes that are lacking in other parts of their lives (Hirsch, 2005; Strobel et al., 2008). In particular, urban schools have been criticized as institutions that are often too large, anonymous and lacking in opportunities for meaningful connections between teachers and students (Darling-Hammond, Ancess & Ort, 2002). Consequently, participation in out-of-school activities has the potential to guard against the heightened risk of negative developmental outcomes in other aspects of some young peoples’ lives. The following section will present the three approaches that are prominent in youth work.
2.2 Perspectives that Guide Youth Work

The programming of structured activities is guided by the ways in which practitioners view the development of young people. The following section describes three theoretical frameworks that guide youth programming in an after-school context.

2.2.1 Deficit/Prevention Perspective

Prior to the 1980s, the dominant discourse in youth development research has been one that represented adolescence as a time of high stress and unpredictability. Through this deficit-reduction lens, community-based programming has primarily focused on serving the needs of teens who were labeled to be most ‘at-risk.’ These efforts were largely reactionary, targeting specific problems to change delinquent behaviours, such as school drop-outs or push-outs, teen pregnancy and juvenile delinquency (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). Within the last two decades, increased criticism from proponents of other perspectives has lead to the evolution of this perspective from a primary focus of intervention to also the prevention of youth problems. Informed by research on resiliency factors in young people, researchers and practitioners now emphasize the role of protective factors in mitigating risk and facilitating successful adaptation in the face of adversity (Stouthamer-Loeber, Loeber, Wei, Farrington & Wikstrom, 2002).

2.2.2 Positive Youth Development Perspective

The positive young development (PYD) movement has been gaining momentum in research and practice for the past two decades. Guided by the view of adolescence as a time of mastery linked to each child’s unique talents, strengths, skills, and interests, (Damon, 2004; Larson, 2000; Scales & Leffert, 2004) PYD is an approach that is committed to enabling young people to achieve their full potential. This approach stands
in contrast to youth work that focuses on the intervention/prevention of problem
behaviours. While recognizing the need to identify and respond to problems that young
people typically encounter, this approach has an asset-building orientation that builds on
the strengths of youth, rather than focusing on their deficiencies. This perspective
promotes the development of positive attributes in young people that enable them to
reach their full potential as “productive and engaged adults” (Witt & Caldwell, 2005, p.
10).

A number of asset-building models have emerged out of the PYD approach, each
with specific implications for practice. These models typically outline a broad set of
personal and contextual attributes that promote successful developmental outcomes for
all young people, without focusing on youth deemed most ‘at risk’ (Lerner & Benson,
2003; Scales & Leffert, 2004). Asset-building models for youth programs aim to offer the
supports, challenges and opportunities that young people need to achieve healthy
outcomes throughout their development. For example, one of the most documented
approaches is the Developmental Assets model promoted by the Search Institute (Benson,
1997; Witt & Caldwell, 2005). Researchers from this institute have developed a list of 40
developmental assets that, according to their review of literature, play powerful roles in
the protection, enhancement and resiliency-building of youth (Scales & Leffert)
(Appendix A). Through predominantly quantitative studies of school-aged adolescents in
the United States, researchers from the Search Institute claim that these assets have
consistently contributed to positive outcomes among adolescents across diverse ethnic
groups.
Other asset-based models have been influential in informing practice. Lerner and Benson (2003) advocate the Six C's that youth need to thrive: cognitive and behavioural competence, confidence, positive social connections, character, caring, and contribution to society. Proponents of this model would use a combination of the six C’s as the overarching goal(s) of their programs. Finally, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) has outlined eight features of program settings that are most likely to foster positive assets in youth: Physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive adult relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, supporting youth’s efficacy and sense of mattering, and skill-building opportunities.

Recently, the PYD framework has been critiqued for its over-emphasis on the future or preparation of young people for adulthood (Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoppe-Rooney & Villarruel, 2003). Responding to these critiques, practitioners have begun to promote young people’s contribution towards their own development and to that of their community. This change in emphasis has resulted in divisions within the PYD framework that target specific domains within the community, such as community youth development, civic youth development and sports youth development. These programmatic approaches share an underlying promotion of positive youth development but differ in the ways that youth are engaged to be agents of change in their own development and in the development of their community. For example, civic youth development programs emphasize youth participation in social issues that affect their communities and promote participants’ involvement in social policies and activism (Carlson, 2006). Community youth development programs promote the ways in which
youth can actively make a difference in their neighbourhoods and local initiatives (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006).

2.2.3 Critical Perspective

A third approach, guided by a critical perspective, has recently emerged within the field of youth programming. Advocates of a critical perspective to youth work argue that despite the ‘positive’ nature of PYD, young people are continually framed as social problems, particularly those living in the margins (Griffin, 1993; Holloway & Valentine, 2000). This framing reinforces the pigeonholing and stigmatization of youth as troublesome, delinquent, dangerous and a threat to social order (Ashcroft, 2008). Coussee and colleagues argue that this approach reaffirms the constructing of the development of vulnerable youth as “lacking, deviant and pathological” (2009, p. 425). Further in this frame, youth work is transformed into an outcome-based approach with an emphasis on accredited activities and on monitoring and manipulating marginalized young people into integrating into mainstream society (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Skott-Myhre, 2006). This output focus has caused youth work to change from a social movement into an educational method. Proponents of this critical perspective promote alternative conceptualizations of young people and the meaning of social work in their lives (Skott-Myhre). For example, Coussée and colleagues reiterate that policy makers and researchers should promote processes whereby youth workers can develop alternative understandings of young people and their shared dilemmas. Rather than an emphasis on individual, clear-cut outcomes, youth work should be seen as fostering the conditions in which young people themselves can learn and give shape to their social life.
2.3 Empirical Research on Youth Programming

A growing body of research suggests that structured youth programs held outside of school hours hold promise as contexts in which adolescent development may be supported (Mahoney, 2000; Pittman, 2000). The vast majority of empirical research on after-school youth programs privileges the voice of academics and practitioners, who primarily focus on issues of implementation and strategies for effective programming. Recently, researchers have begun to explore the perspectives and experiences of participants. This section provides an overview of some of the empirical research that explore the experiences of youth in this setting, including developmental outcomes and processes, the meaning of youth's participation and some mediating factors that contribute to these meanings.

2.3.1 Developmental Outcomes and Processes

Of central interest to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are developmental outcomes that result from participation in after-school programs. The following section presents empirical research on the benefits and impact of after-school programs on participants, as well as the processes that contribute to these outcomes. The potential benefits of after-school program involvement have been well-documented (Larson, Hansen & Moneta, 2006; Mahoney et al., 2005). Organized activities are promoted as unique settings in which youth consistently report experiencing both high motivation and high concentration (Larson, 2000). Along with school, home and neighbourhood, researchers recognize after-school programs as important contexts of emotional, social and civic development. Increasing evidence suggests that young peoples' participation in organized activities, including sports, arts and other types of
youth programs, is associated with positive outcomes, such as college achievement (Marsh, 1992), interpersonal competence (Mahoney, Cairns & Farmer, 2003), reduced risky behaviours (Eccles & Barber, 1999), and adult civic engagement (Frisco, Muller & Dodson, 2004). Most of these positive outcomes are believed to be attributable, not just to attendance, but to youths’ engagement in the learning opportunities that these activities afford (NRCIM, 2002; Weiss, Little & Bouffard, 2005). Organized activities are theorized to provide unique opportunities for youth to take on real-world challenges and responsibilities, work toward goals, collaborate with peers, and interact with community members, among other growth-promoting experiences (Eccles, 2005; Larson et al., 2006). However, the likelihood of participants experiencing these developmental experiences varies across youth and programs.

Recently, researchers have begun to explore the processes that mediate the development of positive developmental outcomes. For example, Wood, Larson and Brown (2009) examined the process whereby participants achieved a sense of responsibility through their participation in an after-school program. The youth in this study were encouraged by leaders to take ownership of demanding tasks and roles, thus were given opportunities to demonstrate that they could be depended on in meaningful situations. In other studies, Watkins, Larson and Sullivan (2007) show how youth negotiated through intergroup conflict to develop tolerance and acceptance with peers of different culture.

2.3.2 Meaning of Participation

Apart from experiences of outcomes and benefits, there has been limited research exploring the meanings that participants ascribe to their participation in after-school
programs. For example, Hirsch (2005) describes in depth how youth in some after-school programs viewed their programs as "home-places" characterized by supportive, family-like relationships. The qualities that make the program feel like a home, including supportive adults and opportunities for self-expression, appear to be missing or to be experienced negatively by participants in both their home and school environments (Dworkin et al., 2003). Other researchers have found after-school programs to be a space in which participants feel a sense of psychological, emotional and physical safety, a feeling that was missing for those youth living in poor neighbourhoods (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel & Stone, 2005). The follow section presents empirical research on mediating factors that have been found to be salient in determining the nature of youths' experiences in after-school programs.

2.3.3 Factors Mediating Youth Experiences in After-school Programs

Participation in after-school programs does not automatically yield positive or developmental outcomes. Researchers have documented factors that mediate the experiences that youth have in after-school programs (Roffman et al., 2001; Strobel et al., 2008). The first mediating factor is participants' relationship with adults in the program. Research has documented the critical role of non-familial, caring adult mentor in the lives of low-income youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Within an after-school context, Hirsch (2005) has found that feeling cared about by staff and seeing the adults as resources and supports are of particular importance. Similarly, Strobel and colleagues describe how the staff at four after-school programs provided youth with important supports, acting as mentors, confidantes and conflict mediators. As a result, the youth of this study reported feeling a sense of physical and emotional safety, feelings that are particularly salient for
youth living in urban neighbourhoods with a prevalence of crime and violence (Hirsch). However, not all youth experienced positive relationships with staff members. Some of these youth shared experiences with adult staff who did not fulfill the above functions effectively (Strobel et al.).

Another factor mediating the experience of youth is participants' relationship with peers. The opportunity to be with friends is a core motivation for participation in urban programs (Hirsch, 2005; Strobel et al., 2008). Some of these youth describe their neighbourhoods as lacking things to do or places to congregate (Strobel et al.). The activities in youth programs typically focus on group goals, rather than individual achievement, resulting in young people having to negotiate through conflict and differences (Larson et al., 2006; NRCIM, 2002). The smaller size of most youth programs, relative to schools, may provide better conditions for youth to develop personal relationships with members of different groups and come to see them as individuals. For example, youth in these programs have consistently described experiences of interacting with peers who would normally be outside their existing network. As a result, some youth have reported the development of understanding and empathy for members of diverse groups (Watkins et al., 2007).

Finally, program activities is another factor that mediates the experience of youth in this context. Research into this component of after-school programs have found mixed reviews in terms of what types of activities are most meaningful for young people. While some adolescents have reported a preference of recreational activities over psycho-educational programs (Hirsch, 2005), other youth value activities that give them the opportunity to develop skills that are personally meaningful and relevant to their futures.
Phenomenology with Adolescent Boys

(Strobel et al., 2008). Other researchers have found that program activities are meaningful when the youth are able to participate as agents of their own development (Dworkin et al., 2003). Although the above studies have been beneficial in exploring the experiences of youth in after-school programs, there remain a number of gaps that have been previously mentioned. This study attempts to address some of these gaps by taking a phenomenological approach to exploring the different ways that youth might derive meaning from the same program.

2.4 Overview of Phenomenology as a Qualitative Research Approach

Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that surfaced in Germany before World War I to challenge the dominant views of scientific inquiry of the time, which sought to 'objectively' produce knowledge of a 'physical' reality (Polkinghorne, 1989). Instead of obtaining descriptions of worldly objects, phenomenology explores the nature and meaning of social phenomena, as they are experienced from the actor's perspective. The contributions of various philosophers have resulted in a range of perspectives within phenomenology, a perspective that has also become the foundation for a research methodology. The following section will provide a brief description of the different research traditions within phenomenology, as well as the theoretical framework that guides this phenomenological inquiry.

As a research methodology, phenomenology seeks to understand human experiences from the perspective of those who have experienced the phenomenon. Phenomenologists express little interest in discovering universal truths or explaining causal relationships. The purpose of research in this tradition is to gain a deeper description and/or understanding of everyday human experiences. Phenomenology has
been used in many disciplines, particularly in the fields of health, education and psychology. Phenomenological studies can range from very specific human experiences, such as exploring the lived experience of those living with diverse disease conditions and symptoms, to more abstract phenomena such as courage and caring (Thomas, 2005). The different perspectives within philosophical phenomenology have resulted in different schools of phenomenological research. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an extensive review of the different traditions of phenomenological research, a brief description of each tradition will be provided in order for readers to understand the theoretical reasons for choosing one tradition rather than the other.

2.4.1 Schools of Phenomenology

While there are a myriad of ways in which to conceptualize the various perspectives within phenomenological research, Dowling (2007) presents three schools of phenomenological research. Appendix B provides an illustration of the ways in which Descriptive, Interpretive and American phenomenology are similar to and differ from one another.

Descriptive phenomenology is guided by the work of Edmund Husserl, which aims to obtain a rigorous and ‘unbiased’ description of social phenomenon, “the world as we immediately experience it, rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or theorize about it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 21). This tradition is captured by Husserl’s famous words, “to the things themselves” (Husserl, as quoted by Moustakas, 1994 p. 26). However, for these traditional phenomenological approaches, the difficulty in exploring human consciousness lies in our own ‘natural attitude,’ due to the tendency of researchers to bring in their personal experiences, preconceptions, beliefs and attitudes to the research
process. This natural attitude informs the ways in which we perceive and analyze the research project. If researchers fail to critically examine the ways in which these suppositions shape the research, these ‘attitudes’ will constrains them from fully capturing the essence and meaning of social phenomenon as it is experienced by others. Descriptive phenomenologists strictly adhere to the concept of epoche or phenomenological reduction, a process whereby researchers and participants set aside or bracket their pre-judgments and assumptions of the phenomenon in order to arrive at a new perspective of the phenomenon (Moustakas). This process helps the researcher to view the phenomenon “in a clear and unaltered manner, exactly as the participant experiences it, and before it is subject to the attitudes and experiences of the researcher” (Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson & Poole, 2005). Phenomenological reduction has been the focus of contention for many researchers, especially those who adhere to other phenomenological traditions. Even proponents of the descriptive tradition, such as Moustakas, admit that bracketing in its purest form is rarely achieved.

Hermeneutics is another phenomenological tradition, guided by the work of Heidegger. The purpose of this phenomenological tradition is to understand the universal meanings of a phenomenon, as expressed by those who have experienced the phenomenon. While Heidegger agreed with Husserl’s notion of ‘to the things themselves,’ he disagreed with Husserl’s view of the importance of description rather than understanding. Hermeneutics is premised on the assumption that humans experience the world through language and that this language is the source of understanding and knowledge (Dowling, 2007). While proponents of this approach recognize the importance of epoche, they would also argue that a researcher’s values, beliefs and suppositions are
inherently pervasive in any research project, despite attempts to nullify it (van Manen, 1990). For example, Donalek (2004) insists “that (research) is not truly phenomenological unless the researcher’s beliefs are incorporated into the data analysis” (p. 516). van Manen also articulates that “if we simply try to forget or ignore what we already know, we might find that the presupposition persistently creep back into our reflections” (p. 47). Therefore, researchers and participants must take great care to make their past experiences explicit and temporarily suspend their suppositions in order to obtain meanings of “prereflected experiences” (Caelli, 2000, p. 367). Some researchers describe bracketing as a developmental skill, one that improves as the researcher gains experience in this reflective process (Wall et al., 2005). Other researchers emphasize the use of a reflective diary to be an effective tool for developing bracketing skills, which includes reflective questions in order to facilitate the process of self-reflection of the phenomenon, such as: What am I taking for granted? What are my experiences with this phenomenon? What does this phenomenon mean to me? (van Manen).

Both descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenological research are viewed as more traditional, European phenomenological approaches because of their adherence to the philosophical principles of European phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger. According to Caelli (2000), there are two primary differences between American and European approaches to phenomenology. Firstly, American phenomenologists generally include the thoughts and interpretations of the participants, rather than focusing on pre-reflected experience. While it remains important for researchers to temporarily bracket their own suppositions of the phenomenon, participants’ assumptions naturally guide their own understandings and interpretations of their lived experiences.
Secondly, American phenomenology focuses on describing participants’ situated lived experience within the context of culture rather than searching for universal descriptions or meanings of phenomena (Caelli, 2000). Husserl and Heidegger both considered culture and tradition as constraints to accessing the pre-reflected experience of a phenomenon. In contrast, American phenomenology is premised on the assumption that it is impossible for humans to think “aculturally” because our experiences are constructed within the context of our culture and life histories (Caelli). American phenomenology is seen as the most appropriate fit for this research study, given that the objective is to understand the contextualized meanings that participants associate with their engagement in an after-school program. From this approach, understanding the context of the participants’ lives is central to understanding participants’ perceptions of their experiences. The following chapter will describe the methods that will be used to phenomenologically collect and analyze the lived experiences of four adolescent boys.
Chapter Three: Methods and Methodological Challenges

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences of some of the participants in an after-school, recreation program, as it was experienced by participants within the context of their lives. The following research questions were explored:

a) What did it mean for adolescent boys to participate in the program?

b) What aspects of the program were the most and least significant to them?

