The Power to Adapt: A Case Study of Special Needs Youth Who Have Participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program

by

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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The transitions experienced throughout adolescence and young adulthood are difficult, and can be even more challenging to navigate for youth living with developmental or mental health challenges. These youth commonly experience challenges in daily life, leading to difficulties participating in reciprocal relationships, experiencing good mental health, and establishing positive identity and self-esteem. Adventure-based therapies may be a milieu where youth can explore their identities, connect with nature, establish social relationships, and gain experiences overcoming a variety of challenges. This qualitative case study illuminated the experiences and identity development of youth who have participated in an adaptive recreation program in Victoria, British Colombia. Semi-structured interviews were held with five youth who have participated in the program, five parents of youth who have participated, and three staff involved in the development and delivery of the program. For the within-participant analysis, Rhodes' (2000) *ghostwriting* approach was used to present youth participants' stories of their involvement. Across-participant analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps of thematic analysis to discover some of the shared themes among participants. Participants described development of positive self-concepts and skills, the inclusive social environment and supportive staff, opportunities to try fun and unique activities, connecting with and learning about nature, overcoming personal challenges,

and the importance of this program in the lives of the youth, their families, and their communities. The results have important implications for theory, research, and practice regarding counselling and community-based adaptive recreation programming.

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Acknowledgments

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Young Royalty, Blaze, Dane, Mickey, Star Player, and all of the other youth in the Autism Spectrum Program whose voices have not yet been heard.

The Power to Adapt: A Case Study of Special Needs Youth

Who Have Participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program

"Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species: the child in nature" (Louv, 2008, p. 159).

Chapter I – Introduction

Background to the Study and Context of Problem

Living with autism is often described as frustrating, confusing, and overwhelming. A developmental neurological condition characterized by distinctly different information processing and storage as compared to those with typical development, autism affects the ability to understand others, communicate, and cope with aspects of the environment (Cashin, 2008; Howlin, 2003). Individuals with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) commonly experience many challenges with daily living, such as difficulty transitioning with life tasks, sensitivities to sensory stimuli, problems with self-organization, trouble with understanding reciprocal relationships, and dependence on routine and predictable events, all resulting in problems with social flexibility (Autism Canada Foundation, 2011; Howlin, 2003; Mesibov, Shea & Adams, 2001). Youth living with autism may have trouble forming and maintaining social relationships that are necessary for healthy identity development and the development of self-esteem (Cashin, 2008; Howlin, 2003). Some people with autism become socially isolated, lonely, anxious and depressed due to their constrained ability to establish friendships (Cashin, 2008; Locke, Ishijim, Kasari & London, 2010; Mesibov et al., 2001). Similarly, young people with Down's syndrome and emotional or behavioural disorders frequently display deficits in social skills, leading to peer rejection, difficulties with school transitions, and long term social and psychological consequences (Erdley & Asher, 1999; Gualnick, Connor, & Johnson, 2011).

Within the autism spectrum, those who are relatively high functioning are more difficult to recognize (Mesibov et al., 2001). Although they have excellent vocabulary and their deficits are more subtle, they may still show some of the same impairments in social interaction, communication, and restricted patterns of behaviour as those who are more low functioning (Bogdashina, 2005; Gray, 2002; Mesibov et al., 2001). People with high functioning developmental disabilities and mental health challenges must navigate adolescence without many of the protections available for more low-functioning individuals (e.g., specialty classrooms), and must deal with the social world as if they were not disabled (Gray, 2002). By adolescence, higher-functioning youth have commonly internalized negative self-attributions and low self-confidence and may be either highly sensitive or indifferent to peer-relationships as a result of stigmatization and rejection (Gray, 2002; Howlin, 2003). These difficulties tend to emerge in an already tumultuous life stage, when the young person is faced with biological changes and shifts in relationships with parents, peers, and teachers (Cashin, 2008; Kroger, 2007). The transition into adolescence may seem particularly overwhelming for youth who may be interested in connecting with others yet face social challenges, since social interactions provide the basis for how we define ourselves and form knowledge about how to navigate in the world (Burr, 1995; Howlin, 2003). People who have a competent sense of self are more likely to experience regular positive emotions, explore new opportunities and relationships, persist in the face of challenges, and feel good about themselves (Hood & Carruthers, 2007). This not only has the potential to contribute to the individual's quality of life, but also to their motivation to participate more fully in a productive life where they are involved in giving back to their communities. However, without knowledge of the self, including an awareness of strengths, building the social and

emotional resources necessary for healthy development may be extremely difficult (Hood & Carruthers, 2007).

In addition to these social and identity-related challenges, youth with disabilities may gravitate more to sedentary lifestyles than their non-disabled peers (King et al., 2003; Murphy & Carbone, 2008; Rimmer, 1999; Rosser Sandt & Frey, 2005). This may be due to a number of factors, such as the tendency of youth with autism to prefer a narrow range of interests in isolated activities (Autism Canada Foundation, 2011; Howlin, 2003), communication impairments that may complicate understanding directives from team coaches (Murphy & Carbone, 2008), and constraints to outdoor recreation such as functional limitations, lack of accessible programs, high costs, and limited time (Burns & Graefe, 2007; King et al., 2003). Like many children, youth living with disabilities commonly spend much of their days inside, sitting down at a desk or computer, or on the couch watching television or playing videogames. The Canadian Health Measures Survey, which collected data from Canadian youth between 2007 and 2009, found that children and youth spend over 8 hours a day, or 62% of their waking hours, sedentary, and that sedentary time increases with age (Colley et al., 2011). In this sedentary time, Canadian teenagers are getting an average of 6 hours of screen time per day, through the television, computer, and video games (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2011). The psychosocial implications of physical inactivity include decreased social acceptance and self-esteem (Murphy & Carbone, 2008). In contrast, regular participation in physical activity during childhood and adolescence helps to build and maintain good physical health, positive self-image, and quality of life, and is associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety (Burgeson, Weschsler, Brener, Young, & Spain, 2001; Iannotti, Kogan, Janssen, & Boyce, 2009). Rosser Sandt and Frey (2005) warn that if young people living with autism spectrum disorders do not participate in leisure-time physical

activity regularly, they are at an increased risk of long-term sedentary lifestyles and chronic health diseases. Yet, the lack of effective community-based recreation programs for youth living with various disabilities limits potential improvements in health and fuller participation in community life through employment and recreation program opportunities in adulthood (Hood & Carruthers, 2007; Rimmer & Rowland, 2008; Rosser Sandt & Frey).

According to the 2010 Physical Activity Monitor, less than half of 13-17 year olds play outside after school (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, 2010, cited in Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2011). Children and youth today find themselves in situations that lure them away from nature, though it is well known that young people need access to nature and outdoor recreation to lead balanced and healthy lives (Boniface, 2000; Louv, 2008). Participation in play and recreation are essential elements to healthy physical and emotional growth of children and adolescents (King et al., 2003). Apart from the promotion of physical activity, it appears that spending time in natural environments has intrinsic qualities that enhance health and well-being. A meta-analysis conducted by Bowler, Buyung, Knight and Pullin (2010) found that after exposure to a natural environment, people tended to experience reduced negative emotions. Time in nature can help individuals recover from mental fatigue, improve attention, and experience opportunities for growth and pleasure (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). It can foster creativity, a sense of play, and a deeper sense of purpose (Louv, 2008). Furthermore, restoring young peoples' relationship with nature can help them to reconnect with the land, learn about where their food comes from, how human actions can impact the environment (both in positive and negative ways), and encourage them become more respectful to the earth and their surrounding communities of flora and fauna by living sustainably. The Child and Nature Alliance (2011) comments that, "At the very least, the inclusion of the 'Nature and Outdoors'

indicator on the [Active Healthy Kids Canada] report card will get more people talking about how disconnected we have become with the outdoors and…hopefully this will inspire them to make a change!" It is necessary that researchers and practitioners strive to facilitate restoring the person-environment connection to help youth develop into holistically healthy and environmentally-responsible beings (Louv, 2008).

Health promotion for people living with disabilities has only become an area of study in the past few decades (Rimmer, 1999). Existing treatments that aim to improve the functioning of youth with autism and their families include biomedical treatments (e.g., pharmaceutical and nutritional planning), behavioural therapies, communication therapies, sensory therapies, and complementary and alternative therapies such as acupuncture, homeopathy, and music therapy (Autism Canada Foundation, 2011). These therapies have been described as extremely useful for families who live with a person with a disability, but tend to focus on only one aspect of development (e.g., speech), or on deficit-reduction, rather than more a holistic approach to growth. Rimmer (1999) comments that health promotion among those with disabilities should also include providing opportunities for leisure, enjoyment, and enhancing the overall quality of life by reducing environmental barriers to good health. Harper and Scott (2006) noted that parents will seek alternative treatment modalities for their children when conventional practices are not appropriate for meeting their needs, such as the socio-emotional and psychological needs of young people with disabilities. In the last few decades, adventure programs have been used to facilitate the adjustment of individuals living with disabilities (e.g., Green, Kleiber & Tarrant, 2000; Weiss, Diamond, Denmark, & Lovals, 2003; Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Groff, 2005). A meta-analysis by Hattie, Marsh, Neill, and Richards (1997) concluded that participation in outdoor adventure programs can improve self-regulation, social skills, confidence, self-efficacy,

self-understanding, assertiveness, internal locus of control, and decision-making skills. Through participation in adventure programming, individuals can learn to overcome their perceived limitations and discover their capabilities, fostering a sense of self-control and empowerment (House & Paisley, 2008). Developing community-based recreation programs for youth living with disabilities can be challenging given the lack of adaptive equipment, transportation, and knowledgeable staff (Fragala-Pinkham, Hayley, & Goodsgold, 2006). However, improving access and availability to adventure opportunities can help youth living with disabilities incorporate physical activity into a healthy lifestyle, develop friendships with other young people of all abilities, and more fully participate in an inclusive community (Fragala-Pinkham et al., 2006). One way this can be facilitated is by involvement in community-based outdoor adventure programs.

Rationale for Present Study

Rutter (1987) specifies that particular attention must be focussed on the processes that operate at key transitional times in development, such as adolescence, that help young people approach an adaptive life path despite challenging life circumstances. Researchers and practitioners working with disabled and mentally ill youth need to better understand what type of programs and experiences can contribute to a sense of self for these youth. This is important because it may help to develop more effective, barrier-free programs, or expand on existing successful programs that help to provide a greater quality of life, meaning, and feelings of inclusion for youth who have traditionally been marginalized (Burns & Graefe, 2007). This can facilitate greater self-understanding, greater connections with others and with nature, an increased sense of social responsibility, and an incorporation of recreation as a regular part of a healthy and balanced lifestyle. Early intervention programmes for adolescents may help young

people manage some of the restricting experiences they have endured throughout their development (Rutter).

While there are many programs aiming to facilitate positive youth development, Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, Cheung, and Levine (2008) note that they must be accessible in order to have any effect on the target population. Persons living with disabilities generally experience more challenges in accessing recreational pursuits when compared to those without such conditions (Burns & Graefe, 2007). Researchers have identified several barriers to the use of nature-based recreation services among the disabled, such as lack of time and planning demands, difficulty accommodating wide age and skill ranges, limitations in marketing to adaptive recreation services, low familial income, and stigma (Bedini, 2000; Burns & Graefe, 2007; Mactavish & Schleien, 2004). While many studies have focused on the opinions of health care practitioners and family members of those living with a disability, little research has directly addressed the perceptions those living with developmental disabilities concerning their leisure and recreation experiences (Malik, Ashton-Shaeffer, & Kleiber, 1991). Service providers delivering adventure programming for individuals with disabilities must include the input of consumers' likes and dislikes in the maintenance and revision of programs (Malik et al., 1991). Furthermore, while there are many studies that highlight individual attributes and familial influences that contribute to resilience, few studies examine the role of community organizations in supporting youth development (Collins, 2001).

The outdoor recreation experiences of young people living with disabilities is a neglected area of study (Mactavish & Schleien, 2004; Scholl, McAvoy, Rynders & Smith, 2003). It is important to discover the extent to which key intra- and interpersonal factors can be affected by interventions such as therapeutic adventure programs, so we can understand how to best foster

resiliency with community programming (Hobfoll, 2002). Parents, mental health service providers, and government ministries would benefit from more information about the impact of outdoor and adventure-based modalities in order to more effectively serve youth living with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Harper & Scott, 2006). It is difficult to respond adequately to the needs of individuals when the understanding of their experiences is limited (Lloyd, Gatherer & Kalsy, 2006). The nature of therapeutic recreation experiences cannot be assumed to be positive (Hood & Carruthers, 2007), and it is important to ask the participants themselves to describe their own experiences. Furthermore, attention on the perspectives of individuals with disabilities can help this marginalized population share their voices in the public sphere (Davies, 2007).While there have been a few studies that have investigated the therapeutic recreation experiences of people living with disabilities (Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais & Seligmann, 1997; McAvoy, Smith, & Rynders, 2006; Zabriskie et al., 2005), there has been little qualitative investigation into how nature-based recreation programs may impact the identity development of youth living with disabilities. Research that aims to provide greater comprehension of disabled individuals' experiences has the potential to correct misunderstandings about who they are and how they can and cannot function (Malik et al., 1991).

Focus and Contribution of the Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to learn more about the identity development of youth living with developmental and/or mental health challenges throughout their experience in an adaptive recreation program. I was particularly interested in the meanings youth make of their experiences in such a program. My research question was, "*In what ways has participation in a nature-based adaptive recreation program designed for youth living with disabilities influenced*

participants' descriptions of selves?" This study aimed to address a gap in the research by exploring the experiences and identity development stories shared by youth living with a disability who have participated in a nature-based therapeutic adventure program. To enrich these stories, I also sought the perspectives of some of the parents and staff members.

The experiences and identity development stories shared by the participants will contribute to knowledge and to the further development of therapeutic adventure and adaptive recreation for youth living with significant life challenges. Specifically, the information gained from this study can help to illuminate how the challenges and opportunities presented through the adaptive recreation programs have shaped these youths' lives and their adaptations to adolescent transitions. Understanding some of the unique and shared themes among participants will also shed light on aspects of the shared venture among youth, parents, staff, and community that impact resilience, growth, and interdependence. Bagatell (2007) observes that those who have experienced social and functional barriers, including marginalization and stigmatization from being labeled mentally ill or developmentally disabled, may become stuck in problem-saturated life stories. Part of my interest in this research was to identify other types of life stories and their impact on identity development among youth living with significant life challenges, and how participation in this type of program may contribute to a more positive shift in identity for youth.

Researcher Self-Location

I was interested in studying this topic because I am passionate about understanding the collaborative process of resilience; that is, the efforts vulnerable youth and their communities engage in to cope with the rapidly evolving and often intensely difficult lives adolescents face. I firmly believe that adaptation to adversity and growth are interdependent processes, despite

Western culture's tendency to promote independence as a sign of maturity and health. Additionally, many young people and adults in the modern age are becoming increasingly disconnected from nature, due to the availability of highly stimulating technology, funding cuts in recreation programs, and widespread beliefs that wilderness environments are unsafe and uncontrollable settings for children. However, I believe that peoples' relationships with natural environments are as much a part of healthy development and wellness as proper nutrition, exercise, and positive social relationships. I believe that experiences within natural environments can have profoundly healing effects on the adolescent's well-being and development, particularly when surrounded by caring adults and being presented with challenges to work constructively with peers and overcome personal obstacles.

I have had my own growth-enhancing experiences in wilderness settings throughout my lifetime (i.e., alone and with others; as a youth and an adult; as a mentor and a mentee) that I thoroughly believe contributed to my own ability to adapt to the struggles I have faced. I have also worked individually with youth living with both developmental disabilities and mental health issues and have seen how a walk through a park or navigation through more challenging outdoor terrain greatly impacted these youths' mood, well-being, and adaptability. I believe that there is no substitute for direct experience in interacting with nature, building relationships, overcoming physical and psychological challenges, and simply getting dirty in the here and now with adventurous activities. My experiences have highlighted my beliefs of how important community, nature, and adventurous opportunities are in the construction of a positive identity and a resilient person, regardless of the presence of "disabling" conditions. I was thrilled to have an opportunity to work with a local adventure therapy organization and hear the stories of participation.

Chapter II – Literature Review

In this chapter, I provide a review of selected literature relating to the present study. I begin with a brief introduction to my theoretical frameworks of constructivism and social constructionism as they relate to adolescent identity development. Then, I present literature describing the development of self-concept in adolescence, which is shaped partially by relational influences and personal conceptualizations of the self. I briefly present positive psychology, which has also been an influential framework for the present study. I review resilience literature as it has developed and describe how it can relate to youth living with disabilities. I present adventure therapies, outlining how they have evolved over time, the purposes of these therapies, and how they can be applied to working with youth living with significant challenges. I then review and discuss research on therapeutic adventure programs on the development of identity among individuals with disabilities. I conclude this chapter with my research question and proposed study.

Constructivism, Social Constructionism and Adolescent Identity Development

I situated this study within the theoretical paradigms of constructivism and social constructionism. Constructivism and constructionism fit within an interpretivist orientation, proposing that there exist multiple, equally valid social realities and experiences of the social world (Blustein, Palladino Schultheiss & Flum, 2004; Havercamp & Young, 2007; Mason, 2002). These paradigms are appropriate for understanding some of the processes of identity development among adolescence. As individuals enter adolescence, they begin to incorporate their personal experiences, knowledge of the world, and awareness of others' descriptions of them into the beginnings of an ever-evolving self-concept.

Constructivism specifically describes the individual processes of actively creating personal meaning, which involves the ongoing development of cognitive schemas according to an individual's experience and interactions with the surrounding environment (Mahoney & Patterson, 1992; Young & Collin, 2003). This is relevant in understanding how adolescents create meaning of their experiences and begin to develop a sense of identity. Upon entering adolescence, individuals gain the abilities to think about the world in more complicated and abstract ways, becoming more accustomed to using language to express themselves (Sharry, 2004). Adolescence has been long understood as a time when young people begin the process of exploring and examining characteristics about themselves in order to discover who they are and how they fit in the social world around them (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Human development and change processes are not necessarily linear, and may involve oscillations of successes and failures over time (Mahoney & Patterson, 1992). For example, a young person may discover aspects of the self through experiences of success (e.g., I find it easy to make friends and I am popular) as well as failures or "wrong turns" (e.g., I am definitely not cut out for a career in medicine since I hate all of my science classes; Ryan, 1991). Based on this self-knowledge and knowledge about the way the world works, adolescents continually restructure the self to understand their place in the world and keep a sense of self as a coherent entity in the face of a changing reality (Mahoney & Patterson, 1992).

In contrast to the individual, cognitive processes emphasized in constructivism, social constructionist writers emphasize the contextual influences in constructing meaning. There is no individual, rational, self-directing, morally-centered knower, nor a universal Truth discovered and revealed only through rigorous and objective scientific methods (Gergen, Lightfoot, & Sydow, 2004). Knowledge, meaning and identity processes are constructed through a variety of

historical, cultural and relational influences that surround the person (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Burr, 1995; Havercamp & Young, 2007). Knowledge is co-constructed through language as individuals interact with one another and come to understand each others' social realities (Burr, 1995; Gergen et al., 2004). Assumptions and descriptions of a person are a product of the social and cultural discourses of the time (Gergen, 1991). According to Ungar and Teram (2000), the definition of mental health is socio-culturally determined by those who have the greatest power to decide what is considered to be healthy functioning. Therefore, the ways in which youth with disabilities form their identities depends largely on the way they are understood and talked about in the society and communities that surround them.

Historically, theories of child and adolescent behaviour have been driven primarily by observation of clinically trained psychologists (Gergen et al., 2004). Gergen (1991) explains that the language used in mental health professions primarily describes human deficit (e.g., anxious, repressed, self-alienated), and disempowers the individual by emphasizing problems, shortcomings and incapacities. Although this terminology was understandably created in attempts to understand and remedy problems in thinking, feeling, and behaving, these descriptions have slowly entered the vocabulary of the general public (Gergen). Conversations of a "youth crisis" involving an over-emphasis on broken families, chaotic neighbourhoods, drugs, boredom, and the dissolution of social and religious influences on young people have also pervaded the last few decades (Gergen et al., 2004). Gergen and colleagues even point out that this view has been partially constructed by the research community, where funding grants are more readily available for studies that address youth problems than for research that explores positive or even typical aspects of adolescent development. When a society continues to generalize and highlight problem-focussed descriptions of youth development, the experience

can be stigmatizing and discouraging for youth who are trying to develop positively. However, different perspectives have different implications for how a person is treated (Gergen). Adolescents' understandings of identity are also embedded in their relationships with friends, family, and social institutions (Chandler, 2000). When a person is surrounded by social conceptions of self that are valued, appreciated, and encouraged, her or his selves can develop in more positive ways.

Influenced by such characteristics as openness and curiosity, social constructionist studies can be liberating to participants and readers alike, in that all voices may justifiably contribute to the dialogues that shape knowledge in our society (Gergen et al., 2004). Therefore, explorations of alternative selves among disabled youth are accepted and encouraged to be shared. Though historical knowledge still shapes individuals' current experience, it is no longer as important in shaping the future of individuals' co-constructed lives and stories of self; together, we can create new realities (Gergen et al., 2004). The present study used both constructivist and constructionist theories in understanding adolescent selves. Proposing a bridging theory of the two frameworks, Martin and Sugarman (1997) put forth that identities cannot be reduced solely to social, cultural, historical, nor intrapsychic processes; rather, selves are seen to arise from both social influences and from people knowing themselves personally. The individual can transcend some of the contextual processes that influence the identity, and personal transformation is possible (Martin & Sugarman).

Development of Identity and Self-Concept

Discovery of identity through social relatedness. Social constructionist theorists contend that humans are relational beings, and the context the person lives in is a fundamental influence on his or her development (Gergen, 1991; Josselson, 1988). Positive relationships with

peers and those within the youth's community are increasingly important influences on identity formation throughout adolescence (Kroger, 2007; Marshall & Leadbeater, 2008). During early and middle adolescence, youth begin to develop self-concept through interacting with others, comparing qualities that are distinct and shared with others, and incorporating the descriptions others have about them (Hart, 1988). Adolescents begin to learn about who they are in relation to others; that is, they consider how they fit in, what they value, and how they are accepted or rejected by peers (Newman & Newman, 2001). Identity develops through imitation and identification processes and active self-construction of what values, beliefs and pursuits are important to the person (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Young people seek connections with groups within the communities in which they reside in the search for belongingness, worth and a sense of personal meaning (Newman & Newman, 2001). While the meaning of social success will obviously vary from child to child, it appears that some sort of friendship or group identity is essential to the maintenance of positive adolescent self-esteem (Howlin, 2003). Thus, development of a positive identity through collective relationships contributes to good mental health and intrinsic desire to continue to participate in group commitments later on in life.

The ways in which someone is talked about within the interpersonal relationships and broader cultural contexts that surround them can influence self-perceptions (Raskin, 2002). Youth living with disabilities may, therefore, have struggles incorporating this aspect of identity that is more or less assigned and stigmatized, that is, disability or mental illness. Devalued personal characteristics can have an effect of distancing the person from others, leading to negative self-evaluations and limiting opportunities (Groff & Kleiber, 2001). However, contexts that give disabled youth opportunities to pursue intrinsically interesting activities and explore identity alternatives can help them to recognize their strengths and transcend threats to identity

exploration (Groff & Kleiber, 2001. According to Larson (2000), youth develop positively when they are involved in activity that makes them feel independent, intrinsically motivated and engaged. Recreation programs that facilitate this type of development are designed to facilitate the development of self-concept and give participants the ability to function more autonomously in social and other settings (Weiss et al., 2003).

Interdependence in identity. Stigmatizing discourses of disability describe a person as incapable of functioning on their own (Devine, 2004). While one of the goals of positive youth development typically includes independence, overemphasis on helping the person function independently disregards inherent adolescent motivation to establish themselves as members of a valued group. Furthermore, individualized conceptions of self development in adolescence have the risk of further distancing and alienating the individual from others (Gergen et al., 2004). Although understandings of a relational self are becoming increasingly prominent in psychological discourse, Western socialization of the self is still based on the seemingly paradoxical push and pull between individual agency and collective communion (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Gergen et al., 2004). Even the field of therapeutic recreation has a history of emphasizing independence as the critical outcome of client success (Goodwin, 2008). Agency in the Western view of the self focuses on the needs of separateness and differentiation in search of a sense of personal uniqueness, while communion in the collectivist view of identity centers on needs of belongingness and interconnectedness with others (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Josselson (1988) asserts that autonomy grows only in the context of connection. That is, when people feel securely embedded within relationships with others, they can feel freest to express themselves. Similarly, Ryan (1991) contends that self development emerges in the context of authentic relationships. Autonomy does not mean detachment, but

rather a sense of freedom, responsibility and self-direction. An adolescent can be emotionally and personally connected with others without losing freedom (Ryan). Through interpersonal relationships, adolescents can examine and confirm aspects of selves. Both individuality and collectivism are necessary for psychosocial wellness and a healthy identity.

Raeff (2006) asserts that interdependence relates to interconnectedness and reliance on one another and includes pursuing common goals, constructing shared meanings, and considering the needs and perspectives of others. It is about relationships that lead to mutual acceptance and respect; interdependence promotes change in the organization of the system, rather than change in the individual (Condeluci, 1995). Interdependent relationships tend to promote empowerment, enabling individuals to work together and participate in preferred activities in their communities (Hood & Carruthers, 2007). Furthermore, Gergen (1991) comments that personal meaning is born out of interdependence. Attempts to define or describe a person's identity cannot exist without relationship; a person cannot be a leader without others to follow (Gergen; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Interdependence and collaborative approaches can, therefore, help promote growth and development among youth who live with significant challenges, merging the aspirations of autonomy and connectedness. Furthermore, interdependent relationships may help promote empowered and capable selves (House & Paisley, 2008). Good interpersonal relationships, self-esteem and self-efficacy have been found to be factors that help to protect adolescents from becoming depressed (Carbonnel, Reinhertz, Giaconia, Stashwick, Paradis & Beardslee, 2002). The following sections will describe and discuss self-esteem and self-efficacy and their roles in development of a positive self-concept.

Self-esteem. Cooley (1902) hypothesized that the self was a social construction, consisting of the person's perceptions of how significant others regard the person. He described

these perceived self-appraisals from others as "the looking glass self" (Cooley, 1902). These perceived appraisals about the self constitute self-worth (also known as self-esteem), which is the self-evaluative judgements about a person's overall worth (Harter, 1988). This commonly emerges in the ways that people describe liking themselves and being satisfied with who they are (Harter). High levels of self-esteem have been found to contribute to fewer emotional and behavioural problems as well as higher levels of academic achievement (Dubois, Bull, Sherman, & Roberts, 1998). Harter postulates that self-worth mediates the person's general affect, ranging from cheerful for those who have high self-worth, to depressed for those who have low-self-worth. Subsequently, those who have high positive affect may have more energy and motivation to engage in age-appropriate activities (Harter). This may signify that interventions that target increases in self-worth may impact how a person feels and how active they are in participating in social and other opportunities they are presented with.

Harter and Marold (1991) identified two pathways that can lead to depression. The first, where the person feels inadequate and incompetent, results when a dissatisfaction of self in the context of social interactions (low self-concept) leads to low self-worth, which ultimately leads to depression. In this case, Harter and Marold contend that the person experiences depression as well as anger towards the self for not being socially competent. In the second pathway, low perceived social support and social relationships that are based on conditional approval lead to depression and low self-esteem. In this case, anger is directed at others which are perceived as the source of low self-worth. Dubois et al. (2002) have also explored the mediating role of self-esteem. These authors found that high self-esteem is a mediator between positive social support and positive adjustment in early adolescence in the form of reduced emotional and behavioural problems (Dubois et al.). Harter, Waters and Whitesell (1998) add that self-esteem may vary

according to different relational contexts. That is, the person may hold a more positive perception of self within some relationships versus others. Harter and colleagues discovered that nearly three quarters of their sample of high school students judged their worth differently among contexts with parents, teachers, male peers and female peers. Validation for who someone is as a person should be related to the person's self-worth within that particular context, as well as impacting global self-worth (Harter et al.). Dubois and colleagues suggest the importance of promoting interventions for young adolescents that include activities directed towards building both social support, from peers and adults, and self-esteem.

Self-efficacy. Feelings of personal competence regarding a person's own skills and abilities are essential for the development of a healthy identity and personal well-being (Groff & Kleiber, 2001). Such feelings stem from people's beliefs in their capabilities to exert influence over things that affect their lives (Bandura, 1997). These beliefs make up what Bandura (1997) termed *self-efficacy*, a major influence in multiple areas of a person's life including life choices, the ability to persist in face of obstacles, the experience of emotional and psychological distress when coping with demands, and striving to accomplish personal goals. People will generally explore opportunities they believe to be within their perceived capabilities and that provide them with a sense of self-worth and satisfaction, while generally avoiding situations they perceive to be beyond their capacities to succeed and/or cope with failure (Bandura).

Many young people living with disabilities have difficulties perceiving themselves as being worthy and self-efficacious at making positive changes in their lives (McWhirter, 1991). Always being on the receiving end of assistance, an experience common among many living with developmental disabilities and other life challenges, tends to promote discouragement (Hood & Carruthers, 2007). When youth feel that they lack power to influence the way they are

viewed in society, their mental health can become threatened and troubling patterns such as risk-taking, apathy, and social withdrawal can result (Ungar & Teram, 2000). Unless people believe they have the capability to influence their environment and produce desired results in their lives, they have little incentive to act and pursue goals (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Self-efficacy and feelings of competence develop when youth learn that they are not helpless, and can exert some control over a seemingly uncontrollable environment. Small experiences of personal efficacy may be particularly significant for youth living with autism, who tend to prefer predictability and control (Mesibov et al., 2001).

Initial efficacy experiences occur in the context of the family. Supportive caretaking, parental efficacy, and parental aspirations for their children can help the child develop positively, in areas such as building a sense of personal efficacy, educational competencies, and prosocial peer relations (Bandura et al., 1996). However, as the young person grows up, peers play an increasingly important role in their understanding of personal capacities (Bandura, 1997). Social structures such as institutions, organizations and community groups can further impose constraints or provide resources that contribute to the adolescent's experience of self-efficacy. For example, Vieno, Santinello, Pastore and Perkins (2007) found that a sense of community at school is significantly related to adolescent self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) maintains that efficacy beliefs are developed and altered by direct experiences as well as vicarious experience, social evaluations by significant others, and self-evaluations of success. Individuals with disabilities who develop self-efficacy in one of these ways can develop resilience in the face of risk (Rutter, 1987). Such experiences can become integrated into a young person's sense of self in the development of an identity that is motivated, capable, and resilient.

Positive psychology

Much of the focus of mainstream psychology has been on mental illness and deficits. However, many researchers have been exploring alternative constructions of the problem-focussed approach that typifies research on adolescence (Gergen et al., 2004). Positive psychology is a paradigm that focuses on understanding and developing capacities of individuals and their surrounding contexts (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is focused on facilitating peoples' subjective experiences of earlier life satisfaction, current well-being and happiness, and optimism for the future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Perhaps paradoxically, focussing on peoples' strengths can actually help improve their life situations and experiences of the challenges they face (such as disability) and allow them to thrive more fully than solely trying to target deficit improvement. Ryan and Deci (2000) indicate that at their best, people are agentic, inspired, curious, self-motivated, and strive to use their qualities in constructive and responsible ways. Thus, research on the conditions that foster human potentials and resilience has been significant in that it can help identify supportive environments that optimize human development and well-being.

Adolescent Challenges and Resilience

Most youth are faced with stressful life events during development (Arrington & Wilson, 2000). Some youth experience considerable hardship during their development as a result of changing family constellations, economic hardship, exposure to violence and drugs, and a loosening of connection to community (Morrison & Cosden, 1997; Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). Others may have been born with or developed medical, psychological, or developmental conditions that have restricted their opportunities to participate in happy, healthy, and productive lives. Western society has a tendency to focus on determining the causes of and solutions to

diseases, deficits, and behaviour problems among youth (Patterson, 2002). Much psychological and therapeutic practice, therefore, tries to correct these perceived insufficiencies to bring a person's functioning more in line with a perceived norm. However, there has been an increasing awareness that the elimination of deficits alone does not necessarily result in healthy, capable or vibrant individuals and communities (Carruthers & Hood, 2007). Resilience research has shifted focus to health promotion and optimal functioning in the lives of populations whose successful growth is somehow limited by significant life challenges (Patterson, 2002; Rutter, 1987; Ungar & Lerner, 2008). Given that the stigma and isolation experienced by those living with developmental or mental health disabilities have been shown to contribute to social and psychological maladjustment in adolescence and adulthood, the concept of resilience is certainly relevant to this population. I have found that resiliency theory and research has deepened my understanding of the experiences of the youth and families who shared their stories of involvement in a community-based therapeutic adventure program.

Resilience theory. The concept of resilience began developing throughout the 1960's and 1970's, but really began growing in the field of mental health in the 1980's (Lee, Kwong, Cheung, Ungar & Cheung, 2010). Masten (2007) writes that pioneering researchers such as Norman Garmenzy, Michael Rutter, and Emmy Werner began seeking to understand the consequences of major threats to development, and discovered some unexpected positive adaptation despite adversity among some of the young people they were studying. Resilience research has evolved over time, and has been divided into four waves (Masten). Early definitions focussed on individual variations in a person's capacity to cope effectively with the stresses of internal vulnerabilities (e.g., sensitivities), and external stresses (e.g., dissolution of the family; Rutter, 1987). This first wave of research was descriptive, seeking to measure resilience by

identifying specific characteristics of children, their families, and their surrounding environments that appeared to correlate with resilience (Masten). First wave researchers attempted to develop a "short list" of commonly observed correlates of resilience. Garmenzy (1983) identified protective factors such as the child's social competence and temperament, family factors such as supportive parents and consistent rules, and community factors such as positive relationships with significant adults and supportive schools.

The second wave of resilience research acknowledged these protective processes and explored further into how resilient qualities were acquired, investigating the interactive processes that might account for these resilient characteristics (Margalit, 2003; Masten, 2007). Werner and Smith's (1982) epidemiological study of a birth cohort in Kauai was one of the first and most extensive longitudinal studies on the development of children living with developmental disabilities. By following the children over time, the study aimed to provide perspective on (a) these children's capacity to cope with stress, poverty, and parental psychopathology, (b) gender differences in vulnerability and resiliency, and (c) protective variables within the child and care-giving environment that differentiated high risk youngsters who are resilient from those who developed serious learning and behaviour problems. In this study, infants who experienced perinatal stress and lived in disadvantaged contexts, such as poverty or family discord, showed greater deficits than those who also experienced perinatal stress, but who lived in a context of fewer environmental stressors and more protective factors. Werner and Smith established an extensive list of protective and vulnerability factors within children and their surrounding environments. Resilient children had positive temperaments, a belief that challenges could be overcome, caring and supportive adult relationships in addition to or instead of support from parents, as well as opportunities for employment and other positive experiences during the

transition from adolescence to adulthood (Werner, 1993). This lead to conclusions that resilience is a complex process, and that resilient children are actively involved in ongoing interactions with their developmental environments rather than simply being passive products of their surroundings.

The third wave of research focussed largely on exploring resilience by applying prevention and intervention programs designed to reduce risky behaviours through programming such as parenting classes and social skills training for children (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999). Providing interventions that enhance young peoples' sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy could also act as protective factors in the face of risk (Rutter, 1987). More recently, the fourth wave of research is seeking to explore multiple levels of analysis including biological correlates of resilience such as neuroplasticity in efforts to see how the brain is modified by experience (Curtis & Cicchetti, 2003; Nelson, 1999). Such research can help to identify the interventions needed to bring children back to healthy development. Clearly, understanding the processes that lead to resilience is a challenging task, but each study in this field helps scholars better understand this complex process (Masten, 2007).

Understanding of resilience for current study. Though the definition of resilience still varies throughout the literature, researchers generally share an interest in understanding contextual factors in the development of both resilience and less healthy processes and outcomes (Ungar & Lerner, 2008). Current research demonstrates the need to conceptualize the bidirectional person-environment process that is mutually beneficial for the individual and her or his setting, understanding resilience as co-constructed (Patterson, 2002; Ungar et al., 2008). That is, individual characteristics, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, work in conjunction with familial, school, peer, and community-based environments to shape the young person's

development. Positive interactions can then set the scene for the youth to give back to their communities (Murray, 2003). This co-constructed approach to resilience fits within the social constructionist framework I used for the present study (Ungar, 2004). Thus, resiliency is defined as, "first, the capacity of individuals to *navigate* to resources that sustain well-being; second, the capacity of individuals' physical and social ecologies to *provide* these resources; and third, the capacity of individuals, their families, and communities to *negotiate* culturally meaningful ways for resources to be shared" (Ungar et al., 2008, p. 2). Stressful events in childhood and adolescence can negatively affect the developmental process, but the availability and use of social support and community encouragement may counteract these negative effects (Collins, 2001). Therefore, resilience is a dynamic process involving youth, their families, and their communities in the collaborative venture for accessible, appropriate and meaningful resources that help youth and society progress towards positive mental health and social adjustment.

Ungar et al. (2008) conducted a study exploring Canadian youths' pathways to resilience through qualitative interviews with 19 at-risk adolescents aged 15-18. Research team members collaborated with community service providers, forming committees to establish participant selection criteria consistent with local and cultural standards of resilience. Committees nominated youth for the study based on three criteria: (1) must be of age transitioning from childhood to adulthood (15-18), (2) have been exposed to at least three factors identified to pose significant threat to youth in the community (i.e., family breakdown, poverty, cultural disintegration, multiple relocations, being a child in care, addictions, or discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation and mental illness), and (3) known by community members to be coping well. The authors reported that there was no single pattern of adaptive behaviour across youth, but seven themes were identified that were related to resilience: *access to material*

resources; access to supportive relationships; development of a desirable personal identity; experiences of power and control; adherence to cultural traditions; experiences of social justice; and experiences of a sense of cohesion with others. When "tensions" in these seven thematic areas were resolved, youth reported that they gained a perspective of resilience for themselves and significant others.

The findings of the above study by Ungar and colleagues (2008) support the depiction of resilience as the outcome of successful navigations to health resources and the contextually relevant provision of those resources by the person's locality. Yet among current resilience literature, there is still a dearth of research that explicitly explores resilient processes among youth living with autism or other developmental disabilities. These disabilities are considered to have the potential to disrupt normative functioning enough to lead to potentially negative outcomes (Riley & Masten, 2005), even without the consideration of other economic, familial, social, or political circumstances that surround the child. Much of resilience research that touches on populations of those living with autism has focussed on the *perspectives of the families* of those who have autism (e.g., Bayat, 2007; Pilowsky, Yirmiya, Doppelt, Gross-Tsur, & Shalev, 2004). To date, little has been done to explore the role of community organizations in supporting youth development (Collins, 2001), and even less has been done to elicit the perspectives of the youth themselves.