How did participants experience these components?

c) How did each participant view this program as fitting into the context of their lives?

In this chapter, I provide a detailed account of the methods used to explore the research questions. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section provides a description of the methods that were used to phenomenological gather data and extract meaning from participants’ lived experiences. The final section includes some methodological challenges and ethical issues that I experienced while conducting this investigation with adolescent boys. Some strategies to mitigate these challenges and issues are also presented.

3.1 Phenomenological Data Collection and Interpretation

3.1.1 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an indispensible component of any phenomenological investigation (van Manen, 1990). It is critical for me, as the researcher, to first examine my own experiences and suppositions of the phenomenon to critically understand the ways in
which these assumptions inform and shape the research process. According to van Manen, the problem with research is not that we know too little about a phenomenon, rather, it is that we know too much. Our past experiences constrain us from maintaining an openness towards the phenomenon and seeing it in a new way. Reflexivity should be a central part of the research process, whereby researchers critically reflect not only on their assumptions, but also on the ways that the choice of methodology and their role within the research setting has an influence on the research process (Punch, 2002).

In my case, for example, my involvement with this project was guided by a passion for recreational programming ‘for’ youth, particularly for ‘marginalized’ youth. My previous adherence to this intervention/prevention approach was shaped by some of my lived experiences and academic pursuits. The anecdotes presented in the first chapter illustrate experiences that have played a significant role in shaping and furthering my support for structured programs, especially sports and physical activity, for young people. As an adolescent, my experiences in out-of-school structured activities, such as youth groups and sports programs, allowed me to develop skills and competencies that my home and school environment could not facilitate.

My pursuit of sports and recreation as an academic field of study solidified the positive association between structured recreation programs and developmental outcomes. Through lectures, projects and class discussions, I recently explored different approaches to the provision of recreation programming and reconceptualised my own theoretical assumptions. Through volunteer and work opportunities, I have coordinated various sports programs for different demographics of young people over the past ten years. For me, the most meaningful experiences were those that involved ‘marginal’
youth because I felt as though I was making a ‘real’ difference in the lives of participants. Participants of these programs often shared aspects of their family life to me in a way that made me realize how much the program acted as a ‘buffer,’ to counteract the devastating effects of their social living conditions.

3.1.2 Locating Myself as the Researcher

I began my research journey through an interventionist lens, enthusiastically promoting the need for recreational opportunities in the lives of ‘at-risk’ youth. Prior to my involvement with the Gully Project, I surveyed other community-based youth recreation programs and was dissatisfied with the typical ‘drop-in’ setting that simply offered a safe after-school context for youth in an unstructured, recreational environment. Contrary to this programmatic approach, I felt the need to document best practices in youth programming that incorporated both recreation opportunities and opportunities for life skills development, such as leadership, as well as social and personal development. Due to the scarcity of these programs within the local community, I wanted to be involved in a research project that would enable me to implement my own notions of ‘effective’ recreation programming. I joined the YMCA programming team because of their commitment to youth ‘empowerment’ and to their openness to different programmatic approaches. I was introduced to all the stakeholders of the Gully Project as a volunteer, to rationalize my initial involvement within the program, until the research project was further developed.

My initial interactions with the research participants began in May of 2009 during the weekly, recreation drop-in sessions. Being involved as a volunteer gave me an excuse to visit the neighbourhood on numerous occasions (which was located across the street
from the program facilities). In turn, the youth often invited me into their homes, neighbourhood and into the spaces where they interacted with one another. Some of the participants also gave me the privilege of interacting with their family members, which has enabled me to contextualize their experiences of the program.

With the commencement of the Gully Project in September of 2009, my role as a volunteer changed to one of a facilitator. In this new role, I was called upon by the staff of the YMCA to help design and implement a program with a PYD orientation. During the process of exploring current literature and trying to implement this approach, I realized my sensitivity and changing interest towards the subjective experiences of the participants. This change in focus from an implementation perspective to a more participant-centred perspective had many implications to my role in the program. In order to facilitate more open communication between myself and the participants, I chose to revert back to my original role as a volunteer and minimize my facilitative and leadership responsibilities. My primary concern was to establish a better rapport with participants in order to enhance dialogue between myself and the participants. I reluctantly gave up direct influence on program design and direction.

3.1.3 The Program and Research Participants

This section provides a description of program activities, followed by a description of the research participants. Over the course of the school year, nine adolescent boys attended the program consistently very Monday nights from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm, with the exception of the holiday break in December and occasional program cancellations. Upon receiving ethics approval to conduct this research study, I formally invited the program participants to be involved in the research study in a recruitment
meeting held during one of the weekly meetings. During this recruitment meeting, all program participants were given details about the research project and were asked to take consent and assent forms home to discuss the possibility of being involved in the research with their parents (see Appendix C for a script of the recruitment meeting). Out of nine potential participants in the Gully after-school program, seven boys initially expressed interest in the study. All seven youth were asked to complete the consent and assent forms (see Appendix D and E for assent and consent forms). Four participants returned their consent forms within the first week of the recruitment meeting. One participant voluntarily withdrew from the project due to the incarceration of his mother. Two others withdrew due to time constraints. At least three attempts were made to accommodate the needs of these participants but after a month of rescheduled and at least three missed interviews, the onus was left on them to return their signed consent forms before beginning the research process. This approach gave participants a relatively easy and non-coercive means of withdrawing from the study. These two youth failed to returned their signed forms. Consequently, the research participants of this study were four adolescent boys who participated in the Gully after-school program over the 2009/2010 school year, James, William, Jack and Omar. Pseudonyms have been used to replace the names of those involved in this research to protect their identity. Three of these participants, James, William and Jack, lived in the government subsidized complex across the street from the research site and the remaining participant, Omar, lived in a neighbouring residential area. Prior to their involvement in the program, these boys were acquainted with each other through their shared experiences of attending the same school and living in close proximity to one another. Due to differences in their socio-cultural
lives and life experiences, these participants bring unique yet equally valued perspectives to the research project.

3.1.4 Data-Collection Methods

The following section describes the methods that were used to explore the research questions. This study employed a multiple methods approach to gather data. Within the context of paired and individual interviews, task-based activities were used to elicit rich details of lived experiences. Task-based activities include a variety of techniques that require research participants to manipulate concrete objects or use visual images as a way to enhance dialogue between the research and participant(s). These activities often include photo-elicitation, drawing-elicitation, timelines and diagrams. Task-based methods are used by researchers to elicit discussions about experiences that are meaningful to research participations (Freedman & Mathison, 2009; Punch, 2002). Phenomenological studies typically rely on the use of individual interviews in the traditional open-ended question-and-answer format (Creswell, 1998). This one-on-one format, with an primary emphasis on verbal communication can be a challenge when working with youth because they accentuate the power imbalance between adult researcher and youth participant (Freedman & Mathison). Moreover, traditional adult research methods have been problematized as boring and confusing to young people (Punch).

On the other hand, task-based methods are increasingly used to enhance young people’s possibilities to participate in research (O’Kane, 2008) and its benefits are well documented (Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett & Robinson, 2004; Freedman & Mathison, 2009). These methods enable researchers to be more sensitive to the competencies and
interests of youth. This approach has been widely used within the context of rural development work, also known as Participatory Rural Appraisals. They are especially effective in researching communities with low levels of literacy because these methods place greater emphasis on visual representations, rather than reading or writing skills. According to Clark (2004), using this approach not only lessens the power imbalance, it also facilitates multiple forms of expression. This is particularly important to “support the communicative styles that children who inhabit different race, gender and class positions may have” (Freedman & Mathison, p. 111). Moreover, the use of task-based methods allows participants to have some control over the research context by setting their own agenda. In task-based activities, such as drawing or graffiti elicitation, participants feel more confident and in control because they can change or add to their visual representations, rather than feeling pressured to give the right answers in more traditional research settings (Clark). According to Punch (2002), young people tend to respond positively to interactive, task-based activities because these techniques offer a favourable alternative to schoolwork.

A phenomenological study typically involves conducting extensive individual interviews (approximately one hour in length) or multiple interviews with the same participant in order to fully grasp the experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). In keeping with much of qualitative research, an emergent research design was used in this study to ensure that each phase was informed by the findings and reflections of previous phases. Although I began the data collection phase with a list of prescribed methods to be used during each interview, these methods acted as a guide for gathering data, subjected for review depending on each participant’s personality and their ability/willingness to
share their experiences in a phenomenological way. For instance, the first interview was conducted as a paired interview due to the anxieties of one participant. Consequently, these two adolescents engaged in an extra follow-up individual interview to clarify different aspects of their experiences, resulting in their participation in a total of four interviews each. For the other two participants, I conducted three individual interviews. Interviews took place both inside and outside of the church, on a different day from the program. During each interview, participants engaged in different task-based activities to explore the various research questions of this study. The following section provides a description and rationale for each interview, supplemented with a timeline of the data collection and analysis phase.

3.1.4.1 Interview One: Exploring Context

The purpose of the first interview was to situate participants' involvement in the Gully Project within the context of their everyday lives. Photo-elicitation interview (PEI) was the method of choice to explore this research question. Instead of the conventional question-and-answer format, this interview used participant-generated photographs to elicit discussions on different aspects of participants' lives outside of the program, such as their school environment, home, and neighbourhood. The benefits of this technique have been well-documented (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Harper, 2002). According to Harper, photographs serve as a medium of communication, "bridging gaps between the worlds of the researcher and participants" (p. 20). Photographs can facilitate asking interviewees relevant questions pertaining to their experiences. Moreover, photographs can also ease rapport between researcher and interviewees by allowing both parties to focus on a tangible object, an image that is partially understood by both parties (Clark-Ibanez).
Finally, visual images stimulate respondents’ memories in different ways than do verbal cues and allow researchers to understand youth’s experiences in ways that other traditional forms of communication may not necessarily allow (Liebenberg, 2009).

The first interview took place in May of 2010, at the eight-month mark of the program. To prepare for this interview, participants were each given a disposable camera a week before the scheduled interview and asked to take ‘snapshots’ of their everyday lives outside of the program, such as their home, community and school environment. See Appendix F for instructions that were given to participants to prepare for the PEL. These pictures were then used to elicit discussion during the interview. Participants were asked to describe the details of the photographs, as well as the significance/meaning behind each image. These interviews were conducted inside the church where the program was located, during the after-school hours on days that the boys did not attend the program sessions. For two of the boys, I conducted a paired interview that lasted 25 minutes and individual follow-up interviews that lasted 15 minutes each. The paired interview was conducted in a small room inside the church, with the two boys and myself sitting on chairs around a small circular table. The two follow-up individual interviews were conducted one week after the paired interview in the foyer of the church, where the interviewee and myself sat around a small circular table. I conducted individual interviews with the other two adolescents in the foyer of the church, one lasting 15 minutes and the other 50 minutes.

3.1.4.2 Interview Two: Exploring the Program

The purpose of the second set of interviews was to gain a better understanding of participants’ lived experiences of the program. Held at the nine-month mark of the
program, two of these individual interviews were held outside of the church building, with researcher and participant both sitting on separate skateboards located a meter and a half apart, facing each other. One interview lasted 20 minutes while the other lasted 30 minutes. The other two individual interviews were conducted in a small room inside the church, with researcher and participant sitting at a table one meter apart and lasted 30 minutes each. Taking an ‘emic’ approach to exploring participants’ lived experiences, I used a variety of open-ended questions to explore aspects of the program that were meaningful to participants, including “How did you get involved with the program?” and “How did you find it?” According to van Manen (1990), a logical way to begin exploration of a phenomenon is to start from the beginning. Probing questions were asked to help further participants’ stories. Three participants were also asked to complete a timeline, illustrating the events in the program that were the least and most meaningful to them (see Appendix G for a sample timeline). The purpose of this technique was to facilitate discussions and to compare the meanings that participants ascribed to different events of the program (Freedman & Mathison, 2009).

The use of an emergent research design can be illustrated through the use of this timeline method. In this second set of interviews, I presented empty timelines for the first two interviewees, in the naïve assumption that they would be able to recall events that were the most meaningful to them. After witnessing the difficulties that these adolescents had in recalling events of the previous eight months, I provided a sample timeline for the third participant, labeling all the possible events that occurred in the program. This change in technique appeared to benefit the later participant, who recalled more events than the first two. The fourth participant was not asked to complete the timeline due to his
recent involvement in the program. Instead, this participant engaged in a drawing-elicitation activity to facilitate discussions on meaningful aspects of the program.

3.1.4.3 Interview Three: Clarification of Previous Themes

The final set of interviews was conducted at the ten-month mark of the program. The purpose of this interview was to revisit themes that seemed important to participants in previous interviews and to make clarifications to other themes. I also used this opportunity to use the drawing-elicitation technique with the other participants to elicit meaningful accounts of the program. These individual interviews were conducted inside the church in the same manner as the previous interviews. The interviews varied in length, depending on how much participants were willing to share, ranging from 20 to 40 minutes.

3.1.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation was guided by Creswell’s (1998) data analysis spiral, Caelli’s (2001) narrative analysis and van Manen’s (1990) thematic analysis. The combined use of these analytic processes facilitated the production of a holistic presentation of the thematic structure of the phenomenon within the context of the youth’s lives. Creswell’s data analysis spiral was the framework that guided the entire data analysis and interpretation process. Caelli’s narrative analysis was the technique used to explicate a narrative of participants’ socio-cultural context and van Manen’s thematic analysis was used to explicate thematic structures of participants’ lived experiences of the program. In keeping consistent with much of qualitative research, data analysis and interpretation was appropriately crafted to accomplish the goals of this research study (Dey, 1993; Huberman & Miles, 1994).
The analysis process began with the collected data of text and was completed with a narrative. Guided by Creswell’s (1998) analytic spiral, I proceeded through the different processes of data analysis and interpretation (data management, reading/memoing, describing, classifying, interpreting, representation) in analytic circles rather than in a fixed linear fashion, allowing each stage of the analysis to inform other stages. Given that three to four interviews were conducted with each participant, this framework was especially appropriate in enabling the insights gained from each interview to inform the content and structure of proceeding interviews. Preliminary analysis of each transcript was conducted using van Manen’s (1990) thematic analysis right after their occurrence to uncover themes of lived experiences. According to van Manen, themes are the “experiential structures that make up that experience” (p. 5). The purpose of this preliminary analysis was to allow each interview to inform subsequent interviews (Creswell). To achieve this task, I transcribed each interview verbatim immediately after its occurrence to ensure accurate recall. I read each transcript several times in its totality to get an overall sense of the transcript before breaking it into parts. I then wrote memos in the form of detailed descriptions and reflexive notes on the margins of the transcript in order to note concepts that needed clarification or expansion, as well as to document methodological challenges and ethical issues. Then, transcribed interviews were coded using a line-by-line technique in which each sentence of the transcribed interview was read to determine what it revealed about participants’ lived experiences both in and outside of the program. These significant statements were coded and combined into meaning units. Emerging out of the meaning units were themes that described the meaning that these experiences had on participants. This preliminary analytic circle
allowed me to explore ambiguous concepts and other themes that were relevant to other participants.

Upon completion of all interviews, I further analyzed the transcripts to explicate a narrative and thematic structures of participants’ lived experiences. To begin this process, I returned to the initial stages of the analytic spiral, data management, a process whereby all themes were filed according to what they revealed about different contexts within the youth’s lives. All sections revealing the adolescents’ socio-cultural context were analyzed using Caelli’s (2001) narrative analysis and all sections revealing experiences of the program were analyzed using van Manen’s (1990) thematic analysis. Caelli’s modified coding procedure combined van Manen’s interpretive analysis with those of scholars who advocate an American phenomenological approach to research. The analytic procedure that was used is as follows. First, all transcripts were read over again to highlight the statements that revealed significant descriptions of each participant’s life outside of the program. These significant statements were then combined into meaning units, ensuring that little change was made to participant’s own words. Next, questions within the interview that seem unnecessary to the narrative were deleted. Finally, meaning units were categorized into themes and were rearranged in a logical order to reconstruct the narrative as verbatim as possible. All changes made to the participants’ actual words were distinguished through the use of brackets.

van Manen’s (1990) thematic analysis was used to create exhaustive descriptions of the boys’ experiences of the program. Sections of transcribed text that revealed the boys’ experiences of the program were analyzed line-by-line. The statements that were highlighted were treated as having equal worth and used to develop a list of non-
repetitive, non-overlapping statements. These statements were then grouped into meaning units and then categorized into thematic structures of the experience. The narrative presentation and the write-up of thematic structures were written in such a way as to highlight both the commonalities within their experiences, as well as the different meanings that they attributed to their participation in the program, as it fit within the context of their lives.