Resilience-promoting interventions. Intervention programs aimed at fostering resilience may enable young people to manage some of the challenges they have experienced over time. Interventions within the resilience paradigm have shifted from deficit-focussed, problem-solving approaches to those that explore and support the individual's strengths (Margalit, 2003). Rutter (1987) suggested that particular attention be paid to the processes and interventions that may

facilitate adaptation despite risk, particularly to key turning points on young people's lives, such as the developmental period of adolescence. Since positive self-concept and self-esteem have been shown to be important in promoting healthy adolescent development (Carbonell et al, 2001), interventions that improve the subjective experience of these qualities can be helpful in promoting resilient youth. In addition to a focus on self-esteem and self-efficacy promotion, Rutter (1987) suggests that interventions should also target processes that reduce the impact of risk, reduce the likelihood for worsening of conditions, and provide the young person with growth-enhancing opportunities. Masten & Coatsworth (1998) describe three key types of strategies to consider in prevention-intervention design: (a) risk-focussed, (b) resource-focussed, and (c) process focussed. Consistent with the second wave of resilience research described above, the first strategy type is focussed on prevention of risk, such as providing pre-natal care to reduce the risk of premature birth. The second type of strategy targets reduction of the impact of specific problems by providing resources such as trauma therapy following a traumatic life event. The third type of more holistic, process-oriented interventions involve creating and maintaining supportive systems that support the multiple facets of development, such as self-efficacy, self-regulation, attachment, competence, and ability to access new opportunities (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Although support from caring adults has been identified as a protective factor, community support has received little attention (Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). An incentive for promoting community-based interventions for adolescents is that, of all protective factors, social support in the young person's community may be most amenable to intervention. One type of community-based programming that aims to help promote positive youth development is adventure-based therapy, which will be described in the following sections.

Adventure Therapies

Adventure-based therapies are continually evolving approaches from a holistic paradigm that show promise to facilitate personal growth and resilience in face of adversity (Gillis & Ringer, 1999). They constitute a shift away from traditional therapeutic modalities which may focus on deficits rather than on strengths, capabilities, and potential for success. Adventure therapy is one of several terms, including wilderness therapy and outdoor behavioural healthcare, which are often used interchangeably. The common elements among adventure-based therapeutic programs include an emphasis on the natural setting (away from the person's usual environment), experiential learning in the here-and-now, the use of small group interactions that promote collective problem solving, and the perception of mental and/or physical challenge in certain activities (Hattie et al., 1997; Hill, 2007; Davis-Berman & Berman, 2008).

Theory behind the therapies. Adventure-based therapies are based on the premise that a major cause of mental, emotional, and behavioural disturbances is the lack of significant relationship between youth and their social and natural environments (Gass, 1993). Nature and wilderness itself can be therapeutic, offering a restorative experience to the mind, body, and spirit (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Louv, 2008; Russell & Farnum, 2004). However, urban and suburban infrastructure and technological advances have widened the gap between humans and nature as part of daily life (Louv, 2008). Furthermore, modern modes of psychotherapy have adopted an understanding of the person as a self-contained and separate self that seeks to increase personal pleasure and avoid pain (Conn, 1995). Therapeutic assessment and treatment is decontextualized and often occurs within the closed doors of a private office (Conn, 1995). The traditional healers of the world have long understood that human health includes balanced relationships with the natural environment (Gray, 1996; Roszak, 1995). People are

psychologically bonded to the earth, and just as we depend on it for physical resources, we also depend on it for our psychological and emotional well-being.

Adventure programs typically involve group settings that help adolescents connect with each other and work collaboratively while they engage in adventurous activities. Adolescence can be an isolating experience for many youth, so the experience of a cohesive group is quite powerful (Hill, 2007). The physical challenges in these types of therapies can also provide an opportunity for catharsis through the expression of the inevitable frustration and anxiety that often comes with novel adventure-based tasks (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Many therapeutic adventure programs exist within the wider umbrella of wilderness and nature therapies. A brief description of the history of these therapies is necessary in setting the context for discussing therapeutic and adaptive recreation. In addition to being explained below, Table 1 presents key definitions of each of these different adventure therapies.

Table 1.

Key Adventure Therapy Terms

Name	Definition
1. Wilderness Therapy	Therapy (involving assessment, treatment planning, and service delivery by trained mental health professionals) occurring in remote wilderness settings for extended periods of time. The therapy involves challenging intra- and interpersonal activities in the wilderness that are aimed at helping the client overcome cognitive, behavioural, and affective problems.
2. Adventure Therapy	Similar to wilderness therapy except it is not always in natural settings and for a shorter period of time.
3. Therapeutic Adventure	Rather than an emphasis on assessment, treatment planning, and remedying specific pathology, therapeutic adventure programs tend to focus on promoting personal and interpersonal growth, which involves learning new skills, recognizing personal and social resources, connecting with others and with nature, and having fun though adventurous activities and group work.
4. Therapeutic and Adaptive Recreation	Similar to therapeutic adventure, except that service delivery is designed specifically for people with disabling conditions.

Wilderness therapy. Wilderness therapy has its roots in the Outward Bound program, a wilderness challenge program founded by educator Kurt Hahn (Gass, 1993). Hahn was a pioneer of experiential education, or "learning by doing," and started Outward Bound to help British seamen to build character and survive the rigours of sailing in World War II (Gass, 1993). In the 1960's, Outward Bound spread to the United States and expanded over the following decades as therapy for troubled teenagers (Gass, 1993). Primarily geared towards adolescents struggling with behavioural and mental health challenges, wilderness therapy currently refers to interventions focussed on using nature and wilderness as a significant aspect of treatment (Becker, 2010). Wilderness therapy specifically occurs in remote settings with participants living in small groups for extended periods of time, ranging from several days to several months (Gillis & Ringer, 1999; Tucker, 2009). Wilderness therapy programs often focus a lot of time helping participants understand the meaning of wilderness experiences, with such therapy-based practices such as journaling, psycho-education, individual counselling, and self-disclosure (Gass, 1993). Hill (2007) maintains that wilderness therapy, in contrast to other therapeutic experiences in the wilderness, involves assessment, treatment planning, and service delivery by trained mental health practitioners. It has primarily been developed for, used with, and shown success in at-risk adolescent populations including young offenders (Russell, 2006) and adolescents with chronic illness and physical disabilities (Kessell, Resnick & Blum, 1985).

Adventure therapy. Adventure therapy includes activities that provide groups or individuals with challenging tasks to overcome, team-building experiences, and activities that facilitate communication and cooperation (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2008; Priest & Gass, 1997). Similar to wilderness therapy, adventure therapy involves taking clients out of their comfort zones into situations that create a sense of disequilibrium (and often, anxiety and

frustration), and then guiding them to build new skills to deal with this state of discomfort and work through the challenges presented (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002). Additionally, adventure therapy programs focus specifically on remedying cognitive, behavioural, or affective problems in the client, through creating circumstances involving perceived risk and experiential learning that will facilitate change in its participants (Gillis & Ringer, 1999; Harper & Scott, 2006). However, in contrast to wilderness therapy, adventure therapy and therapeutic recreation programs may comprise shorter trips intermittently throughout the year, and do not always occur in the context of wilderness natural settings (Gillis & Ringer, 1990; Harper & Scott, 2006); activities may include indoor rock climbing or indoor ropes courses. Therefore, the major difference between adventure and wilderness therapy is the setting and length of time.

Based on structured interactions with peers, modelling by trustworthy adults, successful navigation of novel environments, and opportunities to process experiences, adventure therapy can help vulnerable youth adapt and grow in spite of the significant life challenges they face (Tucker, 2009). It emphasizes personal responsibility as well as collaboration among group members and group facilitators (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2008; Tucker, 2009). Adventure therapy has been used to promote self-confidence, improved self-concept, reflective thinking, social and leadership skills, enhanced communication, cooperation, feelings of trust and worth, improved connections to others and the environment, spirituality, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, reduced psychiatric symptoms, and decreased substance abuse (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2008; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Hattie et al., 1997, Priest & Gass, 1997; Russell & Farnum, 2004; Ungar, Dumond, & McDonald, 2005). Additionally, it provides opportunities for risk and challenge, social connections, and experiences within nature, and may be more engaging and attractive to adolescents than other modalities of therapy.

Therapeutic adventure. Therapeutic adventure is similar to adventure therapy, in that programs are typically enacted in supportive social and natural settings involving components of group-work and challenge, but without the emphasis on assessment and treatment of specific issues (Gillis & Ringer, 1999). The adventurous activities and supportive social context that is facilitated are aimed to be in-and-of-themselves therapeutic. Therapeutic adventure programming is aimed at promoting personal growth, which involves having fun, learning new technical and leadership skills, recognizing existing personal and social resources, connecting with nature, and becoming energized through adventurous experiences (Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Priest & Gass, 1997; Russell & Farnum, 2004; Ungar et al., 2005). The role of the facilitators in therapeutic adventure experiences may be directly or indirectly involved in helping participants to re-write problem stories so that their present and future stories might have more positive "endings" when compared against the disadvantaged pasts they have endured (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2008). Additionally, the challenging activities themselves may give youth an opportunity to challenge a potentially negative self-image and write themselves a new life script (Gass, 1993).

Green, Kleiber and Tarrant (2000) conducted a study in efforts to measure protective factors gained after a ropes-course program completed by high-risk adolescents (e.g., low-income minority youth with an abundance of unsupervised time). These researchers asked twenty-five adolescents aged 10 to 16 years old to complete an adapted version of Witt, Baker and Scott's (1996) Protective Factors Scale before and after completing the ropes course. Results showed that protective factor scores for those who completed the ropes program improved significantly more than those of the two control groups (i.e., a non-adventure based summer program group and a no-treatment group). This was true for eight out of nine protective factor variables – *neighbourhood resources, interested adults, sense of acceptance, controls against*

deviant behaviour, models for conventional behaviour, value on achievement, ability to work with others, and *ability to work out conflicts;* no significant difference was found on the *positive attitude toward the future* variable. Based on these findings, it appeared that the ropes course and group setting permitted youth the opportunity to work through intra- and interpersonal challenge in the here-and-now. This differs from the traditional counselling model, where the client and counsellor sit in the present moment talking about past and future problems that occur in other settings, such as at home or at school. Green and colleagues theorize that the most significant protective factor improvements within the treatment group (*interested and caring adults, neighbourhood resources, sense of acceptance, value on achievement, and ability to work-out conflicts*) were a result of the close facilitator-participant contact, and the types of skills and group support emphasized in adventure programs. Many of these protective factors were relationally-based, highlighting the importance of the positive relationships facilitated by program staff. The study demonstrates the potential for adventure-based programs involving significant emphasis on experiential learning and social support to promote healthy personal and interpersonal growth.

Therapeutic and adaptive recreation. Therapeutic recreation, also referred to as adaptive recreation, builds on the existing benefits of therapeutic adventure programs, but provides recreation services and adventure activities specifically to people living with disabling conditions (Alexander & Matthews, 2010). These programs tend to promote several or all of the following characteristics: a value for diversity in worldviews, abilities, and contributions individuals have to offer; promotion of cooperation, communication, problem solving, and interpersonal growth among participants; cultivation of a commitment to community service projects; recognition of peoples' interconnectedness with the natural world; facilitation of

positive changes in identity or self-concept; and inspiring lifelong participation and enjoyment in recreation and outdoor ventures (Hirsch, 1999). The field recognizes leisure, recreation and play as fundamental components of quality of life for everyone, regardless of physical, mental, social or emotional limitations that might impact their ability to participate in meaningful leisure experiences (Canadian Therapeutic Recreation Association, 2012). One of the main goals of therapeutic recreation is to empower participants to overcome perceptions of low self-efficacy, and to re-focus participants' attention away from limitations and towards capabilities (House & Paisley, 2008).

Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais and Seligmann (1997) examined the effect of an integrated (involving those with and without disabilities) outdoor canoeing program in creating positive change among participants aged 22-65 years. In a multiple baseline design, these researchers used multiple scales to assess attitudes towards disability, relationship development, and canoe skills. They also conducted interviews to obtain information about the impacts that the program had on multiple aspects of lifestyle. Results indicated that participants experienced increases in relationship development, canoe skills, positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities (among those in the program who did not have a disability), self-confidence, self-esteem, interpersonal skills, comfort in asking for help, well-being, and quality of life. For participants with disabilities, social activity and interpersonal relationships were the most valued effects of the program.

Adaptive adventure programs have the potential to provide disabled individuals with opportunities to make decisions, foster senses of control and self-worth, and become more self-reliant (House & Paisley, 2008). The strength-based perspective inherent in adaptive recreation programming has the potential to empower both young people and the supportive systems that

surround them, maximizing a communal ability to thrive and grow (Carruthers & Hood, 2000). However, the potential role of therapeutic recreation to foster this empowerment, capacity-building, and the creation of meaning in life has not been clearly articulated in the field (Carruthers & Hood, 2007).

Gaps in the therapeutic recreation literature. The mental health benefits of Canadian nature-based therapeutic programs have not yet been a focus of much research (Harper & Scott, 2006). One of the challenges in adventure therapy research is the variety of components of the therapeutic process (e.g., use of metaphor, group dynamics, setting etc.) – this results in difficulty establishing which elements of the program are responsible for positive transformations in its participants (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2008). In order build on the existing body of literature, qualitative research is needed to investigate youth's own construction of successful development involving nature-based adventure programming.

Adaptive Recreation Programming and Youth Development

Weiss and colleagues (2003) explored the relationship of components of a Special Olympics program to the self-concept and adaptive behaviours of individuals with various developmental disabilities. Ninety-seven disabled individuals aged 9-43 who had participated in Special Olympics Ontario were interviewed using an adapted version of Harter's (1982) Perceived Competence Scale for Children, called the Perceived Competence Scale for Special Athletes (Riggen, 1992). Their parents (ninety mothers and fifty-six fathers) manually filled the same survey alongside a demographics questionnaire and the Adaptive Behaviour Scales – Residential and Community Edition, Second Edition (Nihira, Leland, & Leland, 1993) to examine their perceptions of their children's self-concept. Results revealed significant and positive correlations between participants': (a) perceptions of their physical competence and both

the number of years and number of sports in which they participated, (b) self-worth and the number of competitions in which they participated, (c) perceptions of social acceptance and the number of medals earned, and (d) actual competence (i.e., in personal, social, and community domains) and the number of competitions in which they participated. The authors suggest that a greater amount of time affiliated with a sports organization and the accompanying progressive acquisition of skills could contribute to the development of a strong athletic identity, and in turn contribute to a more positive sense of personal competence. Self-worth and actual competence may continue to develop with increasing opportunities to exert personal effort to face challenges in sport events. Weiss and colleagues maintain that social acceptance appears to develop when the person received external and tangible reinforcement by coaches, parents and peers. Interestingly, parental reports revealed that they tended to underestimate their child's self-concept, particularly in families with less involved Special Olympic participants, indicating that parental report may not be an accurate depiction of their children's self-concept.

Weiss et al. (2003) concluded that this research was able to demonstrate how athletic programs have the potential to effect change in participants' lives. The results can also help direct program development by highlighting the importance of competition, sport, and tangible reinforcement in the development of self-concept, perceptions of physical competence and perceptions of social acceptance. This study's findings are significant in the understanding of self-concept among people with developmental disabilities; however, it involved participation in competitive sport, and may not apply to other types of adaptive recreation programs. To understand other factors that might contribute to self-concept and identity building, it would be useful to explore programs that involve collective collaboration and the development of intrinsic

motivation. In addition, it would be interesting to hear the participants' voices of what they themselves thought were important in the development of their self-concept.

Blinde and McClung (1997) explored the recreational experiences of individuals with physical disabilities. These authors present the view that although self-perceptions are based to some degree on societal influences on beliefs and expectations, individuals largely construct their identities in active interaction with the environment and other people. Twenty-one women and men aged 19 to 36 years of age were recruited for participation in a variety of individualized recreation programming including horseback riding, swimming, fitness, bowling, walking, tai chi, and other activities. Most (n = 18) participated for 5-10 weeks; however, 3 participants extended participation for 12, 16, and 24 weeks. Within two weeks of the completion of the recreation program, open-ended interviews were conducted with participants. Questions were based on an interview guide developed by the research grant personnel, and covered four areas of exploration: (a) general information about the participation experience, (b) impact of participation on physical capabilities and body perceptions, (c) impact of participation on social life and/or community integration, and (d) impact of participation on independence and employment related skills. A content-based thematic analysis based on an a priori identification of research question categories (i.e., development of physical and social selves) was conducted. The results indicated that participation impacted four aspects of the physical self: (a) experiencing the body in new ways, (b) enhancing perceptions of physical attributes, (c) redefining physical capabilities, and (d) increasing perceived confidence to pursue new physical activities. Perceptions of social selves were also identified based on participation: (a) expanding social interactions and experiences, and (b) initiating social activities in other contexts. Participation in the recreation programs appeared to be a beneficial experience for the physical

and social lives of participants. Findings suggest that these individuals developed an improved sense of personal control, both physically and socially, leading to greater self-efficacy and proactive behaviours (Blinde & McClung). In terms of study design, this research could appear to favour the perspectives and interests of the researchers and funders, rather than the needs of the participants. Also, most participants were involved in the recreation programs for 5 to 10 weeks. The more long term impacts of ongoing community-based recreation programs on identity were rather limited.

Groff and Kleiber (2001) explored whether involvement in sport could be related to identity formation among adolescents with physical disabilities. Researchers conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with eleven physically disabled youth aged 15-21 who had participated in an after school adapted sports program. A content-based thematic analysis of the data revealed four themes: (a) competence and skill development, (b) emotional expression, (c) social interaction and connectedness with others with disabilities, and (d) decreased awareness of disability. Participants reported that a heightened sense of competence and increased opportunities helped them to explore identity alternatives and "be themselves" (Groff & Kleiber). This study provided some preliminary evidence of the potential effects of an adapted sports program on the identity development of adolescents with disabilities, and the researchers urge for future research exploring this link, as well as an exploration into exactly how identity formation can be facilitated in this context.

Participants in the Blinde and McClung (1997) and Groff and Kleiber (2001) studies were adults and adolescents living with physical disabilities; these findings may not generalize to youth living with developmental disabilities and mental health issues. These participants' voices need to be heard, given their struggles and marginalization in society. Also, none of the above

studies' adaptive recreation and sport programs were identified as occurring in a nature-based setting. It appears that contact with wilderness or nature has not been seen as an important variable to consider in relation to the development of change and positive outcomes of therapeutic recreation programs (Taylor, Segal, & Harper, 2010). This aspect of therapeutic recreation programs still needs to be explored.

Difficulty in establishing a positive identity and a sense of self-worth may not be due as much to a person's inherent challenges with social interaction, but rather due to the constraints of the social world and the restrictions to participate in opportunities to discover multiple aspects of identity (Bagatell, 2007). One way to enhance the self-perceptions of any individual with a disability is by presenting them with an opportunity to engage in recreational and adventurous activities that may help to confront and transform existing stereotypes or negative self-expectations. Leisure and adaptive recreation can provide a context for individuals with disabilities to take on new challenges, develop capacities, and explore various aspects of the self (Hood & Carruthers, 2007). This would seem to be particularly true when these opportunities exist within an inclusive and respectful social setting, so that the person can feel safe and supported to explore the multiple facets of his or her identity. Through interactions with others in ventures of shared interest, such as leisure and adventure groups, youth with disabilities can discover who they are and how they fit with the world around them. They can explore new facets of themselves that they previously would not have known, due to a lack of opportunity to engage in adventure settings or appropriate group atmospheres. This could happen through experiential activities that uncover the person's capabilities, outside feedback from others, and belonging to a special group.

Summary of the Literature

From a social constructionist perspective, adolescent development and identity are co-constructed through the historical, societal and relational influences in the young person's life (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Burr, 1995; Havercamp & Young, 2007). Additionally, the adolescent actively constructs an identity by forming cognitive schemas that represent their past experiences and current ways of understanding the world (Mahoney & Patterson, 1992). Resilient development involves the individual's active seeking of the support and resources that the person's community offers (Ungar et al., 2008). Therapies involving components of nature and adventure have been discussed as a form of community resource that can facilitate positive identity development among adolescents with special needs. While nature-based therapeutic recreation for youth living with primarily non-physical disabilities has not received much attention, the research that has been done with other populations would suggest that adventure therapies may help these youth develop positively in a variety of domains. In the studies reviewed, results showed that participants described opportunities to explore identity alternatives in physical and social selves, recognize self-efficacy and self-worth, build skills, experience social interaction and acceptance, express emotions, and decrease awareness of disability. There have, however, been few research studies investigating the perspectives of the youth participants themselves. Qualitative research can yield in-depth and detailed information about the impact this type of program could have on disabled youths' self-concepts and sense of overall well-being.

Research Question

Developed from the literature that has been discussed, my research question is, "*In what ways has participation in a nature-based adaptive recreation program designed for youth living*

with disabilities influenced participants' descriptions of selves?" To address this question, I used a qualitative methodology involving semi-structured interviews with youth who have participated in the Power To Be Adaptive Recreation program, parents of these youth, and staff who have aided in the development and operation of the program.

Chapter III - Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the methodological theory and the specific methods that guided my research. I describe my study design, including my chosen mode of interviewing, research site, partnership development, the recruitment process and participants, and the data gathering procedures. I then explain the processes and steps I took for analyzing the data I collected. Finally, I describe how I achieved trustworthiness and credibility in my interpretation of the data, and acknowledge my influence on the study as a researcher. Although I have endeavoured to present a coherent description of how the research unfolded, there were many changes as the study progressed. As Mason (2002) observes, decisions about design and strategy are ongoing as the research proceeds.

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is conducted when the researcher aims to get a detailed understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative studies commonly seek understanding of how social experience is created and given meaning by people (Burr, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Gergen et al. (2004) invite social constructionist researchers to engage in dialogues with the communities they serve, and employ reflexivity in the theories, methods, and practices that guide their research. The goal is not to discount traditional empirical research, but rather to facilitate richer descriptions of psychological and social processes within peoples' lives (Gergen et al.). Qualitative methods are well-suited to the discovery of resilience processes and positive outcomes in very specific contexts, as well as giving voice to the youth themselves to share their own perspectives (Ungar, 2003; Ungar, 2004). Davis-Berman and Berman (2008) note that qualitative studies on outdoor therapies can help strengthen the understanding of the processes related to adolescent growth. A qualitative approach was therefore appropriate to help me to

learn in more depth about the experiences of youth who have participated in a nature-based adaptive recreation program.

Devine (2004) explains that to better understand recreation among individuals with disabilities, it is important to understand the perspectives and attitudes of those who participate in recreation opportunities. The only way to capture the perspectives of individuals is to ask them to express it directly, even if they have some difficulties with expressive language, since there is a strong possibility that these individuals may have encountered problems making their voices heard in everyday life (Lloyd et al., 2006). The communication of meaning is pivotal in the struggle for individuals living with a disability to share their voices in the public sphere (Davies, 2007). Since one of the aims of research consistent with social constructionism is to give voice to marginalized groups (Josselson, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 1995), this is an appropriate framework to consider the meaning that disabled youth attribute to their identity development. As discussed by Sirota (2010), the experiences shared by the youth in the present study have the capacity to expand on and/or replace existing, potentially stigmatizing, social narratives of disability with alternative considerations of identity.

Study Design

Early in my study, I recognized that a case-study design would be the most fitting framework to examine the multiple perspectives of youth growth and identity based on participation in the adaptive recreation program. Merriam (1988) describes a case study as an investigation of a specific phenomenon, such as a program. It can be used to describe the real-life context in which an intervention has been used, particularly in a unique case (Yin, 1994). This case study is descriptive, in that, its focus is on describing youth participants' experiences, changes, and identity development processes. Descriptive case studies are typically inductive,

finding patterns and meaning within the data themselves rather than using pre-conceived notions and categories (Merriam). This study can be identified as intrinsic and particularistic because it involved my intrinsic curiosity and interest in the Power To Be Autism Spectrum Program (Merriam; Stake, 1995). This means that the study was not concerned with theory generation or generalization to broader populations, but rather understanding the meaning given to experiences by those participating in the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). This study design is consistent with the values of qualitative research, where researchers assume that there are multiple realities, and that the world is a function of personal interaction and perception.

Through in-person meetings and email communications with Power To Be (PTB) staff and examination of documents available on the PTB website (http://www.powertobe.ca), I collected background information on PTB and the Adaptive Recreation programs they offer. Specifically, I retrieved information about PTB's mission and values as an organization and details on the Autism Spectrum Program such as demographics of participants served (e.g., age, gender, culture, disability), the types of activities offered, length of program, and the intended goals of the program. This helped me to develop my study procedures, familiarize myself with the intentions of the program, and describe the setting of this case study.

Observation, a method commonly used in case study research, was not used for the present study because of logistical constraints (e.g., time, location). Patton (1980, cited in Merriam, 1988) notes that researchers cannot observe feelings, thoughts, or behaviours that took place at a previous time; therefore, observation is a less direct method than interviewing at exploring identity development and experiences in the program over time.

Blustein, Palladino Schultheiss and Flum (2004) note that case study and narrative interview methods can provide a rich opportunity for the researcher to understand the

interpersonal and sociocultural worlds in which participants' frame their experiences. People make sense of their lives and create a sense of identity through the stories they tell about their experiences over time (Bauer, McAdams & Pals, 2008; Josselson, 2004). These identity-formation processes begin in adolescence and represent young peoples' attempts to define who they are for themselves as well as others (McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2006). An active engagement in telling personal narratives may allow individuals on the autism spectrum to re-write their identities (Davies, 2007). Davies (2007) asserts that personal storytelling of individuals living with a disability has value not just for the "insiders" writing them, but also for researcher and others reading them, as they have the potential to place the individual experience within its larger sociocultural context.

Given my interest in hearing the stories youth told of their identity development and their experiences in nature-based adventure activities, narrative interview methods would be appropriate. Even though the youth included in the present study were assessed to be competent enough to participate in an interview, it was expected that they would have some challenges with lengthy unstructured narrative communication. Individuals with autism can have difficulty verbalizing their experiences (Bogdashina, 2005). Furthermore, I was interested in particular aspects about the program that might not have come forth without direct questions. Therefore, I adopted a semi-structured interview format that is consistent with case-study research.

Semi-structured interviews of identity processes have been used in populations of adolescent cancer survivors (Jones, Parker-Raley, & Barczyk, 2011) adolescents with spina bifida (Kinavey, 2006), adults who live with traumatic brain injuries (Jones & Curtin, 2010), and youth and adults with various physical disabilities and Down's syndrome (Devine 2004). This type of interview allowed youth in the present study to provide open-ended answers and explain

their particular stories, while providing some structure to focus their thinking on the topics of identity development and specific experiences in the program. This style of interviewing and the use of an across-participant thematic analysis helped to represent the themes shared by participants. Narrative methods used in the within-participant analysis, as will be described in detail later in this chapter, contributed to the youth's sharing of their stories in Power To Be over time. This added to the case study by facilitating the reader's understanding of the social worlds and self-concept development of disabled youth participants.

Research Site. For this research, I partnered with Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society, an organization founded in 1999 in Victoria, British Colombia (http://www.powertobe.ca/). PTB is an organization that provides dynamic outdoor recreation programming aiming to enrich health, quality of life, and positive adaptation among youth, adults, and families facing significant life challenges (PTB, 2010). It is supported by approximately twenty staff members, hundreds of volunteers, and is primarily funded by private donors, with minimal funding from the government. The organization seeks to provide an environment that focuses on inclusiveness and belonging; supports a positive perception and image for youth living with a disability and their families; encourages trust, leadership and teamwork; promotes experiential education; and uses wilderness settings to promote social and environmental responsibility (PTB, 2010). PTB provides services to people with racial, cultural, gender and economic diversity.

The two main programs at PTB are the Wilderness School, which is a five year program for at-risk youth that fosters positive social development and life skills through outdoor adventure activities, and the Adaptive Recreation Program, which provides nature-based recreation activities for people living with a barrier or disability (PTB, 2010). The Adaptive

Recreation programming has been developed for youth, adults, and families living with developmental, cognitive, or physical disabilities, those who are deaf or hard of hearing, those who are living with an acquired brain injury, and those who are living with type I diabetes or cancer (PTB, 2010).

The particular branch of the Adaptive Recreation programming targeted for the present study was the Autism Spectrum Program, which serves children and youth who have behavioural, mental health, or developmental challenges, including autism spectrum disorders. This program has been running for approximately six years. It runs for three terms, in winter, spring, and fall, for eight sessions per term. The Autism Spectrum Program helps its' youth participants learn and grow in their community through connecting with peers, interacting with their environment, and challenging themselves in various outdoor recreation activities. Programming is designed to address the challenges that young people face each day, such as physical barriers, difficulties with social communication, and low self-confidence. The overall goals of the program include increasing well-being and quality of life of participants, facilitating access to inclusive outdoor recreation, improving youth's connection to nature, building social connections and interpersonal skills, increasing self-esteem, and providing respite, resources and community networks for families.

Weekly and biweekly day programs serve participants living in Victoria in two groups, the Fiddleheads (ages 6-11) and the Ferns (ages 12 and up). Participants are introduced to such activities as rock climbing, kayaking, canoeing, camping, hiking, bicycling, gardening, farming, beach walking, snow sports, geocaching (GPS-assisted outdoor treasure hunting), and several other adventure and/or nature based activities (PTB, 2010). Within each activity, youth are helped to set personal goals for themselves and work towards achieving those goals. Youth are

encouraged to participate for more than one term, and commonly, youth do come back for programming year after year.

In attempts to serve more people in need, PTB has adapted the Autism Program since its creation in 2006. Although the program initially was designed to only serve young people with autism, PTB has now expanded the focus to include any youth with a disability. Additionally, PTB does not stop offering programming once the youth turns 18 years of age, which is commonly when government funding diminishes. Participants are encouraged to continually be involved in the community of support, through direct participation in activities, volunteering or mentorship roles. Furthermore, PTB has partnered with several community agencies that work with young people living with autism in order to provide accessible, outdoor adventure-based opportunities for more individuals. Finally, each year there is a weekend family camping trip, in which participants who have accessed PTB's services can share a celebration of their achievements with their families. Overall, the Autism Program is a response to a perceived community need for inclusive, nature-based recreation for people living with a barrier or disability, encouraging people to discover their own unique abilities and a more holistic sense of health and wellness.

Partnership development. In the spring of 2011, I met with the Director of Programs at Power To Be to discuss the possibility of researching the Wilderness School. While he suggested the possibility of a quantitative study involving previously collected data involving the youth at the Wilderness School, he notified me that there has been a lot of interest of the Wilderness School from a research perspective. He informed me that little had been done to research their Adaptive Recreation programs, specifically the Autism Spectrum Program. Several weeks later, I met with the Adaptive Recreation Community Development Coordinator and Program Evaluator

(herein referred to as AR Coordinator) to discuss the possibility of conducting a qualitative study on the Autism Spectrum Program at PTB. He told me more about the Autism Spectrum Program, including what staff at PTB hope to learn from the research (i.e., how the program has helped to shape the way they youth see themselves, and how to evaluate this question when these youths' verbal communication skills are not as strong as typical youth). I reported that I was also interested in understanding how the program has shaped how the youth see themselves, through understanding their experiences in PTB over time. We discussed how it might be a good idea to interview the youth so that they could share their voices, but to also interview parents and staff to comment on what they've seen of their youth since their involvement of the program. After meeting with these two staff, I decided that I was ready to begin preparing to research the self-descriptions of youth who had participated in a nature-based adaptive recreation program.

Development of semi-structured interview guides. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for case study research, since they allow participants to share their perspectives openly, while allowing the researcher to flexibly probe more deeply into issues of interest (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Interviews in the present study were based on the interview guides (Appendix A, B, and C) I created in collaboration with my research team (including my supervisor and committee), and the AR Coordinator at PTB. Questions were created based on identified gaps in the literature, topics of personal interest, and topics of interest to the staff at PTB.

I started the youth interview guide with an open-ended question asking youth participants to tell me a little bit about themselves. This aimed to help build rapport and enable them begin to describe themselves. It was also important for me to know about specific experiences within the program, and these details could only be known by asking more focused questions. Narrative

research often presents an individual's experience in a format that includes a beginning, a middle, and an end (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, Devoy & DeWine, 2005). Since I aimed to incorporate narrative elements into this research project in efforts to help this marginalized group tell their stories, I asked youth to think of their identity as it had developed before, during, and after the program. Because some individuals with autism may use imagery to frame their understanding of the world (Bogdashina, 2005), and nature-based therapies often employ the use of metaphor to help individuals understand their experiences (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2008; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002; Ungar et al., 2005), I intended to ask the participants to think of themselves as characters in a story, choosing an animal or thing to represent themselves. I asked my first two participants to choose a metaphor for themselves before the program, and asked them if their animal or thing changed over time. However, after the first two interviews, it was clear that the animal metaphor was too vague for participants and was not helpful in helping them to think of their story over time. This was apparent in my observations of the youth and their verbal declaration that the questions involving the metaphor were too confusing. Therefore, the animal metaphor was removed from the interview guide. Stake (1995) notes that qualitative case studies rarely employ structured interviews where respondents answer the exact same questions. Each interviewee is anticipated to have had unique experiences and stories to tell, so the researcher can adapt the interview questions according to what is relevant for both the research question and participant's own perspective of the case (Stake). Therefore, the remaining three youth participants were asked to describe themselves over the course of their participation in the program without asking them to compare themselves to an animal. Although participants varied in their expressive language abilities, it appeared that the omission of the metaphor

allowed the questions to become more concrete, allowing the last three participants to more easily share their descriptions of selves over time.

I asked the participants open-ended questions such as, "How did you change over the course of the program? What parts of the program or your experience do you think led to these changes? What would others (like your family) say about how you have changed?" If they did not offer this information spontaneously, I asked whether they thought the program had helped them adapt to some of their life challenges, or might be helping them cope with future life challenges.

In addition to interviews with adolescent participants of the Autism Spectrum Program, program, I conducted semi-structured interviews with parents who have a child in the program. Including the parents' and staffs' perspectives can help the youth in co-constructing their identities, since they are at PTB or the home to witness to growth and adaptation that may have resulted from the youths' involvement in the program. I started by asking parents to share with me their opinions about the Autism Spectrum Program. To gain a more specific understanding of my focus topic, I then asked questions such as, "How would you describe your children before the program started?" and "What are some of the changes you have noticed that you believe are directly or indirectly related to their involvement in this program?" I then asked a question aimed at understanding the parents' views about a collaborative approach to helping youth adapt and grow to some of their life challenges. I concluded with a general question inviting any more comments on changes the parents have seen in their children and/or family that they believe relate to the program, and asked them to describe anything they would have liked to see changed in the program. These questions served to provide more depth to understanding the perceived effects of the youths' experiences in the adaptive recreation program.

Finally, I interviewed staff members who have been involved in the development and delivery of the program. The interview questions (Appendix C) were very similar to the parent interviews, but with some slight changes in order to allow me to obtain information about the program goals and objectives. Staff interviews were not originally scheduled to be audio-recorded; these interviews were primarily intended to be used for a description of the development and structure of the program, and providing staff opinions about any changes they have noticed in the youth, in order to further support information obtained in parent and youth interviews. I did not audio record my first staff interview, and took notes by hand instead. As the interview progressed, I found it difficult to write sufficiently rich notes and keep the interview flowing. Therefore, I audio recorded the last two staff interviews.

Recruitment. Participants were recruited via email (see Appendix D, E, & F). I emailed a recruitment letter for parents and a recruitment poster for youth to the AR Coordinator who circulated the recruitment information to 8 youth he assessed to be able to understand and communicate in the interview and 10 parents of individuals in the Autism Spectrum Program. The letter and poster briefly explained the study, and invited any interested individuals to contact me via phone or email. To screen for adequate levels of comprehension, communication, and ability to provide informed consent, the AR coordinator only sent invitations to those youth who were deemed to be able to participate in the semi-structured interviews. To follow up this primary assessment, I then spoke with the youth and/or their parents who conveyed interest in the study to determine that the youth would be able to understand the nature of the study and what was required of them.

I connected with those who were interested to describe the basic process of the study. I provided information about their voluntary participation, procedures, expected time requirement,

risks and benefits of participation, compensation, withdrawal procedures, anonymity and confidentiality, and dissemination of results. I emailed them the appropriate informed consent letter (i.e., designed for youth, parent, or staff) and the list of questions I would be using to guide our interview. If they agreed, I set up interview times and locations that were mutually convenient. I asked youth participants to start thinking of a code name in advance if they would like, and asked if they would prefer a gift certificate from their favourite store or a cheque for the honorarium. I inquired as to whether or not there were any special requests for participation. I accommodated to any reasonable requests, like having the interview at the youth's home or at the Power To Be office for accessibility challenges, and having the youth's parent there for the interview to help explain questions and ensure they were more comfortable.

Youth aged 17 or older were able to provide their own consent for the study, and their parents were notified of their participation if they still lived at home. Youth aged 13 to 16 and their parents were both required to consent to participate in the study. Youth who were 12 years old received the consent letter, provide their assent (i.e., agreement) to participate in the study, and their parents gave consent as well. Informed consent involves the ability to understand and appreciate the conditions and consequences of the decision to participate in a research project (Leadbeater, Riecken, Benoit, Banister, Brunk, & Glass, 2006). Competence to provide consent is not a one-size-fits-all condition, but rather is specific to the participation of a particular participant to a particular research scenario (Leadbeater et al., 2006). In most research situations, youth can give their consent to participate in research and/or psychotherapy without consent of parents if the professional assesses the youth to be a "mature minor" (Canadian Counselling Association, 2008). In my study, the procedures for obtaining consent that I followed were in accordance with the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board's recommendations

for procedures to obtain informed consent for a vulnerable population (i.e., youth who are living with developmental disabilities and/or mental health issues – see (http://www.uvic.ca/research/conduct/regapproval/humanethics/index.php).

Participants. The youth targeted for this study were considered to be competent youth, that is, they had a high level of verbal and language comprehension skills, sufficient ability to respond to interview questions, and were able to provide informed consent to the research. Of the 8 youth recruited, 6 youth responded via email or phone indicating interest in the study, and 1 of these youth did not return my attempts to contact him to schedule an interview. My final criterion sample was of 5 young men who had all participated in at least one 8-week term of the Autism Spectrum Program and/or some of the weekend day programming and camping trips in the PTB Adaptive Recreation programming. Although there are some female youth in the Autism Spectrum Program, only male youth elected to participate in the interviews. Participants were between 12 and 21 years of age at the time of interviewing, and had a variety of challenges including autism, sensitivities to sensory stimuli, obsessive-compulsive disorder, Down's syndrome, and anxiety and depressive disorders. Interviewing the youth themselves gave them the opportunity to share how they view themselves, and how the program activities and support contributed to their identity development.

Parents were initially invited to participate in a focus group to help develop more context surrounding what changes they have observed in their children through participation in the program. However, due to time and scheduling constraints, interviews were conducted individually with all 5 parents who scheduled an interview. One mother of a female youth who had participated in the Autism Spectrum Program was one of the five parents I interviewed. However, the female youth did not elect to participate in the individual interviews I held with

youth. Although both mothers and fathers were invited to participate in interviews, only mothers elected to be interviewed, so I did not interview any fathers. Finally, 3 key staff members involved in the development and/or delivery of the Autism Spectrum Program were recruited for individual interviews.

Data Gathering Procedures

Individual interviews with youth. At the beginning of each youth interview, I offered the participant a glass of water and a short tour around the building at the University of Victoria for the interviews that were held there. I did this to facilitate the participant's comfort to the interview setting, since novel situations can be particularly challenging for youth with autism and other difficulties.