3.1.6 Data Collection and Analysis Timeline

The following timeline describes the different stages and time frame of the data collection and analysis process.

May 2009 to February 2010:

This period was characterized by prolonged engagement with the youth. As a volunteer of the YMCA, I attended weekly program sessions as well as various events that the youth were involved in, including a basketball tournament and frequent visits to the YCMA facilities. These interactions were documented in the form of fieldnotes about program activities and participants. This process of weekly journaling helped me to gain insights into issues that were important to the adolescent boys and helped me to ask relevant questions during the interviews.

April 2010:

Upon approval from the YMCA and Brock University’s Research Ethics Board to conduct this research study, a recruitment meeting was held to inform potential youth of the opportunity to be involved in the research project. Within the week, four participants returned their signed consent and assent forms and initial dates and location were established for the first set of interviews.
April 5, 2010:

An informal interview was conducted with a 13-year-old boy who was not involved with the Gully Project but had experiences with an after-school program. The purpose of this interview was to practice the interview guide and to obtain feedback on my interview style. The data from this interview was not used in the research project.

May 2010:

The first interview with each participant was completed and recorded on audiotape. In keeping with the analytic spiral, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and preliminarily analyzed immediately after its occurrence. During this process, I read the transcribed interviews thoroughly and recorded memos to document information that required further clarification or elaboration and methodological issues to address during subsequent interviews.

June 2010:

The second set of interviews was completed and recorded on audiotapes. Participants were asked to clarify ambiguous concepts and themes from the previous interview. This second set of interviews was also transcribed and analyzed in the same manner as the previous set, noting questions and topics that needed further clarification and exploration in the final interview.

July 2010:

The third set of interview was completed and recorded on audiotapes. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed in the same manner as previous interviews.
This time period marked the second phase of data analysis and interpretation whereby another layer of analysis was added to explicating contextualized thematic structures of participants' lived experiences. The cyclic nature of this strategy is consistent with much of qualitative research (Creswell, 1998).

August 2010:

Upon completion of the narrative and thematic structures, a final meeting was held with the research participants. The purpose of this meeting was threefold. First, I wanted the boys to provide feedback as to the accuracy of the written representation. Secondly, I wanted to make sure that they were comfortable with the idea of other people potentially recognizing their identity and the details of their lives, given the small amount of participants in the study. Finally, I wanted to express my appreciation for their time and contribution towards the project in the form of an honorarium. During this meeting, I shared my interpretations of their experiences of the program with the four adolescent boys as a group, as per their request. No one articulated any objection to the themes. They insisted that the narratives be shared in the same manner, despite my suggestion for individual meetings. As an alternative, each youth was given their own narrative to read, making sure that they were comfortable with other people reading the contents of the narratives. After scanning the document, all of the boys gave their affirmation by quickly placing the paper on the table and continued with their conversations. After two more attempts to convince the youth to meet separately for further discussions, I ended the meeting by giving each of the boys their honorarium of a ten dollar gift certificate of a previously selected retailer.
3.1.7 Rigor and Credibility

Each research tradition has its own indicators of rigor and credibility, otherwise traditionally known as validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Not only do qualitative researchers comply to different credibility measures than quantitative researchers, one qualitative research tradition follows different criteria from other qualitative traditions. For example, proponents of traditional indicators of validity and reliability may argue that credibility in this study is compromised because participants' testimonies may be 'contaminated' due to the significant impact that the researcher has on participants. However, such an argument is based on the conventional scientific notion that there is a 'true' representation to be collected (Connolly, 2008). From a phenomenological perspective, there are multiple realities of any human experience and the important reality is what actors perceive it to be (Willis, Jost & Nilakanta, 2007; van Manen, 1990). Young people's accounts of their experiences contain an inherent validity because it reflects the ways in which they perceive the world.

Nevertheless, the credibility of qualitative research is essential to ensuring trustworthy research results. This goal was achieved by incorporating numerous components into this phenomenological investigation, including prolonged engagement, audit trails and reflexive journaling (Creswell, 1998; Willis et al., 2007). Through prolonged engagement with participants in the program, I was able to establish a non-threatening relationship with the youth in the study. From my perspective, this rapport enhanced their willingness to share their experiences. Through the use of reflexive notes, an audit trail was established to make explicit the decisions and influences of the researcher in shaping the research process. This process of making decisions explicit to
others is critical to ensuring high quality phenomenological research (Whitehead, 2004). While the process of phenomenological data collection and analysis seem relatively standard to qualitative research, methodological challenges and ethical issues were prevalent throughout this research project.

3.2 Research with Young People: An Overview

Methodological challenges and ethical issues were prevalent in this study, given the nature of the research participants. The following section provides an overview of current literature on research with young people, followed by a discussion of some of the methodological issues and ethical issues that were specific to this study. According to Christensen and James (2008), the ways in which adult researchers view young people inform their choice of research methods and techniques. Prior to the 1980s, young people have been involved in research studies as research ‘subjects.’ As researchers’ ‘objects of concern,’ they are simply required to answer questions and follow instructions from researchers. This approach to research on young people is informed by the view of ‘child as object’ (O’Kane, 2008). From this perspective, young people are seen as incompetent and unable to deal with information to the standard of adults. This research orientation relies heavily on adult accounts and adult perspectives, who serve as ‘protectors’ and ‘interpreters’ of young people’s experiences. Recently, there has been increasing interest in valuing young people’s experiences and unique perspectives. Researchers are advocating for research methodologies that facilitate research with youth, rather than on or about young people (Christensen & James; Fraser, Lewis, Kellett & Robinson, 2004).

More specifically, phenomenology is one such research tradition that has the potential to explore phenomena that are unique to young people in the richness of detail
that other research methodologies have not been able to captivate. However, conducting research with this demographic has many different methodological and ethical considerations from research with adults. The following section describes some methodological issues that arose during this phenomenological investigation with four adolescent boys. Some strategies for mitigating these challenges are also presented, as well as a discussion of some lessons that I have learned throughout this research journey.

3.2.1 Methodological Challenges with Conducting Research with Adolescent Boys

This academic journey was filled with many opportunities to learn about myself as a researcher, about adolescent boys and most of all, about the process of research as a challenging journey filled with on-the-spot decision-making with no prescribed answers. The following section describes three methodological challenges and ethical issues that arose during the course of this research project: negotiating between different roles and responsibilities, conducting phenomenological interviews with adolescent boys and participants’ unfamiliarity with the research process.

3.2.1.1 Negotiating between Different Roles and Responsibilities

One of the main methodological challenges involved negotiating between different roles and responsibilities. Having been previously involved in the program, I found myself juggling between two roles throughout data collection, one being an adult volunteer of the program and the other being a researcher. As an adult volunteer, I was present during the weekly two hour program sessions. Regardless of the minimal facilitative responsibilities I had as a volunteer, I was still expected by the staff of the church to monitor the youth and to enforce the rules of the church (for example, respecting church property, moderate noise level, and no skateboarding indoors).
However, as a researcher, my primary goal was to develop a non-threatening, non-judgement relationship with the research participants. Other researchers have promoted this type of relationship as ideal in enhancing dialogue with young participants (Freedman & Mathison, 2009; Mayall, 2008). Freedman and Mathison explain that a difficult challenge when conducting research with youth is the difference in power and status between adult researchers and youth participants. Young people are unfamiliar with expressing their views freely or being taken seriously by adults due to their low status in an adult-dominated society. In order to lessen the effects of this power imbalance and enhance dialogue between researcher and participants, researchers have advocated the importance of establishing a non-threatening relationship with young participants (Mayall). Other researchers have expressed the need to customize research methods according to the unique skills and abilities of participants (Punch, 2002).

Negotiating between these two roles proved to be difficult during the many times that some of the adolescent boys disregarded church rules. For example, during each interview, I found myself at crossroads between being accountable to the staff of the church while simultaneously trying to show acceptance to the 'youthful' ways of the youth:

Jack liked to pick up the church phones to make prank calls. Sometimes (the participants) engage in what seem to me as harmless activities (putting excessive sugar in his hot chocolate, running around in the church) but when the 'adults' in the church pass by and look suspiciously at their behaviour, I start to tense up and tell them to go into the library. (Fieldnotes, May 13, 2010)
This fieldnote excerpt was exemplar of the conflicting emotions that I often felt while gathering data. Another example of this dilemma occurred when I was interacting with participants outside of the interview setting. As an adult volunteer, I was expected to maintain a certain level of distance between the boys and myself, as to not be misconstrued as trying to take advantage of minors. I often questioned myself regarding the appropriateness or inappropriateness of my behaviour as an ‘adult’ interacting with adolescent boys. For example, is it appropriate for me to give rides to the boys before/after their interviews, especially when it was raining outside? Is it appropriate for me to call participants on their cell phones? Should I encourage personal communication outside of scheduled program activities and interviews?

Moreover, I experienced methodological challenges that were related to my responsibility as an adult female researcher conducting research with twelve-year-old boys. As a woman interviewing boys, I was concerned about my intentions or actions being misconstrued as something other than platonic. Through my involvement in the program, I noticed that some participants spoke to me in a much softer tone of voice than they did to the other adult in the program, which at times made me feel uncomfortable. One participant in particular, hugged me on several occasions out of context during program sessions. I was afraid that my interest to explore their lived experiences and attempts to establish rapport would be misconstrued as something other than research-based, given the more intimate nature of one-on-one interviews. I was every cautious to conduct the interviews in a public space and to avoid places where young people consider as intimate settings, such as a park or a restaurant.
Despite these attempts to establish clear boundaries between the participants and myself, the boys would refer to sexual acts or relationships during our conversations:

I took these eight pictures of Thao. This one she’s looking at Omar. This one she’s looking at Omar. This one she’s giving Omar a (blowjob)...This one, she’s trying to put on a condom but she can’t put it on. It won’t fit, she’s like, “it’s too small!” (Omar & Jack, May 04, 2010)

These experiences were uncomfortable for me, both for how it made me feel and for how I should address them as a researcher. Another example of an ‘inappropriate’ moment was described in the following fieldnote, “Jack mentioned a threesome (Jack, Omar and me) with Michelle – putting me in the closet or I can be with Omar, (telling Omar that) “you can have the older one” (Omar & Jack, May 04, 2010). At the time, I felt very uncomfortable being referenced in such a manner but I tried to hide my discomfort in order to gain a better understanding of the seemingly appalling ways of these youth.

3.2.1.2 Conducting Phenomenological Interviews with Adolescent Boys

The second methodological challenge involved my limited ability to elucidate phenomenological descriptions from adolescent boys. Involving children in phenomenological research has been a contentious issue among researchers (Coyne, 1998; Taylor & Delprato, 1994). To traditional researchers, young people are presumed to lack the necessary ability to verbally articulate their experiences adequately, a characteristic that is essential to any phenomenological investigation (Ryba, 2010). Other researchers have recognized the potential value of studying the lived experiences of young people (Ryba; Tekola, Griffin & Camfield, 2008). As a novice researcher, I relied on methodological strategies presented in the literature to inform my method of choice.
for collecting data. When I began my data collection journey, the words of prominent phenomenological scholars informed my methodological approaches. Some scholars suggested that a phenomenological interview script should consist of one open-ended question and that all other questions would emerge from the context of the dialogue between researcher and participant (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). van Manen (1990) suggests that asking too many questions is seldom necessary. Rather, patience or silence can be effective in prompting participants to gather their recollections. Despite the use of these suggested techniques, I encountered challenges in my attempts to elucidate phenomenological descriptions from the youth as a result of a lack of interviewing techniques and a lack of understanding of twelve-year-old boys.

Firstly, my inexperience as a novice researcher constrained me from obtaining meaningful descriptions of participants’ lived experiences. For most of the participants, open-ended questions were not effective in elucidating rich narratives of their experiences. When questions, such as ‘tell me about your home life,’ or ‘tell me about the other boys in the group,’ could not produce lengthy or detailed answers, I was forced to ask more direct questions to help illuminate their lived experiences. However, by asking direct questions, I determined the types of experiences that participants talked about. It was difficult coming to terms with my own influence on the research project. I felt frustrated in my inability to help them to articulate themselves in a more phenomenological manner, something that participants were clearly not familiar with doing:

T: How do you feel when you’re rollerblading with your friends?
J: Having fun with my friends and it’s really fun, I just do that and like it gets away from everything else. Just rollerblading instead of doing homework and stuff.

T: What kind of stuff?

J: Homework.

T: Homework. Ok, so explain to me what fun is?

J: You don’t know what fun is?

T: Just pretend I don’t know what fun is. In your own words, what does fun mean to you?

J: Fun. I don’t know how to explain fun. (Long Pause)

T: Can you give me an example?

J: …enjoyment of something that pleases you (James, June 10, 2010)

My attempts to help the boys to be articulate was further constrained by my inexperience with using task-based methods. After reviewing some methodological literature, I accrued a favourable impression of task-based methods that, in retrospect, was not thoroughly supported by literature. According to Punch (2002b), the benefits and the drawbacks of these novel techniques have not always been scrutinized and they have been frequently adopted with insufficient critical reflection. I was ill-prepared for the challenges that arose during data collection due to a failure to examine the potential methodological challenges extensively. I relied too much on these techniques during the interviews. For example, in the photo-elicitation activity, my over-emphasis on the contents of the photographs resulted in very limited and shallow knowledge about participants’ lives outside of the program. Instead, I should have used the pictures as
means to probe at more meaningful experiences. Most often, participants took the pictures “cause I felt like it” or “I don’t know.” This was contrary to the assumption that participants would take pictures that were most meaningful to them (Harper, 2002). I did not anticipate most of their photographs being taken spontaneously or without thought of their significance. Similarly, using the timeline was not conducive to elucidating phenomenological meaning behind activities or events. Participants simply grazed over each event, recalling the facts and going onto the next event. If I had more experience with this technique, I would have asked more probing questions to obtain more meaningful details of the experiences.

Along with a lack of interviewing experience, I was also constrained by a lack of understanding of twelve-year old boys. On numerous occasions, I felt that I needed a degree in developmental psychology to excel in my role as a phenomenological researcher. Conducting interviews with youth of varying abilities proved to be a challenge. Some of the interviewees struggled to fill out the timeline activity while others completed the exercise with ease. The drawing exercise produced insightful descriptions in one boy’s interview but was not appealing for the other youth. Along with understanding differences in abilities, I also found it difficult to understand the culture and language of these young research participants. At times during the interviews, I felt like an outsider, unable to relate to their interests and ways of communicating. I was puzzled by some of the jargon or slang that they used and rarely did they take the time to explain the meaning of their statements:

P: I took this picture...of a kid in my class...because he’s giving some puss.

T: He what?
P: He's giving some puss in this picture.

T: What does that mean?

P: I don’t know. (Jack, May 4, 2010)

Apart from jargon, the boys behaved in ways that I could not fathom. For example, they had this culture of criticizing one another that seemed outrageously offensive from my female perspective. Pollack (as referenced in Cronan & Witt, 2005), describes the existence of a Boy Code, which is set of rules and expectations about how boys should behave and interact in their social environment. This code of conduct is first imposed by society and then perpetuated by parents, peers, and friends as the accepted way to be male. The Boy Code encompasses four tenants. First, boys should not show emotion. Violence is an acceptable response to emotional upset. Third, power is important and self-esteem relies on having power. Finally, it is important for boys to reject “feminine” qualities and to maintain a masculine image. This code has many implications to peer dynamics in terms of the promotion of a boy culture, where peer groups reinforce many aspects of the code through ridicule and excessive competition. For example, boys are often reprimanded when they excessively deviate from the expected male ideal or when they do not overtly display their masculinity and sexuality. At the time of data collection, I was oblivious to this expected code of behaviour but in retrospect, this knowledge gives a lot of insight into the meaning of their peer interactions. Perhaps an interviewer with more experience of those topics would be able to elicit more rich descriptions.
3.2.1.3 Participants’ Unfamiliarity with the Research Process

The final methodological challenge was a result of participants’ inexperience with the research process, resulting in nervousness and issues of confidentiality. Firstly, it was surprising for me to witness the high level of anxiety from all of the research participants. For example, the structure of the first interview was changed from an individual interview to a paired interview to facilitate the high level of anxiety and uncertainty that was displayed by the first interviewee. The following field note excerpt illustrates some of the participant’s anxieties over the audio recorder:

As soon as I took out the audio recorder, Omar turned his attention away from his pictures and began to ask questions (in a nervous manner) about the logistics of the interview. He wanted to do a ‘practice’ run, and asked questions such as, “what if I stumble?” and “what if I say the wrong things?” He wanted to record a segment and play it back so he could hear what he sounded like. (Fieldnote, May 4, 2010)

After the first interview, participants seemed to be more at ease with the interview setting and returned to their usual selves.

Finally, research participants’ unfamiliarity with the research process presented some challenges to issues of confidentiality and anonymity. Young people are considered a vulnerable group due to their ‘diminished autonomy’ (Freedman & Mathison, 2009, p. 24) and their limited experience with the research process. Researchers have extensively discussed the importance of ethical practices to protect the rights of young participants and to ensure their confidentiality (Christenson & James, 2008; Freedman & Mathison). During the recruitment meeting, I discussed in detail the potential implication that having
Even though pseudonyms were used for personal identifiers, there was a possibility that readers associated with the research project may recognize their identity through the details in the stories that they shared. Despite my best attempts to help them to understand this issue, some of the youth shared very intimate details of their family lives. During the write-up process, I was faced with an ethical dilemma of what details of their lives to share and what to omit. For example, one participant took a picture of a toy that was symbolic of the orgasmic sounds that frequently echoed through his walls. This story was very powerful in illustrating the instability of this youth's home life but ethically, I felt obligated to exclude this story in the write-up to prevent potential embarrassment to the family. Ethically, I felt a responsibility to ensure the social well-being of the youth and their families.

3.2.2 Strategies to Mitigate Methodological Challenges

To mitigate the effects of the above methodological challenges and ethical issues, the following three strategies were used: bracketing, multiple interviews, and a continuous loop of literature review, data collection and analysis. van Manen (1990) described bracketing as a process that facilitates an openness to the world. When I began this research project, I engaged in what I thought was bracketing, making explicit my assumptions of after-school programs and recreation. At the time, I was oblivious to the depth and significance of this process. I completed this task solely because it was deeply rooted in the phenomenological tradition. As I committed myself to a more reflexive and self-critical cycle of data collection and analysis, I came to an appreciation of bracketing as an ongoing process that was critical for two primary reasons. First of all, bracketing
served as a means to critically reflect on the effects of my methods and my skills as a novice interviewer. Through this process, I gained insight into how my lack of interviewing skills and assumptions as an adult researcher shaped the content of each transcript. Secondly, bracketing enabled me to become more open to understanding the ways of youth. Through the use of reflexive notes, I continually challenged my expectations of what was ‘appropriate’ behaviour through an adult lens. Through this process of critical self-analysis, I came to understand that these assumptions have been socially constructed and that it was not necessarily fair to force these standards on young people who have not had much experience with the adult social world.

Secondly, conducting multiple interviews with the same participant was critical to increasing the richness of the youth’s descriptions of their experiences. Despite my already established rapport, the first set of interviews served as a learning experience for me on how to effectively dialogue with adolescent boys. This process involved teasing out my assumptions of how youth were ‘supposed’ to behave and learn to accept their ‘youthful’ ways. Each participant entered the interview setting with his own strengths and weaknesses and I had to cater to these different abilities. Conducting multiple interviews allowed me to use different techniques, such as photographs, drawings, and verbal games, to elicit in-depth descriptions of participants’ lived experiences. Finally, conducting multiple interviews also enabled me to explore the same topic in different ways, yielding different aspects of the phenomenon. I had the flexibility to allow the nonverbal cues of participants to dictate the length and content of each interview.

The final strategy that helped to mitigate the effects of some methodological challenges was the use of a continuous cycle of literature review, data collection, analysis
and interpretation. Through this emergent research design, I was able to allow the information gained from each interview to inform the proceeding interviews. For example, after analyzing each set of interview immediately after their occurrence, I used the insights to inform the contents and procedures of the proceeding interviews.

Similarly, I tried to address the methodological challenges of each interview by revisiting literature to gain insight into potential strategies that other researchers have used under similar conditions. For example, when the timeline activity did not yield the quality of information that I had anticipated, I turned to literature only to find other researchers who have experienced low success rates with similar task-based methods. Tekola et al. (2009) described instances when the young children in their study experienced difficulties expressing themselves through task-based activities, particularly drawings and timelines. These researchers explained that some children were not accustomed to communicating by pictures or timelines and that it was difficult to use these techniques as a main source of data.

3.2.3 Lessons Learned

Negotiating through methodological challenges enabled me to learn valuable lessons throughout this research journey, including my tendency to privilege adult ways of being, the uncritical use of research methods and the inevitability of power imbalances. Firstly, I began this research journey with deeply held notions of appropriate behaviour in different settings, as constructed through an adult lens. For example, during the program, I expected the boys to obey the rules of conduct that they had established for themselves at the beginning of the program (for example, no swearing, no ‘trashtalking,’ respecting other people). Along with these rules, the youth were also expected to follow the rules of
the church (for example, maintaining moderate noise levels, no skateboarding, no wondering in the hallways and restricted areas of the church). Similarly, I entered the data collection phase with deeply-held notions of behaviours that are socially constructed by adults as being appropriate to a research setting: both parties sitting down, taking turns to share information in a relatively quiet, uninterrupted setting. The following fieldnote illustrates how these four adolescents challenged many of these behavioural expectations:

Throughout the interview, Jack kept himself busy. As he was talking and answering my questions, he put a cupcake inside his hot chocolate...he then proceeded to filter out the cake by shifting the liquid into four different cups...he then got out of his seat (while talking to me at the same time) and began to play with a pink sheep that was sitting on top of a coat rack. After less than a minute with the sheep, he started to play with the hangers...He rearranged the hangers to make a mobile, one attached to the other. He then went over to the coffee machine. I don’t know what to think about all these ‘distractions.’ I found myself trying to negotiate between my assumptions as an adult on what is ‘appropriate behaviour’ and what I should be learning to tolerate as ‘youthful’ ways of being. (Fieldnote, May 13, 2010).

Through constant reflection on the youth’s behaviour, I realized that my behavioural expectations in different social settings are very adult-centered ways of being and began to question whether these assumptions should be forced upon youth who have limited experience with the ‘adult’ world. While young people need to be versed in the ways of the adult world, I would argue that too many adults readily take up this responsibility, without really understanding why some young people are defiant against these norms.
Through this study, I learned that these youth desired a different relationship with adults, a relationship characterized by support and empathy, rather than judgment and negative feedback. How can we begin to understand the learning opportunities that they need without appreciating young people's 'youthful ways of being?'

Secondly, I gained insight into the importance of critically evaluating different research methods. Through my methodological challenges, I realized that the value of any given research technique depends on the ability and personality of each research participant. Not having this prior knowledge on the competencies of the youth caused me to use different task-based methods through trial-and-error, attempting to find a technique that would yield meaningful results for each participant. This experimentation undermined my ability to explore experiences that were meaningful to the boys. As a result of the study, I have learned that there is no technique that resonates with all participants and that it is critical for researchers to explore the strengths and preferences of participants before selecting a method of choice for data collection.

The final lesson learned was the inevitability of power imbalances between the participants and myself. Despite my best attempts to establish rapport and a non-threatening relationship with participants, some of the youth continued to view me in an authoritative manner. My prior involvement as a volunteer of the program established my position as an adult with some authority in the program. When I took up my role as a researcher, I failed to make this change of role explicit to the youth, which may have resulted in gathering data that was less than truthful. Upon reflecting on their shared stories, I noticed limited discussions on negatives experiences and some of the boys' hesitation to share conflicts among group members. For example,
T: I’m having a hard time getting you guys to talk. You just told me that you wanted to have something to do every week, not just there and watch Tyrone play XBOX. How come you didn’t put that in the ‘things I didn’t like’ section (in the timeline)?

O: What? Put what? (Pretending to not know)

T: ‘Tyrone playing XBOX’.

O: You know the pen was running out. I didn’t…

T: What an excuse! No, seriously. You just didn’t think about it?

O: No, I thought about it but I just…

T: Cause you didn’t want to say it?

O: Yeah.

T: ‘Cause you didn’t want to…

O: The pen was running out! (Omar, May 27, 2010)

These comments reflected the association that the youth had of my involvement in the program. Even if I had made a more explicit distinction between my role as a volunteer versus my role as a researcher, this power imbalance would continue to shape my interactions with them. Despite this limitation, my role as a volunteer in the program was necessary to establish much needed rapport with the youth and their families. Without this rapport, gaining entry into the life-world of the participants would have been impossible. With this constraint in mind, I welcomed their limited openness in the following chapters.
Chapter 4: Phenomenological Descriptions of Lived Experiences

Within the American tradition of phenomenology, context is particularly important because of the ways in which it shapes our understanding of human experiences (Caelli, 2000). The meaning of this after-school program was shaped by each participant’s life experiences outside of the program. In presenting descriptions of four adolescent boys’ experiences of the Gully after-school program, this chapter begins with an overview of the program and the events that have transpired over the course of the 2009/2010 academic school year. This background information is followed by a narrative of each participant’s life experiences outside of the program. Finally, exhaustive descriptions of the thematic structures that made up the youth’s experiences of the program will be presented. Gaining insight into the differences and similarities in lived experiences is “extraordinarily revealing and can lead to a deeper and broader understanding of the phenomenon” (Caelli, p. 278).

4.1 Introducing the Neighbourhood and the Program

The following section provides an overview of the neighbourhood and the program to complement the youth’s descriptions of their lived experiences. As mentioned in previous chapters, the Gully Project was an after-school program run by a local YMCA organization. This program was implemented to address the perceived youth delinquency within a subsidized housing complex located across the street from the program. This complex is home to 85 families living in compact townhouses. The mixture of subsidized housing units with market-priced units makes it difficult to assess the socio-economic status of any given family. However, due to the prevalence of single-parent families and ethnic minority families among the residents, this complex carries the stigmatism that
frequents social housing projects. This community is located on the margins of a suburban city with a reputation for affluence and a population that consists of 80% not being of visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2007). For the fifty or more youth of the complex, there is little safe play-space or accessible recreational facilities within a five km radius. There are two playgrounds located in different areas of the complex, one of which is deemed unsafe by residents. On a typical evening, three to four clusters of young people could be seen scattered throughout the complex, some running around neighbourhood while others congregated on a porch. There is much hostility between these different cliques. According to some of the youth, issues of bullying, theft and vandalism, coupled with constant bickering between adult residents cause much division among the young people of the community.

It is against this backdrop that the Gully Project began in September of 2009. The program takes place inside a church that is located directly across the street from the complex. As a charitable gesture, the church has subsidized the use of its facility to program participants. The church is equipped with a full-sized gymnasium, including six basketball nets and other sporting equipment. Located adjacent to the gymnasium is a spacious kitchen, fully equipped with a dishwasher, refrigerator, small appliances and dishes. On the other side of the church, there is an administration section, a day care centre equipped with four small classrooms and a central congregation area. Within the administration section, there are three offices occupied by church staff, two conference rooms and a library. Church facilities, including the gymnasium, are rented out to different groups within the community. Through the generosity of a church staff member,
the participants of the program have been granted weekly access to a two-hour time slot for use of the gymnasium and the library.

The participants of the Gully Program have attended program sessions every Monday evening from 4:00 to 6:00 consistently during the 2009/2010 academic school year. While the program was open to both male and female adolescents, there have been nine boys who consistently attended weekly sessions, one 12-year old, seven 13-year-olds and one 14-year-old. Over the course of the year, three females have visited program sessions but did not attend consistently. The nine boys in the program have been acquainted with each other before their involvement in the program, due to the proximity of their homes and attending the same school. From my perspective, program participants were divided into two groups. One group is often referred to as the ‘basketball guys,’ due to their exclusive interest in basketball, and later, video games. For this group of three boys, race as a marker of identity, appears to be an important criterion for group membership. They are very patriotic of their Jamaican heritage and often use Jamaican slang as a means to alienate others outside the group, including participants and leaders. They differentiate themselves from other participants by making frequent references to ‘black vs. white.’ These three boys of colour enjoy playing basketball and video games and are resistant to trying new activities. They are respectful to group leaders but confrontational to other group members. They often ridicule and ‘trash talk’ other group members, with the exception of one particular boy, Jack, who is also a research participant. Jack interacts with all program participants equally. The other group in the program consists of all other members, including the remaining three research participants, James, William and Omar. Members of this group appear puzzled by the
frequent references to skin colour. They actively participate in all program activities and readily embrace opportunities to engage in new activities. The four research participants of this study get along well with one another, and through their involvement within the program, they also hang out with each other outside of program hours. William, James and Omar share a common passion for skateboarding and rollerblading. The friends frequent an after-school space where they enjoy skateboarding and rollerblading together, often referred to as Skippy's. From listening to the boys' recollections of this 'hangout,' I erroneously envisioned a local skate park. After a first-hand encounter with the infamous hangout, I was shocked to witness that Skippy's was a convenient store, located in a circular plaza with six other retail stores. These stores are elevated by five steps, which these boys used as their 'ramp.' The youth all live within a five-minute skateboarding radius of the convenient store and this space is the best alternative for them to spend their after-school hours, given their low-resourced neighbourhood. The following section provides a narrative of each participant's lived experiences outside of the program.

4.2 Narratives of the Adolescent Boys

4.2.1 Introducing Omar

Omar is a 13-year-old boy of Arab decent who lives in a residential neighbourhood less than five kilometers from the church. His 5’5”, skinny build, with short dark hair and dark complexion distinguishes him from other group members. He often arrives to the program on his skateboard and hesitantly leaves the program early due to parental rules. As a volunteer of the program, my experiences of Omar have always been pleasant. He enthusiastically participates in all program activities. During the program, Omar could be found engaging in some sort of physical activity. Whether it be a
game of basketball, dodge ball, hockey, a skills competition, or even shooting basketballs by himself, Omar uses free play as an opportunity to develop his physical competencies. During the community project planning sessions, Omar attentively listens to discussions but only offers his input when asked to do so. During the basketball tournament, many of the youth were intimidated by the presence of the ‘older teenagers’ and were reluctant and at times, refused to perform their expected roles as minor officials. As a facilitator, I could count on Omar to perform these tasks, despite his uncertain demeanour. The following is Omar’s narrative:

**Home**

*My name is Omar. I’m thirteen-years-old and I live in a house. I have two sisters and a brother and a mom and a dad. I have my own room, it’s pretty big...I got a full tennis court beside my house...I have a van and a Hyundai. I’m pretty close to my sisters and brother. I usually annoy my brother by waking him up in the morning. My sister fails at volleyball. My favourite game is Monopoly cause I always win when I play with my brother and sisters. Sometimes when they’re doing their homework, I’ll just watch TV, sit on the computer or usually listen to my music...look out my window. It’s a pretty good scene.*

*My parents are pretty nice (but) my dad’s always serious and strict. He doesn’t like what I do most of the time. When they’re not home, they don’t want me to go out...my mom’s usually home.*

**School**

*School is fun and boring. My favourite subject is math ‘cause there’s a lot of ways you can answer a question. I like science ‘cause you get to do projects...doing*
stuff with your hands...not just reading and writing. I like my homeroom teacher ‘cause she’s really nice, doesn’t give us a lot of homework and always gives us games to play...not just sit there.

I feel happy when I’m playing sports with my friends at recess...I feel excited when I get in a fight (with other kids). It’s pretty fun. It actually gets me all happy. It gets me excited ‘cause everyone’s there to watch, all the grade 7s. I don’t get scared unless it’s someone bigger...I get pissed off when people need other people to back them up in a fight. Like, this guy was making fun of me and every time I wanted to fight him, he’d get people to back him up...they’re pretty strong. But next year, he’s not going to have nobody to back him up...I’m pretty excited about beating him up...and he’ll see that I’m better than him and he’s gonna regret that he wanted to fight me. He wants to fight me just to prove that he’s stronger.

Play

When I come home from school, I usually try to find somewhere to go. (In my neighbourhood), there’s not many kids my age, most are younger. I like to skateboard ‘cause it’s extreme and you get to do what you want. You go off jumps and get some air, you feel free...I don’t like to sit around and do nothing.

Sometimes I go to Skippy’s after-school. We sometimes skateboard there but there are cars everywhere. You hit a car, you get in trouble. Last time, there was this five-step and there was a big window right beside it. So I tried to (jump down it) a couple of times. The second time, I was close to breaking the whole window. So we just stopped, well, I just stopped.
I go to other skate parks around here. My friend, he comes here every weekend and Wednesdays...he usually takes us different places like Shell Park, Iceland. Huron. I also go to a skate park every Sundays. It's a huge park, it's right beside where me, my sisters and brother play soccer. We all play on the same day so we stay there all day. My sister usually drives us there and we spend all day there. It's so much fun. I like skateboarding everyday, all day.