Gaining consent to participate in research is an important act in ethical research practice involving respect for human dignity, vulnerable persons, informed consent, justice and diversity, confidentiality and privacy, and the need to minimize harm and maximize benefits (Canadian Counselling Association, 2008). Since I interviewed youth who were living with a developmental disability and/or mental illness, I took careful precautions to make sure they were able to give consent to participate. I reviewed the consent form (Appendix G) in simple language and ensured the youth understood the purpose of the research, as well as what their participation in the study would look like. I reminded them that the interview would be audio recorded, and that I might be taking notes during the interview. I explained the issues pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity, and allowed them to choose a pseudonym to protect their identity in the dissemination of the results of my thesis. In Canada, researchers have a legislated duty to report children who are in need of protection (Leadbeater et al., 2006). Therefore, I took particular care to ensure that the youth understood that if they divulged any information

regarding abuse or neglect to themselves or another child, I would be required by law to report this disclosure to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Additionally, I informed the youth that, if I believed they were a danger to self-harm or harm another person, I would consult with my research supervisor, and might have to contact someone who could help. After the consent process was explained and questions were answered, participants signed the consent forms and were given the honorarium of $10.

Originally, all interviews were to take place in a private meeting room at the University of Victoria, since confidentiality and anonymity were expected to be more difficult to guard against in public locations (e.g., a park) or the PTB head office. However, due to participant requests, accessibility and scheduling considerations, I conducted one interview with a youth at the PTB office, one interview with a youth in his home, and one interview with a youth outdoors. At the request of two participants, their mothers stayed with them during the interview in order to help explain questions to them and facilitate answering the questions. I was sure to explain the additional limitations to confidentiality and anonymity with these modifications, to which participants agreed prior to commencing each interview. Malik et al. (1991) advise researchers working with special needs populations to take factors such as time and location into special consideration when scheduling interviews and to be flexible with interview procedures to facilitate participants' ease in answering questions. This is appropriate in qualitative research, which includes methods of data-generation that are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which the data are produced (Mason, 2002).

Bogdashina (2005) suggests that a researcher interviewing people with autism must be aware that these individuals sometimes require more time to process questions and work out their responses. If I noticed that a participant was having difficulty verbalizing their experience, I

simplified the question by first asking for a few words to describe themselves at different times (e.g., before the program), and then asking them to expand on each word. Some youth had difficulty answering open-ended questions, so I rephrased to more specific close-ended questions, and then probed for further information (e.g., "did the program help boost your confidence? How? Can you give me an example?") I also provided verbal encouragers and posed clarifications to questions to move the interview along and ensure I was grasping the meaning the participants were attempting to convey. At times, the youth responded in a short manner (e.g., "yeah"), and I tried to prompt them to share more with me with statements such as, "tell me more about that" to facilitate the youth sharing their perspective with me, and reducing the chance that they were simply agreeing with me. As each interview progressed and the participants appeared to become more comfortable with the interview setting, they were able to disagree with some of my clarifications if it did not fit for their experience (e.g., "was that how you were about 5 years ago?" "Um no not really"). The data are, therefore, a co-construction of my questions and curiosities posed to youth, along with their answers and stories of their experience.

I audio-recorded the youth interviews and took notes during and after each interview in my research notebook. The interviews with youth lasted between 18 and 50 minutes in length. Although some of the youth did not elaborate much on their own without a lot of prompting and paraphrasing, this was something I expected prior to the interviews. My experience in counselling and talking to adolescents, particularly young males with various difficulties, has generally been that they are much less likely to share long narratives unprompted, unlike the adults I interviewed in this study. Regardless, the youth generally appeared to maintain focus, with only one participant needing a break during the interview.

Parent interviews. Originally, I intended to conduct interviews with parents in a focus group format in order to facilitate their description of the changes they have noticed in their youth as they listened to other parents' perspectives. As mentioned previously, this could not happen due to scheduling difficulties, so individual interviews were conducted instead. Interviews were held in a private meeting room at the University of Victoria, in one participant's home, and over the phone for one participant. Interviews with parents were audio-recorded and lasted between 11 and 50 minutes. I asked parents questions from the focus-group interview guide (Appendix B). I asked them to provide examples as needed, though parents were generally able to provide fluent narratives with little prompting.

Staff interviews. One key informant interview with staff of the Adaptive Recreation program took place in a private office at the Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society in Victoria, BC, while the other who took place over the telephone since an in-person interview could not be scheduled for logistical reasons. I interviewed the Adaptive Recreation Program Manager, the Adaptive Recreation Program Community Development Coordinator, and the Adaptive Recreation Community Development Coordinator and Program Evaluator. Interviews lasted between 17 and 35 minutes. I asked staff questions based on the key informant interview guide (Appendix C). As specified earlier, only notes were taken during the first staff interview, while the last two interviews were audio-recorded

Data Analysis

Knowledge and meaning cannot be observed directly, and thus inquiry and interpretation become necessary (Josselson, 2004). As a qualitative case study researcher, my goal is to develop a comprehensive picture of the topic under study by reporting multiple perspectives and describing the larger picture (Cresswell, 2007). Since my interest was the youths' own

perspectives, I conducted both within and across-participant analysis of the youth interviews. I first present an overview of the steps I followed in this process, guided by processes developed and continually refined by our University of Victoria research team (Lawrence, 2010):

1. Making notes after each interview and/or after listening to the audiotape of the interview to record my impressions of interesting aspects of the data.
2. Transcribing audio-recorded interviews.
3. Conducting a within-participant analysis identifying core information for each youth participant as it relates to the research question.
4. *Ghostwriting* a brief story based on this core information for each youth participant.
5. Conducting an across participant-group analysis by re-reading transcripts, generating codes by coding interesting features in the data in a systematic fashion across the whole data set.
6. Examining codes for overlap and redundancy to revise a final list of codes.
7. Collating codes into potential across participant-group themes and sub-themes, reflecting on the meaning, assumptions, and implications of each potential theme. Reviewing themes to check if they work in relation to the data set across-participants.
8. Naming and defining each theme and sub-theme clearly and succinctly. Organizing themes and sub-themes into a table.
9. Linking analyses to research question and literature.
10. Producing a scholarly thesis with appropriate examples and quotes.

Analysis begins at the beginning of the initial interview and continues throughout the whole data gathering process. I began the process by recording my impressions of each interview and the participant's story in my research notebook, after each interview and/or in repeated re-

listenings of the audio-recorded interview. I then personally transcribed the interviews as close to verbatim as was possible (Lawrence, 2010). That is, I transcribed the interview into a textual representation of the interviewee's speech, but the location of punctuation was dependent on how I heard and interpreted pauses and tone of voice. As I transcribed, I continued to record any additional impressions, anticipated and unexpected data, ideas for codes, and noticeable themes within and among interview transcripts.

My next step was to conduct the within-participant analyses. I followed the re-storying approach proposed by Rhodes (2000) called *ghostwriting.* This ghostwritten short story involves a description of the participant and the experiences he shared in the interview presented in a narrative format. I began the ghostwriting process by reviewing my interview notes and transcript for each youth participant, identifying core information for each participant relevant to their self-descriptions and experiences shared in the interview. As suggested by Rhodes, I recreated the conversation with each participant in my mind, focussing on aspects of the conversation that seemed to be more important to them and relevant to the research question. I then constructed a short story that highlighted the core information from each youth participant interview (e.g., significant aspects of their experience and/or identity gained from participation in the program). Rhodes also indicated that this process begins immediately after the interview when the researcher writes down notes about the interview and determines the structure of the story. I followed the same process, as specified in Step 1 listed above, by taking notes on each interview directly after each interview and in each repeated listening of audio-tapes. I then decided that I would begin the story with how the youth described themselves in answering the first interview question. That is, I asked each participant to, "tell me a bit about yourself and what you like to do." For example, one participant's response involved the following

components, used to open his ghostwritten story, "*I'm a people person, I like to get along with other people.* I'm *friendly, outgoing,* and helpful. I also have a job that I do lots of things at. I like *Disney, art things, Nintendo and* other video games." I decided to follow this introduction with a description of how each participant presented their experiences in Power To Be over time (e.g., before the program, while they are engaging in the activities, and now). I then finished the story with any final reflections the participant shared with me about their experience in the program.

Although I constructed it, each story was written from the first person perspective of each participant himself as though that participant were writing it as part of an autobiography (Rhodes, 2000). Rhodes (2000) suggests incorporating several direct quotations and phrases that the participant uses in order to share the story in a similar way to how it was shared in the interview. I used the participants' own words when possible, indicated by *italics.* For example, when one participant was reflecting on ways he did change from before joining Power To Be to now, I wrote "Thinking about it now, I guess *I did have a pretty high stress level before* starting at Power To Be." His words combined with mine, and the way I represented his story from before the program to his current conception of selves, contribute to a co-construction of his story.

I chose this form of analysis since it acknowledges and honours the relationship that exists between myself and the youth participants. This is particularly relevant considering the characteristics of my participants (i.e., adolescent males living with a disability) who tended to provide shorter narratives than would adults. Without actively co-constructing youths' interview data in such a manner, it would have been difficult to adequately capture each youth's story and represent these remarkable accounts to readers. The text presented in each story is not the

transcript of the interview, nor is it something the participants wrote independently; rather, *ghostwriting* produces a story written from the participant's own perspective using the language he or she used in the interview, but is also an acknowledgement of the researcher's role in organizing and presenting the story (Rhodes, 2000). Since researchers are in a position of social power, Rhodes (2000) emphasizes that the researcher must take responsibility for how they are presenting others' accounts.

When I completed each story, I emailed it to each participant and asked them to verify and revise as necessary. This process is called member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Gilgun (2005) notes that the practice of sharing some of our writing with participants is consistent with research that seeks to hear all voices and perspectives. Collaborating with the participants to validate the accuracy of the story they have shared is an ideal process in research with narrative elements (Blustein et al., 2005). Rhodes (2000) specifies that this collaboration with the participant to approve the written accounts of his or her experience is not an attempt to define a pre-existing truth, but rather agreeing on an account for a specific purpose; that is, agreeing that this story, to be shared with readers, represented an appropriate and acceptable description of the story that the participant shared with the researcher.

My analysis of the three data sources (youth, parent and staff) was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis, which is independent of a particular epistemology and can be applied to a range of qualitative approaches including analysis of case study interview data. A content-based, inductive thematic analysis allowed me to identify, analyze, organize, and present the themes across the participants' data (Braun & Clarke). To begin the across-participant thematic analysis, I re-familiarized myself with the data by engaging in repeated readings and listening of the interviews, paying attention to the content and concepts shared by

each participant (Blustein et al., 2005). With each re-reading and re-listening, I recorded any additional thoughts and ideas I had about the interviews in my research notebook and in the margins of the transcripts. Merriam (1988) observes that by making comments and asking questions while reading the transcripts, the researcher is holding a conversation with the data. For example, on one transcript I wrote, "When she talks about him being a social person, and getting the chance to interact with peers at PTB, it seems like his true self can come out. This is interesting because 'social' does not fit the stereotype I have heard in the past of people with autism being isolated or apathetic to social opportunities."

Through this process, I paid attention to patterns of meaning and potentially interesting aspects of the data. I coded these interesting features in a systematic manner across the entire data set. In qualitative research, codes refer to a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a comprehensive, relevant and essence-capturing attribute to a portion of data (Saldana, 2009). For example, for a section of data where the participant gives examples of how PTB staff treat him, I used the descriptive code of, "the staff are good listeners and are fun." I used descriptive coding to record the content of what participants said, and in-vivo coding whenever possible to maintain the participants' own words. An in-vivo code refers to a word or short phrase from the participant's language found in the qualitative data (Saldana, 2009). In-vivo coding can be particularly useful in research involving marginalized youth, because using their actual words to create a specific code helps to promote the reader's understanding of the participants' worldviews (Saldana, 2009). For example, one participant said, *"They didn't abandon me or reject me."* In this case, in-vivo coding permits the reader to see how important the staff members' acceptance is to him.

Creswell (2007) suggests making margin notes as the researcher reads through the text of the transcript. With each repeated reading of the data, I revised my list of codes, reducing overlap and refining to make the codes fit my interpretation of the data. I considered how the codes might relate according to patterns and connections I noticed in the codes, and then grouped the codes into potential themes and sub-themes. A theme represents a patterned response in the data, and captures something meaningful about the data in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is the outcome of reflection and categorization of codes (Saldana, 2009). Braun and Clarke (2006) specify that since there is no quantifiable method for determining themes, it is particularly important for the researcher to maintain consistency in how she or he judges what constitutes a theme. Thematic analysis involves strategic choices based on the researcher's goals, research questions, conceptual framework and literature reviewed (Saldana, 2009).

To review themes, I first considered whether the codes grouped under each theme all fit together in a pattern. If themes were too broad, or if codes did not fit into a pattern, I divided themes into sub-themes. I then considered whether the themes accurately reflected the meanings evident in the whole data set. That is, I scanned all interview transcripts to make sure that the themes fit what that participant shared with me in the interview. Furthermore, I reflected on how each theme fit onto the overall story my data told in relation to the research question. This was particularly important since my research question related specifically to the youth's identity development and experiences, though I also analyzed responses from parents and staff members as they reflected on what effects they noticed the program had on the youth.

Following Braun and Clark (2006), the next step involved naming and defining each theme. I considered the meaning and assumptions of each theme, named each theme based on

what I considered to be its essence, and defined it. For example, all codes that referred to connecting with others, making friends, and feelings of belonging to an accepting and supportive social group were grouped together under a theme I titled "Inclusive Social Environment." Finally, I created a table to visually represent themes and sub-themes, grouped into youth, parent or staff headings. In the across-participant analysis and discussion chapter, I presented the themes and subthemes in Table 2, and then discussed why they are meaningful in relation to the data, the research question, and the literature. I added participant quotes that supported each theme and presented the voices of the participants.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Social constructionist research is based on the belief that research findings are always partial and situated in the socio-political circumstances that surround the phenomena under study (Aguinaldo, 2004). Meyrick (2006) suggests that providing detailed information about the steps in the analytic procedure and using member checking (asking for feedback on the data from the participants themselves) can help improve the transparency and accuracy of qualitative research. Providing sufficient detail in data collection and analysis can help the reader to judge whether the methods used and the decisions made during the study were reasonable (Meyrick). Furthermore, the member checking allowed participants to co-construct the interview data with me, confirming that my transcription or interpretation of their stories was a good representation of their experience. I aimed to achieve trustworthiness through multiple processes. First, I addressed trustworthiness through *triangulation of data methods* and *triangulation of data sources* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation involves taking steps to compare and confirm the data obtained so that it can be considered an accurate representation of the topic of interest. In *triangulation of data methods*, I consulted my audio-recorded interview, the transcript, and my

research notes in my analysis of data. For the *triangulation of data sources*, I reviewed PTB documents and web information, and collected interview data from youth program participants, parents, and PTB staff.

Boyatzis (1998) observes that credibility and consistency can be assessed by the degree to which trained researchers can check the analysis and make similar decisions to encoding. In this vein, my research supervisor and committee checked my analysis process and interpretations of interview data, sharing insights and feedback on the codes, themes, and ghostwritten stories that I had constructed. This is part of the auditing process, which seeks to provide confirmability rather than objectivity in the research findings (Creswell, 2007). An auditor should be able to follow and understand the decision making process within the analyses, make judgements about the researcher's inferences and biases, determine whether the findings are grounded in and fit in relation to the data, and assess the researcher's strategies to maintain trustworthiness. To facilitate this process, I documented my research progress throughout the study, including changes made in the design as the study progressed. Additionally, I shared my thoughts, challenges, and progress regularly with other graduate student researchers on our team at the University. Through in-person meetings, online video meetings, and email, my research team colleagues provided a form of peer examination and an opportunity for me to learn with and from other students trained in qualitative research methods.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) comment that member checking is a particularly important technique for establishing credibility. It provides the opportunity to assess whether the interviewer has adequately captured what they participant intended, gives the participant an opportunity to correct any misinterpretations, allows for the participant to volunteer additional information which may have been relevant but forgotten, and permits the researcher to

summarize the interview, which is an initial step in data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participant can also provide alternative language, observations or interpretations of case study data (Stake, 1995). I asked youth participants to review the ghostwritten stories I created for each of them. I chose to send the story only, since it may have been difficult for these youth to read and make comment on a lengthy transcript. I asked the parents and staff to review their interview transcripts, and, in one case, the notes I had taken during the staff interview which was not audio-recorded. Only one youth provided a few small changes to the ghostwritten profile, which I completed and sent back for his approval. There were no other requests for changes from participants.

Yin (1994) suggests that case study researchers develop skills related to interviewing and interpreting data (such as being a good listener, adapting to various interview situations, and setting aside preconceived notions). As a trained counsellor, the basic counselling skills I have developed (e.g., active listening, use of encouraging non-verbals, flexibility to adapt to the specific needs of my participants, and non-judgemental openness) have helped me to skilfully conduct interviews. Creswell (2007) also mentions that the researcher's self-reflection about the way she or he interacts with participants to co-create interpretations will contribute to the validation of the work. I remained reflexive throughout the research process by journaling about my progress, thoughts, ideas, and challenges in my research notebook. Below is an excerpt from my research notebook:

January 21, 2012

> *Figuring out what identity actually is has been complicated. I am frustrated; I thought that by now I'd be an expert on it, but I think some of my pre-existing notions of a compartmentalized, individualized and separate self have slowed me down from understanding what it is. In my first readings of my transcripts, I was searching for sentences that started with, "I am..." and "I like..." to understand who youth saw themselves to be. My mind is opening up about what identity means, and I hope that at by*

> *the time this thesis is complete, I'll be much closer to understanding what I feel is one of the most important processes we can help youth build. Build – not complete – because I know that it is never complete. It is a constant process of self-discovery, goal setting and striving, achievement, failure (or some better expression, like hitting glitches in the road), learning, and re-adjusting. It is the result of ongoing connections with other people, animals, and the environment to find the parts of the self that not necessarily unique, but that connect the self to every living thing.*

Researcher Influences

Qualitative researchers today are much more transparent about the impact their writing might have on the participants and the potential readers of the study (Creswell, 2007). Within a social constructionist paradigm, meaning is created in social relationships, and the interactions in which we engage present new opportunities for novel perspectives (Blustein et al., 2004; Blustein et al., 2005). Part of my motivation to do this research was to gain perspective on how these youths' identities have been shaped. As a qualitative researcher, I recognize that the stories participants generated were based on particular questions I asked, for a particular purpose and a particular audience (Chase, 2005), and that the conversations I engaged in with my participants were influenced by my own perspective. That is, the questions I asked were not value-free; I explicitly asked them to describe how their experiences in the program have or have not changed or influenced their views of themselves. I must also acknowledge that, while I will have done my best to represent the meanings the participant narrators told about their experiences, my interpretation of the data has been shaped by my own experiences and background. The Canadian Counselling Association (2008) notes researchers must pay particular attention to their part in the research process and identification of how beliefs, values, and position may affect the research outcome, and that this can be done through reflexive analysis. Reflexivity, a major part of the qualitative research process, involves thinking critically about what the researcher is doing and why; challenging and confronting assumptions; and recognizing how the researcher's

thoughts, actions, and decisions shape what is interpreted of the data (Mason, 2002). Throughout the interviewing and analysis process, I engaged in reflexive journaling in an attempt to remain aware of my own values, beliefs, experiences, and characteristics that influence the co-construction of meaning in this research. My intent was to be aware of these personal and historical influences, and "interpret" (i.e., as in "interpretive" research) the meanings that my participants appeared to have had about the world (Cresswell, 2007).

Chapter IV – Participant Stories

In this chapter, I present the within participant analyses of the youth in the form of ghostwritten stories, using Rhodes' (2000) procedure. Rhodes specifies that, "*ghostwriting* is used to refer to a practice where a researcher engages with a research participant and, as a result, creates a new text that both tells a story of that participant and implies the involvement of the researcher....It is a way of writing for and on behalf of someone else" (p. 514). The ghostwritten stories presented below begin with a description of how each participant identifies himself. The stories then describe the experiences that seemed to be most significant among their experiences in Power To Be over time. In the stories, I present how each participant believes he has changed over time. Due to differences in the length and detail of interviews, the stories vary in length. What is most important to note is just how different each participant views his experiences in the program. The stories have been edited for readability and to display the youths' experiences as they have developed over time. To highlight the participants' voices, I have used their own words when possible, indicated by *italics*. In order to preserve anonymity, I have not included the participants' ages or specified their particular challenges or disabilities.