4.2.2 Introducing James

James is a 5'2" skinny, Caucasian boy of Danish and German decent. He lives in the housing complex across the street from the church, beside his best friend, William, who is also a research participant. In his thirteen years, James has had to endure many health-related conditions, some of which he shared in this interviews while others I have come to know through interactions with his mother and William. During his out-of-school hours, James can be found usually walking his beloved dog or wandering around the complex with William. Together, the two best friends invent creative ways to occupy their after-school time.

James consistently attends all program activities as much as he has been physically able. His physical health is a constraint to his attendance in the program. Apart from intermittent absences, James has been absent for four consecutive weekly sessions due to his migraines and exhausting visits to Sick Kids' Hospital, a hospital specializing in child health conditions. James is the most talkative member of the group, always trying to make people laugh, regardless of how relevant his stories are to the conversation. During my interactions with him, James enjoys sharing stories of his dog and on numerous occasions, his many skiing achievements. During the program, James enjoys
rollerblading, playing hockey or walking around the church with William. Although not particularly skilled in most sports, James is always willing to participate in group activities and games. Apart from the other research participants, James rarely interacts positively with other members of the group. From what I could see, there is much hostility between James and the ‘basketball guys,’ which is evident by the verbal attacks and name-calling that was frequently directed at James. Towards the beginning of the program, James would often ignore these negative comments but in the latter half of the program, he responds to the negative feedback by confidently rebutting against the negativity. James’ mother also testifies to this change in his behaviour over the course of the program. According to his mother, James displays an increased sense of responsibility and a “general positive outlook” as a result of his participation in the program. The following is James’ narrative:

Home

My name is James. I live with my mom and my sister. When I’m home, I feel bored. I have been staying home (from school) a month because of my headaches. I’m pretty much on Facebook all day...It gets boring doing the same thing. (Me and my sister) don’t always get along (but) she’s still my sister.

I haven’t seen (my dad) in four years. I know he didn’t really want to be a dad. My mom said he wasn’t really that happy when I was born. I feel sad but now I’m pretty much over it. He doesn’t care enough to try and see me. He tells us to call him. I do but he doesn’t call back or email. I don’t get upset. I’ve learned to live with it. I tried to ask him “why did you stop seeing me?” He said this will take more talks like this...He never talked to me since. Now I’m 13, I get to make the
choice to see him or not. I told him "there's nothing to talk to you. I don't have anything to say to you." And then he denied hearing that 'cause I stood up to him.

My dad isn't paying my child support so we've dipped in all my savings and my sister's...so I have no money. (My mom) used the money for my 13th birthday (three weeks ago) to pay all the bills and food. So I don't have a party or birthday present yet. Hopefully I'm getting an iPod Touch or something.

I may move 'cause my mom doesn't like the place here...Everything keeps on happening. It just gets annoying how...you can't go a week and then there's a cop. We used to have a security van that came here everyday. It just gets annoying. They just don't want you playing around the van and they park where everybody plays. They monitor people and they don't want them playing around the van. That's been happening for eight years. Now it's just really getting annoying.

I just went to see this specialist about (my headaches). He said that it's a migraine gone bad and I may have this for the rest of my life. They're not exactly sure what it is yet or what's triggering it or anything. I'm not sure how I feel but I can live with it as long as it doesn't go back to the worse it's been. My head was just really bad...a lot of pain. They pumped me full of drugs that did a little bit. The doctors don't know what's causing it. They know I'm sensitive to sound, movement and light. But that's with all people with migraines. The migraine should go away after you take the medicine and go to sleep but I go to bed with it
and wake up with it, after taking the medicine. I just want the headache to go away now.

School

When I get to school, I’m bored. I haven’t really been going. I’ve missed half a term of school because of my headaches... (The teachers) tell me I’m faking it and that my mom shouldn’t come and get me. They tell me to respect them, do exactly what they say. You do what they say and then they say, “if you have no respect for us, how do you expect us to have respect for you?” And then I say, “I’m giving you all the respect I can.” And they can just act all sarcastic around me with my headache and tell me it’s nothing like that. I don’t think any of my teachers believe me...So now I have no respect for them...They don’t let me do anything...They won’t let me in the office. Any kid can just walk in and phone while I’m actually in a lot of pain but they won’t let me. We’re having a field trip tomorrow but I’m not going ‘cause the teacher says I’m just gonna pass out. So, apparently I’m not going.

I’ve missed a ton of school and I’ve failed pretty much grade seven. I’m not going to summer school. I’m not worried. I’m generally laid back about schoolwork. If I do fail, there’s nothing really they can do about it...I will still graduate.

Play

If I wasn’t here (at the program), I would be playing with my friends or on Facebook. I’ve been to Shell Park a few times. It’s a skate park. Everything is really big...but it’s too far. I like to rollerblade. I bike but right now, both my bikes are broken so I can’t do that. I like to ski. I’m a really good skier.
4.2.3 Introducing William

William is 5’3” Caucasian boy who lives with his mother and sister. From my experiences with William, I see a very resilient side of this 13-year-old boy. Along with a series of debilitating health ailments, this adolescent has had to negotiate through the divorce of his parents, and the relocation to three different neighbourhoods and four different schools. William suffers from much ridicule by his peers, with the exception of his small circle of friends. Some of the other group members often make cruel references to his stuttering and his lack of physical abilities. On one particular occasion, he was mocked immensely for displaying physical affection towards his mother when she visited the facilities. He repeatedly hugged and kissed her on the cheeks, gestures that the other youth apparently did not see as being appropriate for a 13-year-old boy. Although clearly saddened by these negative comments, William never retaliates. He usually ignores verbal ridicule and avoids contact with confrontational group members.

During the program, William and James are inseparable. William especially enjoys rollerblading on the ramps and playing hockey. He enthusiastically participates in the community project and is always the first person to volunteer for responsibilities. He often expresses frustration during times of free play when he thought the group should be “doing something.” The following is William’s narrative:

Home

Living in my house feels crazy. Me and my sister fight sometimes. I kinda want her to (move out)...she just does what she wants. She doesn’t even care about my mom. She doesn’t do anything around the house. I love dogs...my dog always bites me. For some reason, she just doesn’t like me. My sister tells me I’m not
allowed touching it. I don't understand since it's the family's dog. Me and my mom are close. I tell her almost everything. (But) I had this problem with my mom. She doesn't let me buy things on ebay. She says "ebay's bad and you can't go on it. They rip you off." ... I want to get this phone but my mom said once you're (14), you can get a phone.

I have two dads. My stepdad, well, going to be my stepdad, he yells at me (and) hits me but not as hard as my dad actually does. My other one lives in an apartment now. I don't see him that much. I never cry unless my (biological) dad yells at me. When I'm at his house I just wanna go home when he's angry at me...sometimes for the littlest things, sometimes it's not. Like one time, when he was moving in, I was trying to put the curtain up. I was on a chair and couldn't do it...He's getting mad at me, pushed me off a couch and said, "you can't do it. You're useless." I get pretty mad at him. I don't want to do anything to hurt his feelings but he's hurt my feelings. I don't want to say anything bad to him 'cause he will get more mad at me. Sometimes if I have any money, I just want to give it to him...'cause I don't want him to yell at me all the time.

I had...a ton of surgeries. The biggest two surgeries of my life, I had one when I was four and...one when I was ten. Then they had to, something about my heart in the surgery thing. I didn't really like the hospital, especially Sick Kids. They have video games and computer and everything. It's really fun there but after all the hurting and pain...The doctors don't know if I'll grow back that muscle on the side of my heart. They have to cut it off every time. I don't remember about the
surgery. I only remember how it hurt a lot, like really bad. You just get angry from (the medicine) they put in you. You just get really cranky 'cause you're tired. After surgery I had to stay in the house for six months and basically do nothing.

I don't remember when I was a baby at all. I mean nothing at all, no important stuff that happened to me...Everyone in my school do except me. I really don't like my neighbourhood. Not a really good place to raise a child. There's lots of bad stuff happening there, like right now, someone got arrested...(Some kids) were throwing eggs at people's house. James was getting bullied. I don't like saying this a lot but I just don't like where I am right now. Been here my whole life. I don't wanna live there anymore because a lot of bad stuff happens around here. It feels unsafe. Like, one time someone got stabbed. I was scared to walk home. When I see someone in the bushes, it scares me.... Some people aren't really nice. Sometimes they just don't care what they say to people. They're just like, "oh, you're so weird...you're so stupid"...and they swear at you. It makes me mad but I know there's no point of fighting them 'cause I know I won't fight them back and I'll get hurt.

School

I have a huge decision about what school I'm gonna go to next year. I don't even know when the new house is going to be ready. Last year, I had three friends that actually hang out with me the whole time I was at (my old) school, This year I have, it's a big number, like 30 friends. So I went from three to 30 friends. My mom said I should really never switched schools because you have a better education there but all my friends were there. Now, we are moving to the new
house but I don’t know when. I don’t want to go to that school and then have to move...I don’t want to have to make friends all over again. Now, all my friends are at this school.

I’m not smart, I’m decent. There’s a lot of insane teachers...(They) yell for no reason at all, and sometimes for a reason.

Play

(After-school, I’m usually) at home, staying in my room or watching TV...basically, sitting there. Rollerblading’s a lot of fun. But the closest (skatepark) takes us too long and that one’s really not the best. We’ve been there a few times but my mom doesn’t even take us sometimes. (She) has so much stuff to do. The closest one takes us (too long to walk)...It’s exciting because it means now we go across the street just to a skatepark and go everyday. I can skate with my friends here....It’s fun ‘cause I don’t have to go home everyday to my mom and talk...or doing dishes...One thing I hate is that when me and James move, we’re not gonna be in the group anymore. And there’s a YMCA by me but they won’t be the same.

4.2.4 Introducing Jack

Jack is a very high-energy 13-year-old boy who lives in the same housing complex as James and William. He loves to engage in risk-taking behaviour, such as playing with fireworks and hunting. From my experiences as a volunteer and a researcher, I see Jack as a boy who is greatly misunderstood by the adults around him. Few people take time to really understand his ways. For example, his mom has expressed her appreciation for “keeping Jack out of the house.” According to her, Jack has been
diagnosed with Attention Deficit disorder and often "terrorizes his siblings." Some of the staff of the church see Jack as mischievous and defiant, due to his seemingly lack of respect for adult authority. For instance, Jack makes frequent prank calls from the church phone and wanders in areas of the church that are not permitted by participants. Jack often responds to negative feedback from adults with indifference.

During the program, Jack can be found jumping from one activity to the next, not engaging in any particular activity for more than ten minutes. He shows little enjoyment in sports but seems content to be in the presence of his friends. From my observations, he treats everyone the same. One minute he could be sharing a joke with a friend and the next minute, he would call him "dumb." Despite how bizarre this type of behaviour seems to me as a female adult, this is the manner in which Jack typically interacts with all his peers. He considers everyone to be his friend and he shows no preference towards any individual. Other group members frequently complain about his dishonesty and his recklessness towards other people's belongings. Nevertheless, no one demonstrates any long-term grudge against him. The following is Jack's narrative:

Home

(My home) sucks...not the best place to live. It has four people living in it, two hamsters and a dog. (My mom) is a bitch...the biggest hypocrite...not a normal person. Example...you can't have ice-cream. Goes in her room and has a whole bucket of ice-cream. (My brother) is a fag. I share a room with him...I hate him. Nick, he's my half-brother, he's a stupid idiot. He just doesn't like me for some reason. I try to help him out and he literally kicks me in the face.
We see (my dad) three out of five weekends. He’s getting me a gun, I’m pretty sure we get along. He’s my dad-dy (in a baby voice) I’m fascinated with guns. I spent 300 dollars on a custom pistol for hunting. I can’t use a shot gun. A pistol is like, nothing. A 40 gauge shot gun can blow your shoulder off. I shot a deer in the face and it didn’t die!

(My neighbourhood) is not the safest place to live. Where I used to live was kinda safe ’cause nothing ever happened. Here, some people tried to kill me, this kid and his mother once but he went to jail. He stabbed (the kid) in the arm...(My mom) wants to move but doesn’t have enough money to move.

School

When I’m on the bus (going to school), I feel good...like, talking to everyone. It just gives me the feeling that “wow, I’m here” but when I get to school, I don’t feel good. (My schoolwork) is terrible. All I’ve been getting is Bs. That’s only on tests. Some of (my teachers) are OK. Some of them are just stupid. They give me too much homework. I’ve never ever done homework! I will not miss this school when I graduate. I accidently dialled 911 once (at school). I dialled 9114200.

And then (the operator) phoned back and James and I both get suspended. On the last day of school, I’m gonna call 911 from the school’s phone and I’m going to say, when they ask what’s the emergency, I’m like, “some guy just stole my turkey sandwich. What do I do?”
Most of (my friends) are ok. They don’t do drugs. They don’t do stupid things all the time, like jump off roofs, like, egg cars. Some of them are really, really stupid. I don’t have a best friend. Couldn’t do that. I don’t do that.

Play

(When I’m not at the program), I’m home on the computer or I’d be somewhere near Brampton...just wandering. I’d wander around and end up somewhere and be like, “oh, I know where I am” and I figure out how to get home.

I love fireworks. One time, I set off a firework and it cracked my window. I love candy. I’m in Union station every other weekend by myself...They sell these gummy bears that are two feet long and they’re a foot thick and they’re $20 each and they last a week so I get them. I take the train.

It’s fun (at the program) because I get to hang out with my friends because I don’t usually. When I’m at school, you have to tell every one to meet (somewhere after-school). (The program’s) already arranged every week and you get to meet your friends. It’s like school but you’re not learning...you’re not sitting in a classroom and listening...you don’t have to do work....all your friends are there. We don’t really hang out together (as a group) that much and we become closer friends, to all of us.

4.2.5 Making Sense of the Narratives

Despite their unique life situations, some of these adolescent boys share commonalities in their life experiences, particularly those who live in the subsidized housing complex. Two critical themes emerge from their narratives. The first recurrent
theme is the experience of marginalization and social isolation in different facets of their life, including exclusion from the wider community, the local community and their school environment. Living on the margins of an affluent, predominantly Caucasian, suburban city meant that these youth are marginalized from the wider community, negatively implicating their access to safe, recreational facilities. The closest facility is located seven miles away from their homes. While some form of transportation is accessible for Omar, the other three boys are forced to invent creative ways to occupy their out-of-school time. The youth (Jack, William and James) living in subsidized housing are further alienated from the community due to the stigmatism that is often associated with social housing neighbourhoods and single-parent families. Through my involvement in the project, I have met many staff of government and non-profit agencies who frame these adolescents in the typical ‘at-risk’ manner: as delinquents and ‘problems to be solved.’ The boys share little positive experiences of their neighbourhood. Conflict among parents and peer groups are prominent within the community, resulting in the youth lacking a sense of emotional and physical safety in their own neighbourhoods.

Along with their home environment, some of the boys describe feelings of social isolation from their school environment. Both William and James are inflicted with health conditions that cause them to be absent from school for extended periods of time. For James, the ambiguous nature of his migraines has caused much suspicion and mistrust from his teachers and principal. The lack of meaningful, mentoring relationships with teachers, coupled with a lack of engagement with the curriculum indicate a failure of the school institution to provide these adolescents with opportunities to experience developmental outcomes.
Another recurrent theme from the narratives is the presence of instability in their lives, as a result of their disenfranchised family life and serious health conditions. The four youth describe family relationships that are challenging, rather than nurturing. For example, James desperately seeks a relationship with his neglectful father. William endures much physical and emotional abuse from father figures. Jack uses words like “bitch” and “stupid idiot” to describe his feelings towards family members. Finally, Omar expresses frustration towards his father’s strictness and indifference towards his son’s leisure pursuits. Along with family relationships, three of these adolescent boys have endured serious illnesses that have caused a great deal of instability in their already unstable lives, including frequent visits to the hospital and prolonged absences from school. Although Jack does not talk about his health issues, his mother’s references to his Attention-Deficit disorder and the redness that I have frequently observed around his eyes indicate health concerns that potentially have negative implications on the stability of his life.

4.3 Themes of the Meaning of the Program

Having gained insight into the life-world of these adolescent boys has deepened my understanding of the meaning of their lived experiences within the Gully Project. This section describes the thematic structures of participating in the program, as it was experienced by the youth. According to van Manen (1990), thematic structures are structures of experience that give shape and meaning to the phenomenon. In order to support and illustrate these themes, references will be made to the narratives, as well as the presentation of new data. Appendix H illustrates the categorizing framework that was used to give meaning to participants’ lived experiences of the program. The youth’s
recollections were categorized according to three components of the program: program activities, group leader and group members. Through a more contextual analysis of the meaning of these categories, two overarching themes emerged as the meaning that this program had in the lives of these boys: opportunities for escape and connection. The presentation of each thematic structure will be preceded by background information about the different components to give readers more context into the program.

4.3.1 Meaning of Program Activities

The first category emerging out of participants' lived experiences pertained to program activities. What activities did participants find meaningful? What meanings did they derive from participating in these activities? The format of the program has changed over the course of the year. In the beginning, participants were empowered to have some direction over program activities, in terms of what type of community project they wanted to engage in and how they were going to achieve those goals. Some participants expressed enthusiasm in the formation of a skate team. As members of a skate team, they aspired to make a skate video and organize various skate park events. Other members of the group desired to organize a basketball tournament. Since group members were divided in their recreational interests, participants decided to organize a basketball tournament in the winter and a skateboarding tournament in the spring. Consequently, the first five months of the program were dedicated to a process of team-building, goal setting and planning towards the community project. The program was structured in a way to facilitate the achievement of these goals. The first hour of the program was designated for free play inside the gymnasium or outside in the parking lot. Typically during this time, the youth engaged in a variety of sports, such as basketball, volleyball,
hockey or dodge ball. At times, these competitions were facilitated by the group leader while on other occasions, participants were encouraged to take turns organizing games for the whole group. Weather permitting, some participants also skateboarded/rollerbladed/BMXed on a portable skateboard apparatus that was set up in the parking lot of the church. In the second hour of the program, participants retreated to the library to work on their community project. During this time, the group leader, Rock Ryder, facilitated group processes that helped the adolescents to take ownership of the program and the project. For example, the first two months were dedicated to a process of developing rules of conduct and name selection for the program. These activities were followed by three months of preparation and planning for the basketball tournament.

From my perspective, enthusiasm for this project was high at the beginning of this planning process. Some of the boys actively participated in group discussions of potential location, target audience, format and other details of the proposed tournament. However, lack of consensus, the presence of intergroup conflict and little productivity contributed to the growing indifference among the youth. As a result of these issues, the group leader reluctantly organized the tournament himself and appointed the boys as minor officials.

The basketball tournament took place in January of 2010 and the skateboarding tournament was not scheduled. After experiencing much resistance from some group members to participate in the community project, the group leader changed the format of the program. From February until May of 2010, the program consisted of two full hours of free play. After receiving permission to bring their video gaming equipment, the three boys who normally played basketball became consumed with playing video games. Other
group members continued to play sports in the gymnasium or observed the gaming activities.

Along with weekly recreation sessions, the youth were also afforded privileges throughout the year. During each session, the church sponsored healthy snacks, which typically included pizza or sandwiches and juice. Participants were also granted permission to attend ‘youth nights’ at the YMCA. Three of the research participants took advantage of this opportunity to access the recreation facility on a weekly basis. During this time, participants engage in activities that they did not normally have access to, such as swimming, rock climbing and connecting with other young people in the community. The following section presents the meaning that the research participants derived from engaging in the activities of the program.

4.3.1.1 “Lots of Activities”

The autonomy in choosing from an array of program activities was a salient characteristic for the youth. Contrary to the monotony of their school and home environments, participants found appeal in the different choices that they had in the program. William expressed his appreciation in this way, “it was really fun... ‘cause you’re allowed to play soccer, play in the gym, run around the church and just skateboard outside and chill. There’s a lot of activities that you can do” (William, June 10, 2010). Along with variety of physical activities available, some participants found the program meaningful because they were empowered to make their own choices in terms of what they wanted to do. For example, Omar added that “you don’t have to do that, you can do whatever you want” (Omar, June 8, 2010).
4.3.1.2 "You Learn How to Do It"

Secondly, participating in program activities gave some of the youth the opportunity to develop their skills in a variety of different physical activities, an opportunity that was significant, given its rarity in other aspects of their lives: “I like playing (basketball here)...it’s enjoying ‘cause when you’re at school and you want to play basketball and so many people are bothering you. Now when you play basketball here, it’s so much fun, like no one’s bothering you at all” (William, June 10, 2010). Contrary to their school or home environment, the atmosphere within this after-school space was more conducive to skill development. In this program, participants engaged in friendly competition, which resulted in skill development: “I find it pretty cool, pretty fun ‘cause me and my friend always compete...We play like, a game of skate to see who’s better...he does stuff that I don’t know and you pretty much learn how you do it” (Omar, June 8, 2010). Omar took the many opportunities of friendly competition to increase his physical skills. Because they were the same age, participants often compared their skills to those of their peers. This difference motivated them to enhance their physical competencies. Through friendly competition, participants were also motivated to learn new sports, sports that they would have never experienced otherwise.

4.3.1.3 "Responsibility and a Sense of Accomplishment"

Participants felt a sense of accomplishment in their ability to contribute to the planning and organization of program activities. Participants made frequent references to their contributions to these activities. For example, James described his contribution to the formation of the skate team:
I was expecting a drop-in centre (in the beginning), like how the YMCA does those after-school things where they have the gym where everybody’s playing. And we changed it into a skate team… I like the skate team better ‘cause it’s more around us and not everybody…(two years ago when) I learned how to rollerblade, me and William were saying we were going to make a skate team and then one year later, we actually did. It was something we really wanted to do…and now that we’ve made a skate team, the rat pack…I feel a sense of accomplishment.

(James, June 10, 2010)

James expressed a sense of accomplishment in his contributions to the skate team, as well as towards achieving a goal that he had previously set for himself. Omar also described another example of his contribution towards the team project: “It was fun helping the big guys…being like we were in charge. I was keeping score and seeing who wins. Doing this made me feel more responsible ‘cause I’m the one that makes them move to a higher spot” (Omar, May 27, 2010). For Omar, acting as a minor official in the basketball tournament gave him a sense pride and responsibility. William also enjoyed the praise and recognition that often followed his hard work:

(William, June 10, 2010)
Overall, engaging in program activities were meaningful to participants because these activities offered them a variety of choices, opportunities for skill development and a sense of responsibility and accomplishment that accompanied their hard work. The following section explores the youth’s lived experiences of the group leader.

4.3.2 Meaning of the Group Leader

The research participants recognized two group leaders in this program: myself and Rock Ryder, a staff of the YMCA who coordinated the program. Participants were only asked to reflect on their experiences with Rock. Rock was a staff of the YMCA who was expected, through his position, to fulfill the agency’s mandate of servicing the recreational needs of low-resourced groups within its service area. Under the initiative of the residents’ committee, he agreed to implement this after-school program for the youth of the neighbourhood. Guided by a positive youth development orientation, Rock was committed to promoting the development of physical and leadership skills of the youth by encouraging their involvement in the planning and organization of physical activities and events. Within the program, he tried to create an after-school space where all participants felt welcomed; their ideas valued and were encouraged to actively contribute to program activities. His self-identified appearance as a ‘white, 5’4” male in his early thirties, with piercings and tattoos,’ as well as his interests in video games and extreme sports enabled him to relate well with the adolescent boys of the program. At the same time, he was also accountable to the church to enforce the facility-user rules. The following are themes that emerged from participants’ experiences of the group leader.
4.3.2.1 "Trust Has to Be Earned"

One meaning that participants attributed to their relationship with Rock reflected the important nature of respect and trust. These virtues did not occur naturally, rather, were developed over time and shared experiences. William described his relationship with Rock in this way:

(The leader) respects us 'cause we showed him that we respect him. We showed him in the beginning how hard we worked on organizing all of the events. That's why he respects us, 'cause we made everyone else have so much fun. We just did it...so he things we're kind of responsible. (William, June 10, 2010)

For William, respect is a virtue that group members earned as a result of their conduct and performance within the group. Participants must show group leaders respect in order for it to be reciprocated. From William’s perspective, Rock showed him respect because he successfully carried out his responsibilities. Having a positive, respectful relationship with an adult figure was important to William, especially because he lacked meaningful relationships with male adults in his own life. The relationships he did have with male father figures were characterized by abuse and unkindness. Along with respect, trust was also developed over positive experiences. William described in detail how Rock successfully passed through a trust building process:

In the beginning, we were going to set up the (basketball) tournament. No one really wanted to do anything. They say yes but no one actually did it. We thought (the idea) was pretty cool but we didn’t really do it 'cause for most, (Rock) was a complete stranger. No one knew him and what he does. I think if you trust somebody, you have to know them more. If you don’t know anything about the
person, they could be dangerous. That’s what we thought of Rock. We didn’t even know anything about him. I thought he was doing it for the money. But we didn’t know he was making money for doing this. Now that we know each other more, we can pretty much trust him... So now we can actually do stuff that we want to do. (William, June 10, 2010)

William articulated the importance of this trust-building process to the group dynamics and productivity within the program.

4.3.2.2 “He’s Not a Grown-up”

Along with respect and trust, participants also mentioned youthfulness and supportive as two important traits in a group leader. For example:

I think Rock’s pretty fun ‘cause he’s not really grown up yet...(adults) are so boring. He’s like a teenager than a grown up so that’s how fun it makes him. He’s not a grown-up because basically, grown-ups tell you, ‘oh, you can’t do that, you can’t go there. You’ll get in trouble. You can’t play that video game, it’s too violent. (William, June 10, 2010)

William compared Rock to adults in other aspects of his life, who he referred to as ‘boring’ and rule-oriented. For William, Rock’s youthfulness enabled him to relate well with participants and to understand their interests. Participants also found their relationship with Rock meaningful because he was a source of support and encouragement. William offered an example of Rock’s support:

It’s awesome ‘cause we have really fun people to help us. Like... we were filming, when the leaders were just teaching us how to use the camera. I didn’t even know
how to use a camera so, it’s helping us to know how to do that. (William, June 10, 2010)

Omar gave another illustration of Rock’s encouragement:

When we (played the hockey game), there were two teams and we played each other. That game was pretty fun. Rock tries to make us all play. When he does something, he never leaves anybody out. He always invites us. Another example is when we played the XBOX, he kept trying to let other people play. (Omar, June 8, 2010)

Omar’s meaningful relationship with Rock was especially significant, given the lack of acceptance that Omar experienced from his own father.

4.3.2.3 “I Wish He Did Like Me”

While some of the youth had positive experiences with the group leader, Jack expressed a relationship that was not as positive:

(The leader) doesn’t like me very much…I always piss him off because I don’t listen to him…he’s always like, “that’s your last warning.” But it really doesn’t matter to me. People have been mad at me enough times...(he was mad at me) when I was driving on this (bike), I almost hit a car because the car was (coming towards me). He told me not to (ride in the parking lot) but I went over there anyway. He yelled at me. (Jack, June 8, 2010)

Jack shared an episode when the group leader scolded him for not complying with his request. For Jack, this type of negative feedback was common-placed in other aspects of his life. Jack lacked meaningful relationships with adults in his school and home.
environments, which may have been a contributing factor to Jack’s indifferent attitude towards negative feedback from Rock:

...It really doesn’t matter to me. People have been mad at me enough times. I don’t care that much. I just tune it out. I just can’t physically hear them because I’m thinking about something else. I don’t know I even do it. I just know that I wasn’t listening. I just turn my eyes around in my head and I’m thinking about something other than that. When I turn my eyes back around, I see people yelling and I go, “oh, that doesn’t look so good.” So I just go back thinking. (Jack, June 8, 2010)

Despite his attempts to deny it, Jack was saddened by negative feedback from the leader: “I wish (Rock) did like me. I’d be in better shape. He doesn’t get mad at other people. Just me...I don’t think he has a right to be mad at me” (Jack, June 8, 2010). From his comments, Jack felt this negative feedback was unjustified and that he desired a better relationship with Rock. Due to the short-lived nature of Jack’s involvement in the program, the relationship between Jack and Rock remained a ‘work in progress.’ As William attested in the previous themes, respect and trust are virtues that were developed over time and through mutual understanding.

4.3.3 Meaning of Group Members

Background information on group dynamics have been discussed in previous sections (see section 4.1). The following were some of the meanings that peer relationships had for some of the youth.
4.3.3.1 "Some People Aren’t Really Nice"

Despite the sense of camaraderie among some group members, interactions with other peers proved to be challenging. From the beginning of the program, participants had to negotiate through many types of differences among group members, including variances in race, ethnicity and personality. For example, James shared the following experience:

At first, we had some fights with some of the other guys ‘cause…they wanted to do different things (than us). They wanted to play basketball…we wanted to make our skate team…Sometimes it gets annoying ‘cause some people just sit there and play XBOX. (Jack, May 20, 2010)

William also expressed similar frustration when other group members did not share his enthusiasm for skateboarding:

I want people to actually focus on the thing we’re supposed to be doing, like doing the skate video, deciding a game for example…I like how we have to do it (ourselves) but people (don’t) do anything. They just come here and play around. I feel like they don’t even care about what we’re doing and how fun it could be…I think we should do other (activities) than just basketball. (William, May 20, 2010)

Tolerating differences among group members was especially challenging for William, who lacked positive experiences interacting with peers in other social settings. For example, William described his conflict with some of the youth in his neighbourhood:

“Some people aren’t really nice. Sometimes they just don’t care what they say to people. They’re just like, “oh, you’re so weird…you’re so stupid”…and they swear at you. It makes me mad” (William, May 20, 2010). Similarly, Omar also had to work through
racial differences among group members: “Me and this other guy always beats up Jack ‘cause he’s always like, black and white...kinda racist. I don’t take it seriously, really. I’m like, ‘what are you guys talking about, white people, black people?’ (Acting confused)” (Omar, June 10, 2010). Omar expressed confusion in other people’s frequent references to race and ethnicity. Due to his visibly Middle-eastern appearance, Omar was often the target of racial slurs, instances that he did not share in the interviews. However, as a volunteer, I witnessed these racial attacks on multiple occasions throughout the program. Instead, Omar described one negative instant of group interactions:

(I didn’t get along with everyone in the beginning), just the people that I knew from school... I feel horrible when some of the guys tease me. Sometimes I didn’t even care. They would tell me to pick up the ball when it wasn’t even my fault. I just didn’t listen to him. But if I dropped it, then I would pick it up. If I didn’t drop it or do anything, then I wouldn’t ‘cause that’s not really fair. (Omar, June 8, 2010)

Similar to Omar, William and James were also victims of harassment by their peers. James explained: “they dis me with Jamaican things I don’t understand” (James, June 10, 2010). The three research participants often ignored these negative comments in order to maintain peace within the program.

4.3.3.2 “But Now We Get Along”

Despite the conflict among group members, some of the youth found ways to accept and/or tolerate more difficult members. As Omar explained: “Now we get along a little bit. I don’t know (how it happened). We just started talking” (Omar, June 8, 2010). Unable to articulate the reason for this change, Omar described a positive change in his
interactions with group members, with whom he previously had negative encounters. Having to interact with the same peers on a regular basis for eight months forced participants to develop conflict resolution strategies in order to share the same after-school space. James described his experiences in this way: “I get along with everybody. Everybody sometimes gets annoying... That’s just friends. I bet I’m annoying sometimes. Everybody is...now we get along. But I’m not exactly sure what happened. But now we’re friends. Just not like best friends” (James, June 10, 2010). For James, his strategy for working through differences was to be accepting of other people’s ‘annoying’ differences. These learning opportunities were atypical in their home and school environment, where participants had the freedom to choose their friends and escape from those who were different from them.

4.3.3.3 “Like a Family Thing”

Finally, some participants felt a sense of belonging within the program. William, James and Jack all came from disenfranchised family lives. They all lacked a close knit circle of friends with whom they could share their adolescent experiences. For these youth, participating in a program that made them feel a sense of belonging was important, given the challenges in their home and social lives. James shared the following sentiments: “When I’m at the program, I usually feel happy ‘cause we’re like a skate team, a bunch of guys just rollerblading and skateboarding on ramps just for us” (James, June 10, 2010). Being apart of a skate team enabled James to feel a sense of belonging to a group of peers who shared his interests and goals. Similarly, Jack illustrated the meaning of his group membership in Figure 1. When asked to draw a picture depicting his experiences of group members, Jack drew a picture of a family unit. Jack explained
that "there's two owners (leaders) and these are all the people that go here, almost like a family thing" (Jack, May 27, 2010).

Figure 1. Jack's drawing of group members.

4.3.4 Contextualized Meaning of Participation

 Participating in this after-school program had different meanings for participants over time, as they engaged in new and shared experiences. However, when we analyze their experiences in a more holistic manner by situating their experiences within the context of their lives, the following two themes emerged as central to the meaning that this program had for the youth.