Young Royalty

Hi, I'm Young Royalty. *I'm pretty chill,* and I'm a pretty *humourous guy.* I like to draw, to make things, and to act. I love kayaking and I like other sports. I try to go on adventures with Power To Be *whenever I can. It's like basically my life. They're like my family.*

Before I started at Power To Be, *I used to be this shy, little creature and didn't really like talking to too many people or being around people a lot.* And I *wasn't always open to try new things.* Before the program, I had a *somewhat fearful energy. My dad would always say I was like this little creature in a shell.* I wasn't *open to meeting new people* and others would ask what

was wrong with me. *I just always thought I had to be like, on defence.* If I were to pick an animal to describe who I used to be, I'd say I was a *fearful aggressive dog*.

When I go to Power To Be, I do a lot of things. My roles are *participant* and *volunteer.* I *kayak, do gardening, go to Mary's Farm,* and *snowboard.* I take care of Power To Be staff a lot, I like to *see what's up and how they're feeling.* I'm like a dog, *you know like in packs, there's one alpha dog who just walks around the house and makes sure everything is going well.* I get to be a leader; *I'll have ideas for games,* or help someone else kayak by sitting in the back. At Power To Be, *I get to do stuff that I normally wouldn't really have the chance to do.* And that makes me feel good, *cause then I can prove to the world* that me, and other people with disabilities, *can do much more* than people think we can. I'm also like a mascot, doing *whatever I can to promote Power To Be,* and answering people's questions about it. I tell them that we *do rock climbing* and lots of other things. I tell them that it's my job, and that *I get paid with love.*

Since I've had a chance to do things with Power To Be, I feel *like I'm more important now and there's more reasons for me to do stuff instead of just being locked up at home. It just feels better, knowing that there's always something to do, like every time kayaking comes around I'm* so excited! I feel depressed when I can't kayak. When I'm kayaking, *it's just relaxing,* like *you're hiking on the water. And you get to see other places of the world that you wouldn't be able to do on foot.* I've seen lots of sea creatures out there, like a *chiton, sea stars,* and *a seal*.

After having been in Power To Be for a few years, I would describe myself as having more of a *sense of humour. I've gotten better with dealing with change.* I've *been more open to meeting new people.* People like me there and ask about me when I'm not there. *I just get along with everybody because I like to be friends with everybody and because I don't like to pick fights* and *I'm always open to doing a lot of stuff.* Sometimes when I'm on longer van rides with other

people it gets overwhelming, *but I still like to be with people.* I think other people would see that I'm *more flexible,* and I've gotten better at dealing with some stuff I normally don't like to deal with. When it comes between deciding whether to avoid those things or go kayaking, I say to myself, *"I'll just deal with it."* Before Power To Be I was *like a puppy who didn't really know the rules.* I'm still a puppy now, but *a puppy who's learned a lot better rules and respect.* And there I'm getting the *rules, boundaries and limitations* that I need. That *has been making my energy more confident, relaxed, easy going,* and I'm like a *happy-go-lucky* dog. I still get nervous, but I'm better at realizing that I have my Power To Be *family here so there's no need* to be scared. *And like it's awesome 'cause they all accept me for who I am. I just think I'm a better person and I don't think I'd be the person I am today if it wasn't for them so that means a lot to me.*

Because Power To Be helped me become a kayaker, one of my goals in life is to kayak with glaciers one day and *I'd like to kayak somewhere around the world to raise funds.* I want to run this kayaking fundraiser *for families who might not be able to afford the services they need and they would be open to all ages.* Because *it sucks,* funding in Canada *stops around 19* years old. *But then it's like, well after we become adults what happens to them? So my goal is to raise funds for that so there's ongoing services for autism throughout the rest of their lives.*

Power To Be has made me see the world in a different view that I thought I would never see, and I thank them every day for teaching and showing me what great things we still need to learn about nature and how to work with and respect nature the way nature wants us to, with kindness, acceptance, love and care, just like Power To Be.

Blaze

My name is Blaze, and I've *pretty much* always been happy about who I am. *I enjoy quite a few things, but mostly I collect Pokemon cards.* I just love Pokemon! I could talk about it all

day. *I like using my imagination* and I *write stories*, especially the kind that are *out of the ordinary with powers that would be so cool* to have. *I also do karate,* and *I eat* all of the time!

I've been with Power To Be for longer than I can count. *It's really hard* to think about how I've changed over the last few years. I don't really think I've changed a whole lot, but Power To Be definitely *gave me more opportunities to do stuff* like biking with a group of friends, *'cause I don't really bike that much* on my own. My outdoor skills have probably gotten *a little bit better.* We do *a little bit of gardening* and that gives me the chance to plant and *look for the edible plants*, so I can *start eating them! Basically everything we did was quite fun,* especially *bicycle riding, kayaking, and games day!*

When I started the program, I got to work with some *pretty cool* people. The leaders are good listeners *and they're really fun.* There's two friends I have there that I'm closely connected with, the *ones who I talk to* a lot! One of them is a *sports fanatic, and we kind of became friends through the biking thing. It was quite easy* to meet friends through Power To Be, and it was *kinda hard meeting people before the program. In school I look for the outcasts to see if I can fit them in easier* to my personality, and *I have an interesting way of well, being popular and not popular* at the same time. *I just kind of realized that well, it really is kind of boring with, yeah, I was kind of not the most popular person* in the past. *I do try to strike up conversations* and make friends with *"the popularity masters"* at school, *but it doesn't really go that well. I don't really get much* of a friendly response from them, so I just *end up listening to the conversations* from afar instead. Even though *it's kind of hard to pinpoint one thing in particular* that has helped, I think Power To Be has helped me to become more social! *It does kind of help having friends at Power To Be because you can kind of connect* with people who have similar interests, and people

who *go to different schools*. Some of them I find annoying, but it's still *exciting* and *fun* to be there.

Kayaking is quite fun. It's very relaxing and it's pretty easy to do. It's exciting when I can achieve something that I've never done before, like kayaking. Biking isn't as relaxing but *it is pretty fun* and *pretty cool.* Sometimes being at Power To Be is *very interesting, like sometimes when we do some of the underwater* discovery days. What I like best about that is *seeing the different animals, and most of the time I do learn quite a few different things.* I learned all about *the decorator crab*, which *has this flaky stuff on it like seaweed to blend into the surroundings.* In the future, *I'm thinking of becoming a Marine Biologist because I'm very interested in sea life,* and I'd like to study the creatures that *live in the very deep dark sea, like bioluminescents.*

Thinking about it now, I guess *I did have a pretty high stress level before* starting at Power To Be. I was *very aggressive. I'm still pretty aggressive in small doses,* but where I used to *get really mad at people for small things, now I just brush it off. I've gotten used* to being frustrated, and Power To Be helps because *it's after school so you can kind of let go, and just kind of, have fun, and just get rid of some of the stress during the day*. *I do handle competition a bit better*, but that's probably from my experience in all sports and games, including in P.E., *not just from Power To Be.* Talking helps me be less competitive; *if I can blow my steam off right after the game by just yaking to myself or to a friend of mine, it helps.*

When I'm not doing Power To Be, I have a more open schedule. But *it does kinda stink* to not be able to go to Power To Be more often *because it's quite fun* to be there, and I can see my friends there. I'm really glad I've been able to be in Power To Be. *I think it will* help me to adapt to some of my future life challenges.

Dane

Hey I'm Dane. I got to do my interview outside! I can focus better out there and it's not as scary as a small office. I like *every animal,* but my favourite animals are *horses. I love to go fishing,* and *I catch and release everything. I don't like hurting animals,* I love to rescue them instead. I like walking my dog, *he likes to bark at squirrels, haha,* and I taught him that!

I used to do lots of horseback riding, but I stopped riding after my horse died. *I didn't want to go to Mary's Farm* after that because it made me so sad. But now when I go there with Power To Be, I get to feed a pony. His name is Blackjack, and *he's mischievous!*

I learned lots of stuff at Power To Be. I learned *about all these different types of moss,* like *Old Man's Beard,* this stuff that grows on trees. One thing I that bothered me is when people stepped on bugs, because I hate when people hurt animals. *Now I know that sometimes it will happen* and *it's just part of the life cycle,* something I learned at Power To Be. Another thing is that *I like to learn a lot about fish.* I went on a fishing trip with them, *and I caught a fish!* I was so proud of myself.

I used to worry about *lots of different things, but now I can handle myself. I used to be scared that the boat would sink,* so at first I didn't want to go kayaking and canoeing. *I'm not* scared *anymore because Power To Be made me fight my fear and that really helped. Baby steps* are key to trying things you're scared of, one small step at a time! With kayaking, *they have these things that help to keep the boat sturdy when the waves were hard, but now I don't need them.* Then there's canoeing, *I like that too. My favourite part is that Power To Be brings me rock climbing,* and to *Galey's Farm.* Rock climbing was also hard at first, because I didn't like to put on the tight shoes. But I tried it anyway, *and then I ended up liking it!*

Before Power To Be, I was *angry I guess.* Well, more *frustrated* and *edgy.* One time we were supposed to go skiing at Mt. Washington, but we got snowed out, and the road was too dangerous. It was so *frustrating, but I did really well controlling my anger.* The staff understand, and *they help* when I'm having a tough time. They suggest things like giving breaks, and help with social cues.

When I started, *a worker would go with me, and now I don't* need that and I can go by myself. *Big groups were hard* for me, *but now I can handle* being in some groups. It wasn't easy making friends before, but now it is! I gained a better understanding for how to *keep friends*, and I'm still *working on that.* When one of the staff members had a baby, I made a flag for them with *my Power To Be friends.* Being there is so *amazing, and it makes you feel good* getting all the help from the *staff they have on their team. It's the very first time that I have a group that I can trust in.*

Doing the activities there makes me feel *happy* and *amazed*. When I come home, after being outside, I feel *relaxed.* If I'm ever sick, *you have to literally make me stay home* if there's Power To Be to go to. I don't even care if I'm not feeling well, I just want to go! I've been at Power To Be for a few years, and I want to keep going for a while. One thing I have to say to all the kids thinking of joining is that *you can be amazed with all the stuff you can accomplish*, just like me.

Mickey

Hi I'm Mickey. *I'm a people person, I like to get along with other people.* I'm *friendly, outgoing,* and helpful. I also have a job that I do lots of things at. I like *Disney, art things, Nintendo and* other video games. My favourite game is *Disney's Magical Mirror. I collect*

hockey cards of the Anaheim Ducks. I'm a big hockey fan! I like when they score a lot of goals, and *I like to go to hockey games.* I also like going on *a bunch of outings* like walking.

I'm just starting at Power To Be. I go to Mary's Farm with them, which is *a very fun experience* where I like to *look at the horses, feed the llamas* and go hiking. *I helped restoring the park at Fort Rodd Hill. It's pretty neat there* and we get to work with the different plants. *It was my first time* gardening, and I felt *good about it*! I also like to do *cleanup* when things need to go into the garbage. *It helps me a lot* to help out like that.

I like *kayaking, and canoeing and camping* at Power To Be. *I've done kayaking before, and canoeing,* but it's *really neat* to be able to do those things again *with all the people who were supporting me.* With the activities at Power To Be, even the tough ones, *I jump right in.* I even do challenging things, like *when they told me about hiking a mountain, I just put on my hiking shoes and do it.* When I do those things *I'm happy, and outgoing* and I have lots of fun.

When I first met those people at Power To Be, *they were very nice. They've helped me a lot to get along with them and it's so nice to be with other people.* Now, *I have pretty nice friends there,* friends that I'd never met before joining. *It's easier to get along with people now. The most enjoyable thing is getting along with the leaders* and going on the *outings.* I just get so excited to go on all the outings! That *boosts my confidence and I'm pretty happy about it!*

My family is *pretty happy* that I get to do a lot of things. I get to tell them about my experience at Power To Be, like helping to restore one of *Canada's National Parks. I hope more people follow in my footsteps and the program treats them well,* because it treats me very well.

Star Player

Hi I'm Star Player. I'm a really active guy. *I'm really flexible, I do weights, I do some track and field* sports *like sprinting, running, and jumping. Right now I do tons of stuff, like*

kayaking surfing, and riding a bike. I like to hang out and make food or eat food. I like watching TV, and *my favourite shows* are *Man vs. Food* and the Dog Whisperer. *I like to be included, I like to help others, and I have good manners.*

I've been in *Scouts, Venturers, and Easter Seals camp,* and *I started with Power To Be* a few years ago. *I like kayaking,* and I want to get better at *rock climbing.* I've tried waterskiing before but *that was so difficult.* Power To Be gave me the chance to try other water sports that I probably wouldn't have tried otherwise. *I learned how to kayak at Juan De Fuca. I want to be involved in more sports* too. In the future, *I'm going to do surfing again.* I'm really good at it! I had never done it before going on trips with Power To Be, and now it's something that I love to do.

When I'm at Power To Be, I'm *happy. It's tons of fun. I usually meet with people, and I learn more skills,* like improving my kayaking skills and social skills. *Sometimes it is hard to see my friends, when you want to do something with your friends that I know from school, like hang out with each other* it can be tough. At Power To Be I've made new friends. I hang out with the staff more than the campers at Power To Be, I especially like talking to them about leadership. *I want to be involved with the leaders, because it's just fun. When I get out from high school I want to get involved with leadership because they do amazing stuff* like teaching and helping others. *I want to learn how to become a leader in Power To Be!* I'm really outgoing and want to *help out with the campers.* This will make me feel more *independent.*

Now *I'm more confident* in my abilities. I've become *very caring, very outgoing.* I *love to ride animals,* and *I'm interested to help out animals at Mary's Farm,* where I went *with Power To Be.* That and being a leader are two of my goals for the future.

Summary of Within Participant Analysis

This chapter presented the youth participants' ghostwritten stories. Each story is unique, sharing the youths' experiences and what they have witnessed in themselves over their time at Power To Be. Despite these differences, there are many similarities among the stories shared by the youth, and many themes evident among the youth participants are also shared among the parent and staff participants. These common themes, identified through the across-participant analysis, are described in the following chapter.

Chapter V – Across-Participant Analysis and Discussion

In this chapter, I present the findings of the across-participant analyses, across the youth, parent and staff groups. I begin by presenting the participant themes and subthemes in Table 2. I then discuss the meaning of these themes and subthemes, and link them back to the literature. Direct participant quotes, in *italics*, are used in the presentation and discussion of the themes. Some quotes have been edited slightly to make them more easily readable. To protect participants' confidentiality, some quotes are anonymous, without the inclusion of the pseudonym. I include key quotes from all participants throughout this chapter, but not all participants are accounted for in each subtheme. I have tried to include quotes from each of the youth group, the parent group, and the staff member groups within each subtheme presented. Finally, while I try to give equal space to each youth participant, some were more articulate and verbally expressive than others.

Across the participant groups, I identified seven themes: (1) Developing Self- Concept, (2) Developing Skills, (3) Inclusive Social Environment, (4) Supportive Staff, (5) Opportunities, (6) Overcoming Challenges, and (7) Overall Well-Being. There were more specific subthemes within most of the themes (see Table 2 below). All participants addressed the larger themes; however, not all addressed each of the sub-themes. This may be, in part, because several of the themes/subthemes were interrelated. That is, sometimes a narrative statement was relevant to more than one theme (e.g., a participant spoke about feeling connected to a social group and learning social skills at the same time, which could fit into either the Social skills subtheme or the Inclusive Social Environment theme).

Table 2.

Across Participant-Group Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
1. Developing Self-Concept	(a) Self-efficacy (b) Self-esteem (c) Recognition of existing strengths (d) Discovery of identity alternatives (e) Independent and interdependent selves
2. Developing Skills	(a) Social skills (b) Coping skills (c) Outdoors skills
3. Inclusive Social Environment	
4. Supportive Staff	
5. Opportunities	(a) Fun and unique activities (b) Learning about and connecting with nature
6. Overcoming Challenges	(a) Existing life challenges (b) New challenges
7. Overall Well-being	(a) Experiencing positive emotions and mood states (c) Well-being and functioning of family and community

Developing Self-Concept

The first theme illustrates the ways in which the participants talked about how the Autism Spectrum Program helped the youth to learn more about who they are and who they can be. For example, Star Player talked a lot about learning about what his interests are:

> *When I get out from high school, I want to get involved with leadership because they do amazing stuff like teach people things and help other people. I want to teach them first aid training.*

Star Player talks about a future self that he became aware of as he watched the staff members interact with the youth and as he got to try out leadership and volunteering roles himself. This theme is consistent with research conducted by Groff and Kleiber (2001), who found that an adapted sports program provided youth with disabilities with a context where they could develop and strengthen a sense of self. Ungar et al. (2008) found that the development of a desirable identity was a significant aspect that enhanced mental health and helped in the development of resilience among at-risk youth. Participants in the present study spoke of their experiences in the program providing them with what Adams and Marshall (1996) identify as the functions of identity: understanding for who they are; meaning and direction through commitments, values and goals; a sense of personal autonomy; consistency and coherence between commitments, values and beliefs; and a recognition of personal potential through a sense of future possibilities and alternative choices.

Self-efficacy. All participants except for one parent commented on what I have termed "self-efficacy," following what Bandura (1997) described as beliefs in a person's own capabilities to exert influence over things that affect his or her life, including persistence in face of adversity and the motivation to strive for personal goals. In the present study, the youth primarily attributed the development of self-efficacy to the special activities they had

opportunities to engage in. Star Player described some of the biggest changes he has noticed since starting at Power To Be several years earlier:

> *I'm more confident, I want to help with animals...I love to ride animals like horses, I'm really good with horses.*

Star Player described how getting the opportunity to be at the farm enabled him to become aware of a competency he has at managing horses. According to Hood and Carruthers (2007) people who feel competent are more likely to experience positive emotions, feel good about themselves, be optimistic in face of challenges, and explore new opportunities. This experience of confidence may have contributed to the discovery Star Player's specific interests in present and future volunteer ventures, which will be discussed in later sections of this chapter.

Mickey talked about his overall experience being positive:

> *It was a pretty nice experience for me. The most enjoyable thing is getting along with the leaders and the outings. It boosts my confidence and I'm pretty happy about it.*

Mickey was able to experience the self-satisfaction, noting that getting along with leaders and being able to do the different activities contributed to his feelings of confidence. Ewert and Yoshino (2001) suggest that a sense of confidence gained in adventure experiences may serve to facilitate the development of resilience.

Another participant described how it felt to do things that he normally wouldn't get the chance to do:

> [It feels] *good 'cause then I can prove to the world, I'm like "Ha! And you guys thought autism was a locked up thing! Well you're all wrong. We can do much more than you could all think"...it's just cool 'cause people will just see them do stuff and so they're like, "Oh wow look at those kids" and we're like "Ha! We're so pro for you."*

This youth spoke about deconstructing what he believed to be others' preconceived notions of what people with autism are incapable of doing. He commented that sometimes people make remarks to him, saying those with autism do not really talk and seem to be in their own worlds

much of the time rather than interacting with others and participating in life outside of their supposed restricted interests. Not only does his statement represent an identity alternative, as will be explained in more detail in a following subsection, but it clearly gives this youth a sense of power and competence to feel professional at something that others would not have expected him to do. Blinde and McClung (1997) found that participants in individualized recreational programs were able to interpret their experiences in ways that countered traditional societal belief systems that tended to emphasize disabilities rather than abilities. When strengths are emphasized, youth living with challenges have the opportunities to see and showcase what they are capable of.