4.3.4.1 Participation as an Opportunity to Escape

 The first theme was that participating in this after-school program enabled these four adolescents to escape from both the monotony of their after-school activities and escape from the instability in their lives. In the narratives, all of boys involved in the
study expressed dissatisfaction in their unpleasant home life, their school or after-school environments. For William, Jack and James, participating in the program offered them a means to escape from unpleasant family members, especially siblings with whom they did not have meaningful relationships. When asked about their school experiences, three of the participants shared either little information or primarily negative experiences, giving evidence to their lack of engagement in this aspect of their lives. This was true of William who saw his participation in the program as a relief from the toughness of his school environment. "(The program) is really fun... 'cause the whole day is work and you have freedom" (William, May 20, 2010). Although Omar was more academically inclined than the other youth, he also expressed instances when the curriculum failed to provide stimulating activities: "School is fun and boring... I like science 'cause you get to do stuff, like projects... I don't like writing or reading stuff" (Omar, May 13, 2010).

Similar to their school environment, research participants rarely engaged in new or stimulating activities during their after-school hours. Due to their limited resources, safe, recreational activities were inaccessible. Each participant desired more exciting ways to spend their after-school hours. For example, Omar explained, "When I come home from school, I usually try to find somewhere to go... (If I wasn't going to this program,) I'd be bored 'cause Mondays, I don't usually do anything" (Omar, June 8, 2010). Despite his access to some form of transportation, Omar still experienced boredom in this aspect of his life.

Participating in the Gully Project was one way for participants to escape their monotonous after-school lifestyle. Jack explained, "I feel happy when I'm here 'cause... it's better than being in the house and it's better than doing nothing....(When
I’m not at this program,) I would be at home on my computer or I’d be somewhere near Brampton...just wandering” (Jack, June 8, 2010). Due to their resource-poor neighbourhood, participants were unable to access recreational facilities. William explained that, “the closest (skate park) takes us too long and that one’s really not the best. We’ve been there a few times but my mom doesn’t even take us sometimes. (She) has so much stuff to do” (William, June 2010). Participating in the program allowed the boys to access a recreational facility, including a gymnasium equipped with various sporting equipment, as well as a miniature skate park. Through this program, they had access to an array of physical activities on a weekly basis, “What I like about (the program) is that it’s helping people that don’t usually get to do this kind of stuff. Like, usually we can’t really rent skate equipment” (Jack, May 27, 2010).

4.3.4.2 Participation as an Opportunity to Connect

The final meaning that the boys ascribed to this after-school program was the opportunity to connect with supportive adults, positive peers and the wider community. Attending an after-school space where they had the opportunity to develop meaningful friendships was an invaluable aspect of their experience. The narratives indicated that some participants had difficulties establishing meaningful relationships with peers, both in school and at home. For example, William explained, “last year, I had three friends that actually hang out with me the whole time I was at (my old) school, This year I have, it’s a big number, like 30 friends. So I went from three to 30 friends” (William, June 10, 2010). Similarly, Jack described his friends in this way:
Most of (my friends) are ok. They don’t do drugs. They don’t do stupid things all the time, like jump off roofs, like, egg cars. Some of them are really, really stupid.

I don’t have a best friend. Couldn’t do that. I don’t do that. (Jack, June 8, 2010)

Participating in the program enabled participants to strengthen their bonds of friendship. Participants embraced the many opportunities to get to know one another, which changed the quality of their friendship from acquaintances to friends. For example, Jack explained, “it’s fun here because I get to hang out with my friends because I don’t usually... It’s like school... but you don’t have to do work... all your friends are here” (Jack, June 8, 2010). Similarly for James, “I really like just coming here and skating with my friends... (it’s) fun. This is important because without fun, you just become a really boring person” (James, June 10, 2010). Lastly, Jack provided insight into the meaning of being in the company of his friends: “I wouldn’t be doing much if it was with people I really didn’t know. Just wouldn’t be doing anything” (Jack, May 27, 2010). For Jack, being among friends gave him a sense of comfort to actively participate in the program. Along with peers, the youth were able to connect with supportive adults who took a vested interest in their development and their leisure pursuits.

Finally, through their participation in the program, participants were connected to the wider community through their weekly access to the YMCA facilities. Participants repeatedly expressed their appreciation for this privilege: “I like it how we’re able to do free stuff at the (YMCA). We have opportunities that other people don’t have. Every time we go there, we meet somebody new” (Omar, June 8, 2010). All four boys took full advantage of this privilege on a weekly basis, enabling them to connect with other youth and to increase their awareness of events and happenings within the community.
4.4 Summary of Findings

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the meaning of an after-school program from the perspective of participants. Through the exploration of participants’ lived experiences of the program, we have gained insight into the meaning that they derived from the program activities, group leader and group members, as it was experienced within the context of their lives. The lack of stimulating activities found in participants’ school and home lives gave greater significance to their experiences of the activities of the program in terms of the availability of choices, opportunities for skill development and a sense of responsibility and accomplishment. Due to the lack of meaningful relationship with adults in other aspects of their lives, some of the youth found significance in their relationship with the group leader. Lastly, due to the lack of meaningful relationship with peers in other aspects of their lives, participants not only developed a sense of belonging to the group, they also embraced their participation as learning opportunities to tolerate and accept differences among peers.
Chapter 5: Discussions and Implications

The findings of this investigation gave insight into the experiences of four adolescent boys in an after-school program. The question of ‘so what’ remains unanswered. What is the potential significance of exploring the lived experiences of these participants? The potential implication lies in the possibility that their experiences may be the experiences of other youth. This chapter provides discussion on the findings of this study, as well as programmatic implications. This discussion has been informed by the participants’ recollections of their experiences as well as the researcher’s own involvement in this program.

5.1 What Did I Hear When I Tried to Listen?

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning that the Gully after-school program had for participants within the context of their lives. Through their discussions about the program, these boys shared experiences of developmental outcomes such as physical and social skills development, a sense of responsibility and accomplishment that have been well documented by other researchers in similar after-school context (Dworkin et al., 2003; Fredricks et al., 2010). In presenting the benefits and outcomes of this program, it is not my intention to portray the Gully program as ‘best practices.’ To do so would be to add uncritically to the overwhelming outcome-based literature on youth programs and to encourage the idea that there is a single formula to structure programs for ‘problem’ youth. During my attempt to listen to adolescent boys, I not only heard them share explicitly about the meaning that the program had for them, they also implicitly conveyed my status as an outsider.
5.1.1 Outsider Status

Despite my best attempts to establish trust with four adolescent boys, the choice of what to share was ultimately theirs. The information collected was the product of the stories that they were comfortable in sharing with me. I had no way of verifying the ‘truth.’ Sometimes the boys made jokes that I took seriously. For instance, during one interview, one of the participants made frequent references to his mom’s “pregnant belly.” In the second interview, I probed more into his feelings about the baby. He told me that he was “kidding.” Another youth tried to retract a statement that he had supposedly made about his mom:

P: I was just kidding about my mom being a stripper.

T: You didn’t say that.

P: Are you sure?

T: yeah.

P: I was just kidding about my mom smoking pot. I was just trying to be funny.

Trying to be funny for my fans. (Jack, May 4, 2010)

In the end, I had no choice but to take their word at face value. Regardless of my many naïve attempts to ‘blend in’ with the participants, they still saw me as an outsider, as evident by the drawing of me as a leader. My role as an adult volunteer constrained me from achieving the insider status that I desired immensely. More importantly to this research, my identity as an adult female of Asian decent constrained me from obtaining the phenomenological stories that an insider would be able to obtain. These adolescent boys made this outsider status clear to me through their sexualisation within the interviews and hesitation to share negative aspects of the program. I found myself unable
to get a phenomenological sense of their world precisely because I did not belong in their world. Their experiences as twelve-year-old boys did not resonate with my own experiences growing up as a female adolescent. If at all possible, obtaining a more phenomenological sense of the meaning that this program had for the youth would have required me to spend more time than what this research study could afford. Having realized the effects of this limitation on my findings, I made a conscious decision to limit my analysis as it was presented in the previous chapter. Adding deeper layers of analysis to the transcribed data would have unnecessarily privileged my adult ways of viewing the meaning of the program.

5.1.2 Discrepancy Between Youth Experiences and Adult Expectations

Through my experiences with the program, as a volunteer and a researcher, I saw the Gully program as ‘successful’ to some participants and less for others. Witnessing the mixed results through this outcome-based lens, I was puzzled as to why the youth remained faithful to the program week after week, expressing their discontent when sessions were cancelled. By most outcome measures, this program would be seen as a failure. For example, low attendance, prevalence of intergroup conflict and lack of structure are characteristics that would not lead to favourable outcomes (Grossman, Goldsmith, Sheldon & Arbreton, 2009). However, listening to the adolescents told me another side of the story. We learned that living on the margins of an affluent city had major implications. Some of the youth were not only socially disconnected from the wider community; they also felt alienated from peers within their neighbourhood. Issues of racism and prejudice and a lack of understanding between youth of different cultures made it difficult to feel a sense of emotional and physical safety in their own
neighbourhood, not to mention developing meaningful relationships with peers. Living in a resource-poor community meant that these boys limited access to recreational facility. Moreover, these boys had to negotiate through neglectful, abusive and challenging relationships with their family members, a string of stressful and at times, detrimental health conditions and financial problems. The potential risk factors faced by adolescents from low-income neighbourhoods and its associations with negative psychosocial outcomes are well documented (Miller, Webster & MacIntosh, 2002; Rasmussen et al., 2004).

Consequently, the youth were forced to find creative ways to engage in stimulating activities among their small circle of friends. Whether it was skateboarding off the curb or hanging out at Skippy’s, these boys yearned for opportunities to engage in something new, something stress-free. They also embraced opportunities to develop meaningful connections, connections that were lacking in other aspects of their lives. Unlike in other contexts, their prolonged involvement in the program forced them to negotiate through conflicts among group leaders and group members. As a result, some participants learned strategies to tolerate difficult members and developed meaningful relationships with peers and adult leaders. These findings support research that have found after-school programs to be a context that has the potential to compensate for developmental opportunities that youth lack in other aspects of their lives (Hirsch, 2005).

On one hand, adults found this program to produce mediocre results while on the other hand, the youth found the program to be meaningful. Why is there a discrepancy between adult and youth expectations? Throughout the implementation of this program, I watched as the facilitator wrestled to achieve the outcome-based expectations of his
superiors and other adult stakeholders while balancing the interest and perceived needs of the youth. I watched as he turned to the positive youth development literature to gain insight into the needs of youth, particularly marginalized youth, due to perceived resistance from the participants to offer their perspectives. These dilemmas are commonplace, given the ambiguous focus and role of youth work in the after-school context (Halpern, 2002). Some proponents of a PYD orientation would argue that after-school programs are child development institutions that offer young people opportunities to experience developmental outcomes (Dworkin et al., 2003). These programs have also been promoted to make up for the deficiencies of other social institutions (such as schools and family), especially in the lives of disadvantaged or marginal youth (Halpern). Others have argued that youth work could support young people to develop lifestyles and cultural spaces that have personal meaning for them and are socially enriching (Pitts, 2001). I would argue that at the core of youth work in this context should be a participant-centred focus, to facilitate the learning opportunities of young people, in a way that is relevant to their lives (Coussé et al., 2009).

A participant-centred focus challenges the current outcome-based mindset of the field of after-school youth programming (Banks, 1996; Barry, 2005). This change in focus involves using “listening” as a metaphor to inform practice. Other researchers and practitioners have recognized the importance of promoting youth voice to inform practice (Beilenson, 1993; Kalish, Voigt, Rahimian, DiCara & Sheehan, 2010). For example, Marczak and colleagues (2006) reiterated that youth voice is necessary in determining the types of learning opportunities and supports that young people need. Lashua (2009) discusses the importance of listening and affording young people the “respect to speak in
their own terms and on their own turf” (p. 17) to understanding the socio-cultural context in which young people live their lives. While we can claim to listen to young people, the challenge lies in the ability to hear and understand their words and meanings, as it pertains to their lives.

Throughout this phenomenological investigation, I became increasingly aware of my lack of understanding and connection to the lives of these adolescent boys. I could not fathom their obsession with violent war video games and resistance to my attempts to change their inactive lifestyles. I felt desperate in my attempts to ‘break down their walls’ and to uncover their struggles and fears, as though they were my own personal project. I grappled with what Clarke (2008) referred to as the “pathology of marginalized youth” and how this attitude and predisposition constrained me from truly understanding the conditions of their lives in all its complexities. Coming from a middle-classed background, I have come to learn about the lives of ‘at-risk’ or marginalized youth from a distance, almost as an outsider looking in. My ‘knowledge’ of their struggles and challenges was gained through my academic pursuits and work as a facilitator. Through an exhaustive process of self-reflection and reflexivity, I was able to reflectively critique some of these taken-for-granted assumptions and its implications to my relationship with the boys and to the research. The discussions in Chapter Three on methodological issues illustrated that no one, including the boys themselves, were practiced in the art of listening. Listening for me meant that I had to go beyond the confines of the program or interview setting to really understand the role that this program played in their lives. It was through naturalistic exploration into the neighbourhood and in their interactions with each other that I was able to more deeply understand the meaning that this program had
for these youth. As a volunteer, I had many opportunities to interact with the youth in their typical after-school environment and to observe their peer interactions. These observations were often more insightful than anything they could have articulated in the interviews. Also, listening for me meant that I had to 'listen' to myself as an adult and hear the ways that I frame young people and how those constructions contribute to their marginalization (Clarke, 2008; Griffin, 1993). By taking a more critical perspective to youth work, I was able to question some of the assumptions of my previously unwavering adherence to a positive youth development paradigm. Understanding the discourse and critiques of different approaches to youth programming enabled me to better “listen” to the ways in which I control the agenda for young people.

5.2 Programmatic Implications for a Listening-led Approach

What do I think a listening-led approach to youth programming would look like? One way a ‘listening-led’ model would change youth programming is through the promotion of a bottom-up approach to structuring program activities. An alternative to asking superficial and closed questions about youth’s needs and motivations for participating in after-school programs is to explore more naturalistic ways to answer these questions. This study has illustrated the importance of context and its implications in the ways that people experience social settings. An understanding of young people’s unique socio-cultural context should be the starting point with which we use to provide learning opportunities that are relevant to their lives. What follows from this bottom-up approach is a change in different measures of success. As an alternative to outcome-based evaluations, success can be determined by how adequately a program services the specified learning opportunities of its participants.
The privileging of youth voice is critical to promote meaningful after-school programming for youth. This study highlighted the importance of contextualizing young people’s lived experiences. More research is needed to explore the socio-cultural context of different demographics of youth to gain a better understanding of their needs and experiences in after-school programs. Phenomenology as a research methodology provided a unique tool with which to listen to the lived experiences of young people, as it was relevant to their lives. The use of this methodology provided rich insight into this phenomenon that has been difficult to obtain with other methodologies. However, this study was limited to the insights that participants desired to share. Moreover, the willingness of the participants to engage in this investigation was an indication of the possibility that these participants felt more positive about their experiences. Due to the variance and complexities of experiences in after-school programs among youth, future phenomenological investigations are needed to explore the experiences of diverse participants in various after-school settings, as experienced by youth themselves. As van Manen reiterates, “a phenomenological interpretation is one out of potentially many interpretations” (1990, p. 31), all of which contribute to the complexity of any phenomenon. Moreover, research using other qualitative traditions in this context would also yield valuable insights.

Privileging the voices of young people is not only important to our understanding of their experiences but also to the ability of others to create, implement, and evaluate high-quality youth programs that promote the learning of all youth regardless of ethnicity, gender, age or socio-economic status. Exploring these youth’s stories has enabled their lives to be more vivid and real to people working with children. We speak of youth
development without considering the socio-cultural contexts in which young people live their lives. We speak of developmental outcomes and assets without considering the turmoil in their lives. Young people have much to share about their lives, if only we would listen. Listening is skill that requires critical self-reflection and an empathic, non-judgmental orientation towards young people in an attempt to maintaining an openness to youth’s constructions of their own lives.
References


Dey, I. *Qualitative data analysis: A user-friendly guide for social scientists*. New York: Routlege.


## Appendix A - 40 Developmental Assets (NRCIM, 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Assets</th>
<th>Support (1–6)</th>
<th>1. Family support</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2. Positive family communication</td>
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<td>3. Other adult relationships</td>
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<td>4. Caring neighbourhood</td>
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<td>5. Caring school climate</td>
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<td>6. Parent involvement in schooling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Empowerment (7–10)</td>
<td>7. Community values youth</td>
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<td>8. Youth as resources</td>
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<td>9. Service to others</td>
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<td></td>
<td>10. Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boundary &amp; Expectations (11–16)</td>
<td>11. Family boundaries</td>
<td>11. Family boundaries</td>
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<td>12. School boundaries</td>
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<td>13. Neighbourhood boundaries</td>
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<td>14. Adult role models</td>
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<td>15. Positive peer influence</td>
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<td>Constructive Use of Time (17–20)</td>
<td>16. High expectations</td>
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<td>17. Creative activities</td>
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<td>18. Youth programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal Assets</td>
<td>Commitment to Learning (21–25)</td>
<td>19. Religious community</td>
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<td>20. Time at home</td>
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<td>22. School engagement</td>
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<td>23. Homework</td>
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<td>24. Bonding to school</td>
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<td>25. Reading for pleasure</td>
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<td>27. Equality and social justice</td>
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<td>28. Integrity</td>
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<td>29. Honesty</td>
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<td>30. Responsibility</td>
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<td>31. Restraint</td>
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<td>Positive Identity (37–40)</td>
<td>32. Planning and decision making</td>
<td>32. Planning and decision making</td>
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<td>33. Interpersonal competence</td>
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<td>34. Cultural competence</td>
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<td>35. Resistance skills</td>
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<td>36. Peaceful conflict resolution</td>
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<td>37. Personal power</td>
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<td>38. Self-esteem</td>
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<td>39. Sense of purpose</td>
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<td>40. Positive view of personal future</td>
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<td><strong>Phenomenological Tradition</strong></td>
<td><strong>Descriptive</strong></td>
<td><strong>Hermeneutic</strong></td>
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<td>(Traditional) European, Interpretive, Existential,</td>
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<td>Martin Heidegger</td>
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<td>Van Kaam, Giorgi, Colazzi, Moustakas</td>
<td>Van Manen, Gadamer</td>
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<td><strong>Goal of research</strong></td>
<td>Description of pre-reflected experience</td>
<td>Understanding and meaning of pre-reflected experience</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Concept of Epoche</strong></td>
<td>Strict adherence to bracketing and phenomenological reduction</td>
<td>Temporarily brackets researcher’s and participants’ assumptions</td>
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</table>
Appendix C – Script of Recruitment Meeting

Researcher: Today, we’re going to be doing something different than what we normally do. I’d like to talk to you all about a research project that I’m doing for school in university. Along with being a volunteer for the YMCA, I’m also a student at Brock University. Does anyone know where that is? Well, for my degree, I’m planning to do a research project on this program. What do you think of when you hear the words ‘research project’?

Well, the purpose of this research is to find out more about you guys and what you think of this program. I think it’s important to listen to you because you guys have valuable things to say. This can really help adults, like Brandon and the YMCA, to do things that young people like to do, instead of what adults think is good for you. I want to know things like, what does it mean for you to be a part of this program? What were your experiences with the basketball tournament? What are you hoping to experience with organizing the skateboarding tournament? What were the most and least memorable activities/events for you over the last 10 months?

If you are interested in taking part in this study, I want to have three different interviews with each of you over the next three months. I think each interview will take between 20-40 minutes long outside of program time. I’ll be doing different activities with you during these interviews. For the first interview, I’ll give you a disposable camera and ask you to take pictures of your life outside of the program. The purpose of this interview is to help me to get to know you better, the people and things that are important in your life, so that I can better understand what being involved in this program
means to you. I’ll develop the pictures and we’ll be talking about them in the first interview. After the interview, you’ll be able to keep all the pictures. For the second interview, we’ll be doing an activity that will help me to understand your experiences of different parts of the program, like, the gym time, and with helping to organize some of the event that we’ve done in the program. The purpose of the last interview is for you to share about your overall experience of the program. In this interview, I’ll be asking you to fill out a timeline, writing down all the events in the program that have been the most and least memorable to you over the past 10 months. With your permission, I want to record all the interviews so that I don’t have to worry about writing down everything you say. Once all the interviews are done, I’ll write up your experiences in a story so that there’ll be a short story about each of you. This means that I want to share the things you say with other people. I’m going to change your name and the names of places or other people that you talk about so that no one will know who you are and what you said.

Before I show the report to anyone, I’ll first go through it with you to make sure that you’re comfortable with other people reading your story. Even though your names won’t be in the stories, this group is small so chances are, you may be able to recognize each other’s stories. That’s why it will be important for us to go through your story together one-on-one, so that we can change all the personal details that will connect you to the story. The one thing I do have to share with other people is if you tell me any information about your experiences of abuse or neglect. Under law and for your safety, I have to report cases of abuse. I wouldn’t do anything before I talked to you first though.

What are the benefits for you if you decide to participate in this study? First of all, you’ll be able to keep the twenty-four photographs that you took for the first interview.
Each of you will receive a small gift, a thank-you from me, for the time you’ve given up for this study. Besides these benefits, being involved in this study will give you a chance to voice your opinion about his program and to make suggestions on how to improve the program for next year. Your ideas can really benefit other kids who attend programs like this. Other adults will be reading this report and this report will help them to better understand young people. In this way, adults can create programs that better suits the needs and interests of young people.

In case you are interested in participating in the study, I’ve given you two forms to fill out, one for your consent to participate, and another form to get your parents’ permission, because you’re underage. If you look on your consent form, it’s called ‘participant assent form’. Let’s read through it together and you can ask me any questions that you may have. *(Read assent form verbally.)*

If you decide that you’d like to be involved in this project, you also have a lot of options of how you can participate in the study. On the second page, you have the option of check marking different boxes. In the first set of boxes, you can check mark the different interviews that you want to participate in. The reason why there are three different interviews is that I think it’s important to get your ideas about different parts of the program. But, if you don’t feel comfortable, for example, with taking pictures of your friends or your family, you can leave that box blank and check mark the other interviews. Another option is that instead of taking pictures, we can have a normal interview where I ask you some questions and you can answer whatever questions you want to answer. In the next set of boxes, I am asking your permission to record the interviews. As I said before, the reason why I’d like to do is, is so that I don’t have to worry about writing
down everything you say in the interview. I can just focus on listening to you in the
interview. I'll destroy the recorded interviews once I have a chance to write it all down.
You can check mark the box that you feel most comfortable with. You also have the
option of quitting the study anytime you want. If, in the middle of the study, you don’t
want to be involved anymore, for whatever reason, just let me know and I will respect
your decision. I won’t ask any questions and I won’t treat you any differently. You will
still be able to receive your small gift of appreciation.

Please take some time to think about this. I wanted to give you detailed
information about this study so you can make an informed decision. Your participation in
this study is completely voluntary. This means that you don’t have to take part in the
study if you don’t want to. If you say no, no one will be mad at you or treat you any
differently. After today, all the activities and interviews of this study will take place
outside of the drop-in program time so that you won’t feel left out if you say no. If you
say no, my research project will still go on. It doesn’t matter if I have 2 people or all of
you, I will still continue with the project and I will still get my degree. So don’t feel like
you have to take part in this study. This will not change my relationship with you. I will
not treat you any differently.

Do you think a week is enough time to think about this? If you do decide to
participate, please get these forms signed and bring them back to me at the end of next
week’s session. Thanks for listening. Do you have any questions for me?
Appendix D – Youth Assent Form

Dear (participant's name),
I'd like to invite you to take part in a study that I'm working on with my professor at Brock University. The purpose of the study is to understand your experiences with the Clearview/YMCA youth program. I'm going to spend a few minutes telling you about the project, and then ask you if you're interested in taking part in it.

Why am I doing this study?
I'd like to know your experiences of this program and what it means for you to be involved in this program.

What does the study involve?
If you decide to take part in this study, I'd like to have 3 interviews with you over the next 3 months to talk about different parts of the program. Each interview will last around 20-40 minutes. During each interview, we will be doing different activities. For the first interview, I'd like to know more about you and what your life is like outside of the program. A week before this interview, I'll be giving you a disposable camera and asking you to take pictures of the people, places and things that are most important to you. I'll develop the pictures before the interview so that we can talk about them during the interview. For the second interview, we'll be doing an activity that will help us to talk about your experiences with different parts of the program, such as the gym time and helping with the basketball tournament and the upcoming skateboarding tournament. For the last interview, I'm going to ask you to make a timeline of all the high and low points of the program since September 2009 and ask you to talk about these events/activities. I'd also like to record all the interviews to make sure that I don't forget anything you say. If you don't want me to do this, we can still do the interview without the recorder. There are no right or wrong answers. These interviews are about you and what this program means to you. After the interviews are finished, I will be writing up your experiences like a story, so that each of you will have your own short story. I will be making up names for each of you and the places and people that you talk about so that no one will know who you are and what you have said. Afterwards, we will go through your stories one-on-one to make sure that the story is right and that you are comfortable with other people reading the story. Even though your parents won't be listening to your interviews, they will have a chance to read these stories before other people read them.

Are there any risks to you if you say yes?
There are some potential risks. Some people may get upset or uncomfortable when talking about their lives or if you've had a bad experience in the program. If this happens, you can stop the interview at any time. Taking part in this project is completely up to you so you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. Just let me know when something is bothering you and we can either stop the interview or move on to another topic. Also, even though we will be changing your names, you may be able to recognize each other's stories because this is a small group. That's why it's important for us to sit down one-on-one to take out personal details that will connect you to your stories. I won't include your story in my report unless you are ok with other people reading it.

Who will know that you are in the study?
Since there may be less than 8 of you in this study, within the program, you will be able to know who is in the study and who is not. I will do my best to make sure that no one will know what you have said.
I will not let anyone other than my professor see your answers or any personal information about you. The only time I will have to break this promise is if I think you or someone else might be in danger. For example, if I think that you are being abused or neglected, I will have to report it. I will talk to you first before I do anything.

Do you have to be in the study?
Taking part in this study is completely your choice. No one will get angry or upset with you if you say no. No one will treat you any differently if you say no. If you say yes, you can always change your mind later if you don’t want to continue. Just let me know if you’ve had enough and want to quit the project. I won’t ask any questions and I will respect your decision. You will still get a small gift from me for your time.

Do you have any questions?
You can ask me questions at any time. If you think of a question when you get home, you can send me a message on Facebook.
Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

Thao
Youth Assent Form

Youth's name (printed): ____________________________

Do you want to participate in this study?
  o Yes
  o No

Which interviews would you like to participate in?
  o Interview 1
  o Interview 2
  o Interview 3

Do you agree to have your interview(s) recorded?
  o Yes
  o No

Youth Signature: ____________________________
Date: ____________________________

Signature of the Researcher: ____________________________
Date: ____________________________
Appendix E - Parental Consent Form

Dear (Parent’s name)

My name is Thao Joseph and I am acquainted with your son through the Clearview/YMCA youth program. Along with being a volunteer for the YMCA, I am also a student at Brock University. I would like to ask for your permission for your son’s participation in a study that I am conducting as part of my Master’s degree at Brock University under the supervision of Dr. Erin Sharpe. I would like to provide you with more information about this research project that explores the youth’s experiences of the Clearview/YMCA youth program. As your son is a minor, I would need permission from both him and yourself to participate in this study.

Why am I doing this study?
The purpose of my study is to gain a better understanding of what it means for the youth to participate in this program. I would like to know what aspects of the program they find meaningful and what can be done to make the program even better. I believe it’s important to listen to young people because they can tell us a lot about themselves and what is important to them. This information will provide valuable insight for organizations such as the YMCA on how to create programs that reflect the needs and interests of young people.

What does the study involve?
If you decide that your son could take part in this study, I would like to have 3 interviews with him over the next 3 months to talk about different parts of the program. Each interview will take between 20-40 minutes. During each interview, we will be doing different activities. For the first interview, I would like to find out more about the participants, for example, what they find meaningful in their lives, their fears, their aspirations, etc. A week before this interview, I will be giving participants a disposable camera and asking them to take pictures of the people, places and things that are important to him. I will develop the pictures before the interview so that we can talk about them during the interview. For the second interview, I will ask participants to do an activity that will help them to talk about different aspects of the program, such as the gym time and helping with the basketball and the upcoming skateboarding tournament. For the last interview, I am going to ask participants to make a timeline of the program, from September 2009 until June, 2010. I will be asking them to record all the high and low points of the program on the timeline. I would also like to audio record all the interviews to make sure that I do not forget anything that is said in the interviews. Once all the interviews are finished, I will create a story of each participant’s experiences so that each participant will have his own story. I will make up names for the people and places that your son talks about so that no one will know who he is or what he has said. Your son and I will go through the story together to make sure that he is comfortable with other people reading the story and to take out personal details that would connect him to the story. Even though you will not be present during the interviews, you will be able to read your son’s story before anyone else reads it to make sure that you are comfortable with other people reading it.

Is it mandatory to participate in this program?
Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and will not affect your son’s involvement in the program. He will remain a valued member of the program, regardless of whether he
decides to participate in this study or not. This study will go on whether I have 2 participants or 10 participants. If you give your consent, you can always change your mind at a later date and withdraw your son from the study at any time up until the completion of the final report. Participants who wish to withdraw from the study you can contact me via email at tj08ee@brocku.ca or by telephone at (416) 556-5537. As you may know, the YMCA facilitator, the participants and myself have been using Facebook as a form of communication outside of program hours. We have created a Facebook group called the ‘pack rat’, which has been a space that we use to discuss program logistics, upcoming events and issues that the youth may have regarding the program. The youth have indicated that this is the best form of communication for them. With your permission, I would like to continue to use this medium to encourage participants to ask questions about the research project and to communicate to me their comments about the study.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this study?
There are some potential risks that you should be aware of. Some people may get upset or uncomfortable when talking about their lives or if your son has had a negative experience in the program. If this happens, I will assure participants that they can stop the interview at any time. Taking part in this study is strictly voluntary so they will not have to talk about anything that they do not want to talk about. Even though I will be making up false names for the people and places that each person will be talking about, the participants may be able to recognize each other’s stories because there is a small group of them who will be participating in this study. That’s why it will be important for your son and I to go through the story individually to take out personal details that will connect him to his own story. Even though you will not be present during the interviews, you will be given a chance to read over the story before anyone else has a chance to view it. I will not include the story in my report until you and your son are both comfortable with other people reading that story. The only information I do need to report is that which I am required under law to report. As a student investigator, I am obligated to report instances of suspected abuse and neglect.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Erin Sharpe, at (905) 688-5550 ext. 3989 or email erin.sharpe@brocku.ca.

Thank-you for your time.

Yours Sincerely,

Thao Joseph,

MA candidate

*This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Office, Brock University. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your son’s participation in this study, please feel free to contact the Research Ethics Office, at (905) 688-5550 ext. 3035 or reb@brocku.ca.
Parental Consent Form

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Thao Joseph at Brock University, under the supervision of Professor Dr. Erin Sharpe. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.
- I am aware that my child will participate in the study if he agrees to participate and I agree to his participation.
- I acknowledge that all information gathered on this study will be used for research purposes only. I am aware that permission may be withdrawn at any time (by either the parent and/or youth) without penalty by advising the researcher.
- I realize that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Research Ethics Board at Brock University. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns about my son’s involvement in this study, I may contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 ext. 3035, or reb@brocku.ca

Child’s Name: ____________________________  Child’s Birth Date ____________________

I agree to have my child’s interview audio-recorded to ensure an accurate recording of his responses.

- Yes
- No

I also agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research, with the understanding that all quotations will be anonymous.

- Yes
- No

Name of Parent or Guardian: ________________________________ (Please print)
Signature of Parent or Guardian: ________________________________
Date: ________________________________
Appendix F – Instructions for Photo-Elicitation Interviews

Preparing for Interview #1

Please use this disposable camera to take pictures that will tell a story of your life at school, at home, or anywhere else that is important to you. You can take pictures of the people you like, the places and things that are most important to you and the activities you do the most (for example, family members, friends, teachers, favourite places, things you do everyday).

Things to remember:

- This camera is FREE—it will not cost you or your parents anything.
- This camera belongs to you! Remember to keep it out of the sun.
- This camera will only take 24 pictures so choose carefully what will tell me the most about you.
- Facebook me when you’ve finished taking the pictures and I will pick up the camera from you. I think a week should be enough time but let me know if you need more time.
- After the photos are developed, I will show you the pictures and we’ll talk about them.
- Facebook me with any questions.
- Have fun!!
Appendix G – Sample Timeline

Things I liked

Things that were ok

Things I didn’t liked

Appendix G – Sample Timeline
Appendix H – Categorizing Framework

**Contextualized Meaning of Participation**

- Participation as an Opportunity to Escape
- Participation as an Opportunity to Connect

**Meaning of Program Activities**

- "Lots of Activities"
- "You Learn How to Do It"
- "Responsibility and a Sense of Accomplishment"

**Meaning of Group Members**

- "Some People Aren't Really Nice"
- "But Now We Get Along"
- "Like a Family Thing"

**Meaning of Group Leader**

- "Trust Has to Be Earned"
- "He’s Not a Grown-up"
- "I Wish He Did Like Me"