One of the parents tells a related story of her son's experiences kayaking with Power To Be:

> *I've noticed that his confidence level went up quite a bit, particularly after he's been out kayaking. He's been out kayaking with them twice. The first time they went out of the Sooke Basin, and it was quite windy, and he was in a double kayak. The conditions were quite challenging, and previous to that, the only kayaking he had done was with his dad, and I think his dad tended to sort of do all the work. And he would just kind of 'go along for the ride', haha. So this was the first time he really had to pull his own weight, literally. And it was an opportunity for him to see what he was capable of doing in those circumstances. And everybody was pretty impressed with what he did.*

This participant had the experience of building his confidence level as he recognized his abilities to effectively navigate a kayak despite challenging conditions and limited experience. Similar results were reported by Anderson et al., (1997), who found that self-confidence was raised after participants discovered they were able to navigate through several canoe trips. Perceptions of physical competence were positively and significantly related to the number of years and number of sports participated in as part of a Special Olympics program (Weiss et al., 2003). For the participant above, in addition to personal gains in confidence, others witnessed his success and

were able to share appreciation for his accomplishments, which helps in the co-construction of a competent identity.

Blinde and McClung (1997) suggest that recreational activities can help to influence the self-perceptions of individuals with disabilities because they can feel what it is like to do different activities, enhance beliefs about physical capabilities, and increase confidence to try other sport or recreational activities in the future. A staff member at Power To Be shared what a participant told his mother about his experience there:

He said, "you know mom, if I can rock climb and kayak, I can do anything."

Similarly, in follow-up research to the Kauai longitudinal study, Werner (1993) found that resilient children held a belief that challenges could be overcome.

Descriptions of young people with disabilities have historically used deficit-laden language (Gergen, 1991). Additionally, young people living with disabilities commonly experience low self-efficacy and discouragement (McWhirter, 1991; Hood & Carruthers, 2007). However, the youth in the present study were able to comment on feeling that they were effective in prevailing over some of their challenges they have encountered, leading to the generation more hopeful and positive self-descriptions.

Self-esteem. Most participants made reference to this subtheme. Self-esteem relates to feelings of self-worth, characterized in Young Royalty's statement:

> *I just know like I'm more important now and there's more reasons for me to do stuff instead of just being all locked up at home. I don't know, it just feels better, just knowing that there's always something to do.*

He comments that opportunities to get out make him feel like he is a worthwhile individual. He later adds:

> *I just think I'm a better person and I don't think I'd be the person I am today if it wasn't for them so that means a lot to me*

It would appear that he feels a sense of acceptance and purpose because of the opportunity to be in the program, which he says is very meaningful to him. This is consistent with research conducted by Anderson et al. (1997), who found that adult participants experienced increased feelings of self-esteem and self-acceptance in an adapted outdoor adventure program. In a study of protective factors for those at risk for depression, Carbonell et al. (2002) identified positive self-concept and self-esteem as important factors in promoting resilient adjustment in the transition to adulthood. With such positive self-esteem, Young Royalty may be more resilient in face of present and future challenges. Gergen et al. (2004) contend that meaning grows out of interpersonal relationships.

A parent also described her daughter's experience of being given a leadership position:

> *She's a little more high-functioning than some of the other participants, so they rely on her to do certain things and share her experiences. They'll call on her to do that which just boosts her self-esteem. And it helps her recognize abilities she does have, and you know the focus is on that: what she can do, not what she can't do.*

Similarly, Kaplan and Kaplan (2003) comment that when people are given opportunities to achieve and enhance competence, they are more likely to feel useful and respected, and less likely to feel helpless and worthless. Weiss et al. (2003) found that self-worth was significantly and positively correlated with the number of Special Olympics competitions participants were involved in. Though the present study also described increases in participants' self-worth, it seemed to be related to support from staff as well as opportunities to participate in activities and demonstrate autonomy. Therefore, self-esteem appeared to grow out of relatedness and opportunity in the present study. One PTB staff member talked about what one youth was able to realize in his time at Power To Be:

> *[He was able to] see that he has the skills and ability, and he just needs to access that and bring that out. Now he's no longer involved, which is too bad because he's a really*

> *sweet kid, but it's great, like that's what I want for people, to see that they have a lot to offer, and they can take that out into the community.*

She discussed how this participant joined the group and gradually built up the skills and the self-esteem to propel him towards joining some of the other recreation opportunities. She mentioned that he is no longer in the Autism Spectrum Program, but is more actively involved in sports in his school and neighbourhood. Self-esteem may be one of the reasons that participants of an outdoor program seek new recreation opportunities in their communities, as they may feel worthwhile of using the skills and abilities they have to engage in activities they recognize enhance their well-being.

Since self-esteem has been considered to develop on the basis of perceived social appraisals about a person's selves (Cooley 1902; Harter, 1988), social support has been linked to higher levels of self esteem. The present study supported this notion, as participants directly commented on the importance of the inclusive social context within the group as contributing to their feelings of self worth. High levels of self-esteem have been found to contribute to fewer behavioural and emotional problems (e.g., anger, depression) and more positive adjustment in adolescence (e.g., increased positive affect and motivation, and higher levels of academic achievement; Dubois et al., 1998; Dubois et al., 2002; Harter, 1988). Although these links were not examined experimentally, participants spoke about the different ways the social context and self-worth helped them to feel better about themselves. Overall, it appeared the program was able to enhance participants' perceptions of selves.

Recognition of existing strengths. Almost all participants referred to characteristics and interests that were highlighted and encouraged in youths' participation. One parent described her son's lack of social interaction after he graduated from high school:

> *He in particular was a couch potato. And it is easy for him to end up spending a lot of time alone. And coming home and just going into his room and watching TV.*

She then reports on how the setting at Power To Be allowed her son to be himself:

> *Interacting with other people you know, he's a very social person, and it seems like the more he's out doing things, the happier he is*.

For this youth, Power To Be seemed to provide an environment that allowed his social characteristics and qualities to emerge and flourish. Groff and Kleiber (2001) found that the opportunity to interact with other adolescents with disabilities in an adapted sports program allowed young people to feel as if they could "be themselves". Another parent describes how the Autism Spectrum Program meets her daughter's social needs:

> *She's very active, she's very sporty. She likes being out and participating in different sports. While we were down east, she was very involved in Special Olympics. And that didn't really work out here. It was very social down east, and here it seems to be more competitive. And that's not really what she wants. She really likes Operation Trackshoes, that's very social as well. But she found that Special Olympics was very, you have to win. And that's not what she's about, she wants to socialize and be active, which Power To Be meets that need.*

This parent commented that while some other groups provided disabled youth with a chance to be her active and social self, other groups are more focussed on winning and competition, which did not work well for her daughter. This experience is in contrast to a study by Weiss et al. (2003), who found that competence and positive identity developed in an achievement-oriented environment. This discrepancy suggests that the meaning of achievement varies individually; for some it may promote a positive self-concept, for others it may constrain the expression of social identities.

The Autism Spectrum Program at Power To Be also appears to support participants' values and interests. To introduce himself, Dane spoke a lot about his love and appreciation for animals. He first told a story of an animal rescue he participated in:

> *Once there was a seal stuck at Island View Beach in a rock, so we called the SPCA and people came all the way from Salt Spring Island.*

He also described his humane values he holds even within a sport that has the potential to be harmful to animals:

> *I love to go fishing and I catch-and-release everything I catch. I just don't like hurting animals.*

While the above statement related to a family fishing trip, Dane became excited during the interview when his mother reminded him of a fishing trip he went on with Power To Be where he also was able to release his catches:

> *And I caught a fish! I caught a bass that was five pounds! Large mouth. Yeah, I like to learn a lot about fish.*

Blaze also commented:

> *I like using my imagination.*

His mother then said:

> *They had one day where they did brainstorming to see what the kids would like to do, and that was Blaze's idea to do a game night....so they said that it was nice because he brought in all these games that could be adaptable to any age group or any group of people. And that's what they liked. So Blaze felt very proud that he was the one that kind of started this.*

Blaze's mother talked about how PTB staff encouraged the kids' ideas and contributions. In this particular instance, Blaze was able to use his creativity and imagination to contribute to the creation of a new activity. House and Paisley (2008) indicated that an environment where facilitators promote participant involvement in adventure programming activity selection can help empower participants to become more self-reliant through the discovery of their personal strengths. One staff member explained why this was important. She said that she recognized that these youth always hear others talk about their difficulties with schoolwork and managing their behaviour; this experience can feel quite oppressive and disempowering, for both the youth and

family members. However, she noted that at Power To Be, their strengths are always emphasized and celebrated. One parent also reflected this:

> *I always knew that my son was a great kid, but I wanted some other people to see him like I see him. And with Power To Be, they do.*

She observed that while disabled youths' strengths are celebrated in a supportive context, they have the confidence and space to discover who they are and who they can be. Zabriskie et al. (2005) comment that involvement in community-based recreation can help participants gain new skills or improve existing skills that may provide them with further options for independent leisure functioning in the community.

Discovery of identity alternatives. This subtheme illustrates how youth have explored new descriptions and aspects of the self through their participation at Power To Be, and how parents and staff members have observed these new parts of the self emerging and strengthening. Young Royalty spent a lot of time talking about this experience. In this quote, he describes what kind of person he used to be before joining the program:

> *I used to be this shy, a little creature and didn't really like talking to too many people or being around people a lot. And not really willing to try new things.*

He adds:

> *I probably also wouldn't have been so open to meeting new people. I'd be like (makes angry face). Other people would be like, "oh, what's wrong with that kid" and my dad would be like, "Oh don't worry, he doesn't bite, usually." I just always thought I had to be like on defence. Like a fearful aggressive dog.*

Young Royalty is able to use two animal metaphors to describe himself before the program started. He was both "a shy little creature" and "a fearful aggressive dog," which vividly illustrate his feelings and mannerisms before the program, particularly in social settings. On the other hand, he describes a different type of dog-like character when he is volunteering at PTB:

> *I feel good because I like being pack leader*.

Being given a valued role in the group enabled him to shift away from being withdrawn and reactive much of the time. This change appeared to permit him to feel appreciated and autonomous. He also described himself in a particular setting outside of the program:

> *At school sometimes, I was not really the talkative one. Like, you wouldn't really know what kind of person I am if we were at school. 'Cause I just like being in the corner. But here I'm just like, 'yay!' Cause I feel like more safe here.*

When Young Royalty said "yay" in the interview, he was smiling and appeared very excited. I got the sense that he felt like his true personality could emerge when he was at Power To Be. Whereas before he did not enjoy being around people, he now has the desire to be around others. He describes how his true social self was able to emerge in the program:

> *I just get along with everybody because I like to be friends with everybody and because I don't like to pick fights or any of those types of things, and I'm always open to doing a lot of stuff.*

Young Royalty was able to recognize his strengths, which included personal and social resources. This appeared to be a very important change for him, and he described himself in ways that contrasted to his previous self-descriptions. Studies of marginalized groups have demonstrated that recreation experiences can help individuals challenge components of identity that are no longer useful to the person (Devine, 2004). People with disabilities can navigate outdoor pursuits to discover identity alternatives and use skills they previously did not have or were not aware of (Anderson et al., 1997; Groff & Kleiber, 2001). Adaptive recreation programming has also been shown to contribute to enhanced social interactions and participants' perceptions of their social selves (Blinde & McClung, 1997; Groff & Kleiber, 2001). When there are opportunities for participants to try different activities, within an environment that is supportive and non-judgemental, young people are able to explore different parts of the self.

Rather than having a constrained and assigned identity absolute (e.g., disability), youth can explore and choose among multiple identity alternatives.

Parents spoke of the atmosphere at PTB, being inclusive and supportive, as contributing to the changes they noticed in their youth. One observed:

> *She was always outgoing to a point, whereas now she's much more outgoing, and much more confident in meeting new people and not that feeling of trepidation before she goes into that situation. You know, she'll say "yes I'm going to do this."And she goes and she does it. And she'll say, "oh there's probably not going to be anybody there that I know, but you know what, I'll meet people." Whereas before she was very wary, she would hold back.*

Star Player's mother also noticed a change in willingness to do things:

> *His comfort zone has grown leaps and bounds. And so when I say to him, "you want to go kayaking?" It's like "Yeah man!" "And do you want to go on an overnight kayaking trip," "oh yeah!" He's in.*

When I asked if Star Player used to be like that before, she responded:

> *No, there always a bit of reluctance. Even when he was in Scouting and Venturers, he did a lot of pack trips and hiking and camping and all that, but there was always some reluctance there about, "uh I don't know if I really want to go, do I have to go? Nah" And then last minute, "oh I don't really want do go" "oh you're going, we've committed and you're going." So there was always that. And now as soon as he finds out there's an opportunity he's in.*

Star Player himself also expressed an identity alternative he discovered through his willingness to try new things at Power To Be:

> *I'm going to do surfing again...I'm a good surfer*

Groff and Kleiber (2001) suggest that as an individual engages in a sport-related activity, she or he can identify with athletes that participate in the same sport and consider to the degree that he or she possesses such characteristics. Though Star Player did not explicitly share this, he may begin to see himself as having characteristics similar to surfers in his exploration of identity alternatives. Moreover, Weiss et al. (2003) contend that the greater amount of time individuals

are involved in a sport, the more firmly defined their athletic identity becomes, contributing to a positive sense of physical competence.

Hood and Carruthers (2007) comment that in order for recreation experiences to promote well-being, they must provide support to explore and express the self through opportunities to identify personal interests, strengths and assets. A PTB staff member described how they design their activities with the intention of discovering identity alternatives:

> *They were on a bike and they went on a journey, an adventure. And they, with their own power and support, got themselves to the lake. So in terms of identity conclusions, the hope was that the activity might have helped them to see themselves in different ways. As a capable cyclist, as a part of a group with different friends, as competent enough to get themselves somewhere to do something fun.*

Blinde and McClung (1997) contend that environments that promote alternative conceptualizations of the self can assist in empowering individuals with disabilities to view themselves in more positive ways that challenge societal views of disability. The youth in this study were able to experience themselves in new and more positive ways in the program, which enabled them to envision different possibilities and futures for themselves. These "new identities" were also supported by their peers, staff, and parents.

Independent and interdependent selves. This subtheme relates to how the youth took personal responsibility and leadership in the program, while also sharing their skills and giving back to the group itself and to the environment and the community as a whole. One example of interdependence shows how being given a leadership opportunity helped a youth in her own growth, as well as enabling her to help others:

> *Emotionally she's grown. Her emotions are always on her sleeve, so when things upset her, she tends to cry first, that's become less and less and less. Because they've given her more of a leadership role.*

This young woman's own expertise was given the space to shine through, which appeared to affect her own emotional development. This observation was similar to that shared by a staff member in a study by McAvoy et al. (2006), who commented that being a part of the group and helping out seemed to provide participants with feelings of success and enjoyment. Demonstrating responsibility for the self as well as others in adventure programs has been shown to be an important link to the development of resilience (Ewert & Yoshino, 2001).

Star Player's mother also talked about this sharing of responsibility when she discussed how he got involved with volunteering with Mary's Farm outside of the hours he is at Power To Be:

> *He went to Mary's Farm with Power To Be through the Teen Community Connections and was introduced to Mary. He was very intrigued by working on the farm with staff, and so then that connection was made and he's been volunteering ever since....Lots of time we've been there and a Power To Be group is showing up at the farm. And he feels very important because he's there and he's able to actually talk to people and tell them what he does at the farm and how you do certain things. Because he's been working there for over a year as a volunteer, so it's exciting. It gives him that leadership opportunity to show that he can demonstrate.*

This is an example of both independence and interdependence, because while Star Player is stepping into a mature role as a volunteer, his tasks at the farm and showing others around are ways he gives back to his community. Interestingly, Raeff (2006) refers to independence and interdependence as "multiple and inseparable" (p. 96). Ungar et al.'s (2008) study found that feelings of self-reliance, finding meaningful roles in the community, and balancing personal interests with a sense of responsibility to the greater good are factors that can help youth develop resilience despite stress. Hood and Carruthers (2007) comment that leisure contexts tend to facilitate engagement with helping out in the community. Star Player described how his experience helping out at Mary's Farm extends to ways he wants to be interdependent in being involved with the Wild Animal Rehabilitation Centre:

> *I just want to help out at Wild ARC, and do lots of stuff like help out with animals, help to treat animals, help to groom them, help to clean their stalls kind of stuff. I got interested to help out animals at Mary's Farm.*

Mickey describes his willingness to help out at Power To Be:

> *[I] do a bit of cleanup, I just get along and do it and get the job done. It helps me a lot. When I see something, I just pick it up and put it in the garbage.*

Participation in community can help a person feel as if they are making a difference and are valued by others (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003; Newman & Newman, 2001). Shapiro (1995) comments that any activity that helps to shift a person's worldview towards more collaborative ways of living in the world can be seen as restorative to both the person's inner and outer environment. The above quotes not only show attitudes of interdependence, but also suggest the presence of an environmental identity. Clayton (2003) maintains that an environmental identity is a motivating force that can guide a person's personal, social, and political behaviour, created as she or he interacts with the natural world and feels emotional attachment to it. Clayton proposes that self-concept can consist partially of an environmental identity, which is a form of collective identity, similar to an ethnic or national identity. The adolescent comes to understand the self in relation to human and non-human others, seeing similarities rather than differences, and holding the belief that the environment is an important part of who they are. Similarly, one staff member observes:

> *It's interesting watching them interact, just in terms of supporting perspective taking, and being community members and contributing to the greater good of society*

What is interesting to note is that behavioural dimensions such as turn taking and perspective taking, identified by Raeff (2006), are not typically automatic processes among individuals with autism and other special needs; they tend to struggle with these social skills and rules (Mesibov et al., 2001). However, the above experiences illustrate social responsibility and

the desire to help others. For Star Player and Mickey, helping the group at PTB and helping others in the environment such as animals may be one form of helping themselves and becoming more connected to an environmentally conscious and collective community.

Participants in the Devine (2004) study did not comment on interdependence and leadership among the community, but they did talk about collaborative participation in activities and encouragement among peers and staff. The positive emphasis on interdependence that was discussed by participants of the present study is a finding that does not appear to have been discussed extensively in the literature. Through my previous front-line work with youth diagnosed with autism, I was aware of the tendency of many parents and/or autism-aiding organizations to promote independence as the highest sign of maturity. The youth in my study described giving back or wanting to give back in the future, either to the PTB programs or other places in the community. Parents also observed both independent and interdependent qualities in their youth, discussing the autonomous but also collaborative nature of their youths' leadership and volunteer contributions. The concepts of independence and interdependence were intertwined in the data; it was difficult to separate these concepts in examples of leadership and "giving back" since the behaviours included both autonomous and collaborative intentions. These descriptions support the relational view of the self that includes aspects of relatedness into the development of self-concept (Josselson, 1988).

Developing Skills

All participants described examples of skills developed within the program. These appeared to fall into three areas: Social skills, Coping skills, and Outdoor skills. Skill development has been cited as an area that improves for youth who participate in sports, adventure, and wilderness programming (Groff & Kleiber, 2001; McAvoy et al., 2006; Russell,

2006; Sibthorp, 2003). Groff and Kleiber note that developing a sense of competence in skills and abilities is an important aspect of identity development, particularly for those with disabilities who may have had constrained opportunities to engage in physically demanding activities in the past.

Social skills. All of the youth identified the development of social skills within the program. As will be illustrated in the quotes that follow, this subtheme includes skill development in social communication skills, comfort in social settings, and learning acceptance and respect for others. Young Royalty talks about learning some social etiquette:

> *I feel like a puppy who's learned a lot better rules and respect.*

Similarly, Blaze's mother notes:

> *He has learned through Power To Be too because he's got to talk, he's got to do all the ideas they tell him to do. And they do introductions and he's having to introduce himself. He's learning that people are talking and I've gotta talk to them. He's trying his best to talk appropriately, talk openly....He tries his best to wait his turn, he tries his best to say different things and accept people.*

She notes that he has become more assertive in social situations that were typically outside of his comfort zone and has developed some social communication skills. She later mentions that she recognizes that he has learned this through the variety of ways the Power To Be staff model and demonstrate social skill development, and through being patient, talking to other people, and playing games cooperatively. These findings are similar to those of Anderson et al. (1997), McAvoy et al. (2006), and Sibthorp (2003), who found that social skills, tolerance of others, conflict resolution skills, comfort in meeting new people, and group involvement improved in people with and without disabilities after participation in outdoor adventure programs.

Another parent related her daughter's growth at PTB:

> *Her language has improved. Now I don't know if that's directly related to Power To Be, but it can only enhance what's been [going] on at school in the last two years. She's expressing herself a little better. And I think that's all part of the maturity.*

A staff member described social competencies he believes many of the youth have gained:

> *We are starting to see some gains around social skills. We require them to speak in front of a big group, like an opening circle, a closing circle. And so over the time from when they've started to end, a lot of them are now more comfortable talking in front of the groups.*

He also references some autism-specific difficulties that he sees changing in one youth in particular:

> *One of the challenges with autism is an inability to recognize that what they're interested in may not be interesting to other people. And seemingly, a difficulty in perspective taking. But I've definitely seen one youth in particular way more concerned about how people are doing. Talking less about the things he's absolutely passionate about, which most people find quite boring, and more willing to just listen and talk about other things.*

The above findings match McGovern and Sigman's (2005) report that engagement with peers is as important in the development of social skills in young people with autism as it is in typically developing individuals. Sibthorp (2003) comments that life skills learned, such as personal awareness and tolerance for others, have the potential to transfer to success in school, work, and optimal functioning at home.

Coping skills. Developing coping skills involved the youth learning to deal with difficult emotional states and challenging situations through increasing openness, ability to self-soothe, and problem solving capacities. Blaze talked about some of the coping skills he has gained:

> *I do handle competition a bit better. That's one of the biggest things but that's overall mostly, not just from Power To Be but most things I've gone through, like P.E. and stuff....if I can blow my steam off right after the game by just yaking to myself or to a friend of mine, it helps.*

He notes that he did not just acquire this skill in the Autism Spectrum Program, but through his experiences in physical education class at school. Power To Be appears to offer a space where

participants can not only gain new skills but also practice and strengthen coping strategies learned elsewhere. In addition to skills like self-soothing and eliciting support from others, Blaze has also recognized that he has developed a tolerance for frustration:

> *I did have a pretty high stress level before; I was very aggressive. Well it didn't really change that much, I'm still pretty aggressive in small doses. But I used to like, get really mad at people for small things. Now I just brush it off. I think I've just gotten used to it*.

One participant in the Groff and Kleiber (2001) study also noted that he too learned how to work with people without getting mad. Other participants in that study commented that sports allowed them to express their aggression in a socially acceptable manner by channelling their anger into energy they could use in the sport.

One parent of a child with autism noticed some changes in her son's ability to endure the company of others, even if someone is doing something that he does not necessarily like:

> *I do see that if that person is sort of attached to him, they want to touch him, he'll kind of weasel out of it and walk away...he shows his [dis]comfort, he doesn't make a big deal out of it, but he could be when he was younger, yelling screaming and that. And I don't know if that's Power To Be or just growth on his own, but he's learning to be calm, and when he's frustrated he takes deep breaths...they're quite experienced with knowing how to talk it out or trying to make him feel comfortable. And he's never had an outburst with them.*

This parent recognizes the opportunities to learn and practice coping skills at Power To Be just builds off of previous successes in coping. The process is facilitated by staff members who help him practice his skills in the moment. Increased abilities to work with others and to work out conflicts have been reported among high-risk youth who participated in an adventure-based ropes course (Green et al., 2000). A PTB staff member spoke about how they teach youth how to cope with group conflict:

> *If there's conflict in the group, which often happens, we see that as a challenge. How can we work with the youth to learn about how they might navigate with that social situation differently in the future? With some of the youth that's very, very hard, so it's small steps*.

He reports that they help youth figure out how to deal with the situation in the moment, as well as planning on how they might work through a similar situation the next time they encounter it. He mentions that some youth find this task difficult. This may be particularly true for individuals with autism, who typically have a harder time taking another's perspective and imagining how a conflict might affect another person, in addition to having trouble generalizing the outcome of a specific situation to uncertain and abstract conflicts in the future (Autism Canada Foundation, 2011). In recognizing and understanding these difficulties, PTB staff attempt to provide a setting that promotes gradual learning.

Dane notes changes in his ability to accept adverse situations and difficult emotions:

> *Before I went to Power To Be, stepping on bugs was a really big thing…. Now I know that sometimes it will happen and there's nothing you can do about it, even though it may be hard… And you can talk to the person they may not stop, but it's not the end of the world, it's just part of the life cycle.*

Dane talked about how staff members helped him talk through his worries and recognize that he is capable of accepting when something unfortunate happens. At a later point in our interview, when Dane walked by a dead bug on the ground, he had the opportunity to practice his coping in the moment. He became sad, but his mother helped to remind him that everything would be alright. When I asked Dane where the bug goes once it dies, he replied:

> *To the earth.*

In this example, Dane was able to transfer coping skills learned at PTB to another setting. Hobfoll (2002) described this type of personal resource development as a positive spiral, in that those with external (e.g., access to leisure opportunities) and internal (e.g., specific coping skills) resources were more likely to continue to cultivate resources and solve problems in times of stress. This example supports Ungar et al.'s (2008) description of resilience as the mutual provision, navigation, and negotiation of resources between individuals, families, and

communities. That is, Dane practiced and navigated coping resources through outdoor recreation resources at PTB that he could cultivate in other situations in the community.

Outdoor skills. A number of participants identified the development of outdoor skills through the program, both developing capabilities for engaging in and mastering adventurous activities. Mickey's mother described her son's growth during his first time being alone in a kayak:

> *The next time they went out, they went just in the Gorge. And they put him in a single kayak, which is the first time he'd ever done a single. And when his dad found out he right away sort of freaked out, like, "he can't do that!" So I thought it was interesting because, as parents we possibly overcompensate or unknowingly hold our children back, you know? So by being in this different circumstance, with different people, and different expectations, all of a sudden he was able to see that he was able to do so much more.*

Masten and Coatsworth (1998) assert that competence develops as the person interacts with the current environment, and thus it will change as the context changes. While Mickey's experience kayaking with his father may have introduced and familiarized him to kayaking, an opportunity for him to challenge himself and recognize his own kayaking abilities may have only emerged in the Power To Be setting. In other outdoor adventure programs, adults with and without disabilities have shown improvements in their canoe, camping and safety skills as well as abilities to remain comfortable in the face of harsh conditions (Anderson et al., 1997; McAvoy et al., 2006). Young Royalty also surpassed his own expectations in terms of his technical skill development:

> *I've gotten better with snowboarding within about a year which is quite cool. I've already been on the black diamond, 'cause before I was like, 'whoa, okay.' That was unexpected.*

He mentioned that he was originally too worried to do the difficult run, indicating that he thought it was beyond his skill level. Bandura (1997) calls this an outcome expectation, a judgement of the likely result of a situation. Positive outcomes in attempts at adventure activities can help

adolescents feel excitement and satisfaction, surpass self-doubt, and may help provide an incentive to participate in adventure challenges again in the future (Bandura; Martin, 1999).

A PTB staff member highlighted how skill development involves a personal definition of success. While one person may consider skiing on the black diamond hill to be a success, another may experience success differently:

> *We definitely have kids that, when they initially arrive, they struggle a lot with the new concepts and the new ideas. But it's about building that up slowly. We talk about, maybe for the first time they come down and it's just getting the life jacket on them. And they get there and that's a big success for them. They get the lifejacket on, and next time they come, they stand in the boat, they visit the boat, and they get out and then they get in. And they get their life jacket on. So you're building up to that experience, and that is looking at everybody's individual success. So success is not just, we got so-and-so in the boat and kayaking today, or we got them up to the top of the mountain. It's all about that level and having that individual experience that has benefitted them.*

Masten and Coatsworth (1998) note that although a child must act to develop skills, environments also afford competence. In the above quote, the staff member describes individualized goal setting and success that happens collaboratively with participants to help them develop outdoor skills and competence. Similarly, support staff in an outdoor adventure program for adults with cognitive disabilities commented that they thought that each time the participants went out, they would continue to learn and build skills as well as pushing their abilities farther (McAvoy et al., 2006). Overall, outdoor skill development does not just mean mastery of a sport. It is about challenging oneself to try something new, and discovering capacities that were previously unknown to the self and others.

Inclusive Social Environment

Every participant made reference to this theme, which involved the youths' experiences in connecting with others, making friends, and belonging to an accepting and supportive peer

group. A staff member noted that this type of environment is one of the biggest contributors to the effects she sees in youth:

> *The relationship building that they have with one another in the peer group and the support, where they feel really accepted within the program and being in it. They feel the place where they can be themselves, where they're going to be challenged but at the same time they're going to be supported and feel safe. Because that's the main goal of the program, building that safety and that perceived risk and challenge. You go rock climbing, there's this perceived idea that you're up high, you're climbing a wall but you're harnessed in and very secure and lots of risk management going on. But at the same time overcoming that, and then feeling that if they are scared or worried, they're not going to be judged or treated poorly by anyone in the group whether its staff or other participants; it's an encouraging and supportive environment.*

Fletcher and Hinkle (2002) note that one of the main principles of adventure-based therapy is the experience of taking personal risks within a safe and supportive environment. One of the parents recognized that in the Autism Spectrum Program, her son is accepted unconditionally:

> *I think it's given him the opportunity to fit in with his diagnoses, or his disabilities. So he can fit in and he's accepted no matter how his day is. If it's a hard day, if it's a good day, he's still welcome. And that's huge, because in other groups, "oh he's having a hard day, let's keep him at home." That's not really a group. So they accept him. So if he hadn't have been in the group, I don't think he would be gung ho with jumping in with a group now. And it's given him a group, again, to fit in that now, he can talk about. And that's huge when you're 12 or 13.*

This parent recognizes that, regardless of the presence of a disability, a supportive social group is essential when you are an early adolescent. This is corroborated by authors who recognize that seeking connections and supportive relationships in young adolescence can help individuals to take on personal challenges and build a sense of self that is understood and valued by a group (Marshall & Leadbeater, 2008; Newman & Newman, 2001). This parent also acknowledges that if her son had not joined the group several years ago, she wondered whether he would have wanted to join a group at the present time. Achieving a sense of belonging during adolescence has implications for the desire to join groups, comfort in group settings, and investment in

collective goals later on in life (Newman & Newman, 2001). Similar to the present study, Blinde and McClung (1997) found that recreational pursuits for those with physical disabilities expanded peoples' social interactions and experiences. They found that participation also helped participants initiate social activities in other social contexts. Blaze talked about what it means for him to have friends at Power To Be:

> *It does kind of help having friends at Power To Be because you can kind of connect in big things, and I didn't have that many friends before Power To Be.*

His experience at PTB has been positive, particularly because he found it difficult to make friends before joining the program. Dane expresses a similar sentiment:

> *It's the very first time that I have a group that I can trust in.*

These statements are similar to a finding in another study. A participant in the Bedini (2000) study stated that a community-based adaptive recreation program helped her to connect with other people who shared similar disabilities. She asserted that this gave her a sense of support, whereas she previously identified herself as a loner and experienced depression. Groff and Kleiber (2001) note that social interaction and connectedness with others with a disability was one of the biggest impacts for youth involved in an adapted sports program. Youth in this study indicated that it was not so much the activity itself, but the context of understanding peers that helped them express themselves (Groff & Kleiber). Anderson et al., (1997) and Devine (2004) also found connecting with peers, encouragement from others, and friendship development were important outcomes of participation in integrated (i.e., participants with and without disabilities) recreation programs, particularly among those with disabilities. However, in contrast to the present study, Devine found that these integrated contexts sometimes distanced individuals with disabilities than from non-disabled participants, as the atmosphere of the leisure context sometimes emphasized differences rather than similarities, and some disabled individuals

felt mocked, devalued or ignored. When a culture of acceptance is not present in leisure contexts, it is unlikely that people with disabilities would be able to feel valued (Devine).

Highlighting the importance of helpfulness, connection and inclusion at PTB, Mickey stated:

They've helped me a lot to get along with them and it's so nice to be with other people.

Weiss et al. (2003) found that Special Olympians' perceptions of social acceptance significantly affected performance. Hood and Carruthers (2007) comment that relatedness is one of the key factors that influences happiness in peoples' lives, and that individuals who are socially connected tend to participate in health-promoting behaviours more frequently than do those individuals who are isolated. Ungar et al. (2008) also found that relationships offering comfort, experiences of trust, a sense of belonging and caring were central in the lives of youth who were considered to be coping well with adversity. Bandura (1997) adds that personal relationships bring satisfaction in life, making stress and discomfort more bearable. In the present study, it appears that the Autism Spectrum Program group was felt to be welcoming and supportive, and that this had a meaningful impact on youth and parents alike.

In my own previous work with young people with developmental challenges such as autism, it was not uncommon to have the youth shy away from social interactions, since it appeared that they found social settings to be frustrating, full of cues and rules they did not understand. In contrast, all the youth in the present study acknowledged that they liked being around others at PTB, and some were even to make friends, despite having difficulties in social situations in the past. This supports a relational view of the self which affirms the need for human connections and relationships throughout peoples' lives (Josselson, 1988).

Supportive Staff

All participants spoke positively of the support given by Power To Be staff. This theme signified ways in which staff members and volunteers in the program helped to create adaptations to activities, encouraged participation, provided positive role modelling, and showed unconditional support. Young Royalty described their special approach to addressing the youth:

> *With this field, you just got to be super energetic and stuff, but be chill at the same time. And they're all basically like that which is good. And just, they're all so understanding with every people and they don't assume things. They ask before they assume, "Oh, 'cause that person uses a wheelchair, we'll just help him." They don't do that, they ask first, which is important to a person who uses a wheelchair and just anybody else. They don't feel sorry 'cause people don't want to feel pity.*

Similarly, one participant in the Devine (2004) study noted that the staff in an integrated leisure program did not treat him any differently than the non-disabled participants. However, another participant in the same study noted that a staff member disregarded and did not help when other disabled peers refused to interact with him. Young Royalty spoke about the staff members' approach to helping the youth in the Autism Spectrum Program. He commented that they treat the youth as they would like to be treated, which appears to be different from the approach he is used to seeing, where non-disabled individuals overcompensate for the difficulties they perceive disabled people as having. Therefore, it appears that it is important for participants to feel understood and supported to the same degree, not more or less, than any other participant. Ungar et al. (2005) note that authentic relationships with outdoor adventure practitioners who demonstrate caring and equality towards youth participants rather than focussing efforts on discipline and control provides an ideal environment for the development and demonstration of new skills, autonomy, helpfulness, and other attributes associated with resilience such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and the ability to engage in meaningful relationships with others. Young Royalty adds his appreciation for the way they deal with challenging behaviour:

> *If I was having difficult times and they'd all stay by my side, they didn't abandon me or reject me which is super important to me. So that like helped me be able to trust them so fast.*

Young Royalty then noted that he could not pinpoint exactly what helped him trust the staff members right away, he just got the sense they had a different way of dealing with him, a way that felt refreshing and comfortable. The atmosphere of trust in safety was also noted to be a major theme in an adaptive adventure therapy program for adults with cognitive disabilities (McAvoy et al., 2006). Participants in that study talked specifically about how the leaders cultivated a sense of emotional and personal safety by accepting everyone unconditionally, being calm and patient, matching levels of ability to challenge, and creating an inclusive atmosphere; these actions were also identified by participants in the present study.

Relationships between the vulnerable youth and caring and supportive non-parent adults has been linked to resilience (Green et al., 2000; Werner, 1993). Dane talked about how the PTB staff pay attention to him and help him to cope:

They help, they suggest things, like say you're a kid who needs outside breaks, like me.

By doing so, they not only meet his needs, but also model how he can check in with himself and determine if he needs to take time to relax if his stress level gets too high. Participants in the Devine (2004) study also described this encouragement and an understanding of various abilities as important staff qualities in leisure settings.

A PTB staff member discussed in detail their intentional approach to facilitating the groups:

> *I see that the mainstream autism rehabilitation therapy world is very focussed on a 'normative' understanding of social interactions. And they are trying to facilitate children to fit more within that norm. But the approach we take is slightly different in that we provide a context where they can be accepted for exactly who they are at that moment. But then we do encourage them through role modelling, through some behavioural strategies, like if they're hurting someone or speaking to someone rudely, we*

> *try to model and reframe and find opportunities so that they can learn other strategies for communicating.*

He expresses how there are a lot of therapies for youth with autism that explicitly or implicitly try to change the youth's unique ways of approaching the world to behaviours that more closely approximate those of typically developed children their age. While that approach certainly has its advantages, it can convey the message that the youth are in some way not good enough. And as reported earlier, the youth and parents see self-worth as an important aspect of identity development and well-being. The staff member conveyed that when there are potentially harmful behaviours displayed, staff use therapeutic strategies to help the youth manage difficult situations in a respectful manner, in the present and in the future. Blaze's mother recognized this as well:

> *He's learning through watching their actions, they way they deal with it, right openly, they're not yelling at the kids. They're dealing with it appropriately, understandingly, taking each kid aside and listening to the kids.*

She spoke about how even when Blaze is not directly involved in a conflict, he learns vicariously by watching how the staff members deal with conflict suitably. Bandura (1997) notes that vicarious performance can help the observer feel more confident in their own abilities in a similar situation if they observe others experiencing success in a task.

Another parent describes her confidence in the staff:

> *It's nice to be able to send your child off to go into something where you know that it's always going to be positive. And if there are things that happen, then the people are skilled enough to take care of it.*

Similarly, Mickey's mother expressed:

> *I think they're really good with getting people to try things, and I think that's a really special skill. And like when they went out kayaking that day, they have to be ready to deal with all kinds of things that could occur, right? Like you know, he got splashed, it didn't bother him but it might have. And for some people, like what if their kayak tipped over...they really have to be able to deal with emergencies and things. And so they're taking a lot of responsibility on themselves.*

The staff are good at more than just conflict management, they actively try to find ways to help the youth challenge themselves in the activities they present. Blaze's mother describes:

> *They do a lot of work adapting any way they can to the kids that they deal with.*

She told several stories of the ways they adapted an activity to make it easier for him, but they also adapted activities to a higher skill level if they noticed he was doing well in a certain activity:

> *They took separate people and they went on each of [the different bicycle routes], depending on their ability. They'd do more of the trail rides for him because he was older, he really enjoyed that part.*

In another part of her interview, she told a story about how Blaze was involved in another horseback riding program (i.e., not at PTB) and that he had a lot of difficulty there, since the program was not adapted for him. In Groff and Kleiber's (2001) study, the majority of the youth revealed that it was not just the participation in sport, but rather involvement in activities that were designed specifically for people with disabilities that allowed them to be personally expressive and explore their identities. Similarly, Star Player's mother talked about how PTB staff make sure they are challenging her son even within the adapted activities:

> *When he's with Power To Be, of course he's got leaders and he's got direction, but they don't do it for him. They push him and make sure he's doing it and he's getting something out of it, and it's awesome. So you know, we've really seen him grow independently, his independence level. And his maturity level, of accepting responsibility for what he needs to be doing, so not counting on others to do it for him.*

Grotevant and Cooper (1985) have shown that the safety necessary to explore and discover the multi-faceted components of identity are most likely to occur in a context that provides both autonomy and connectedness. As Star Player's mother describes, the staff members in the Autism Spectrum Program support him while giving him opportunities to

explore his own abilities. When I asked what she thought contributed most to these changes, she responded:

> *I think it's the fact that the leaders that are running the program, they really sort of figure out what makes them tick and where their strengths are, and then they focus on the strengths.*

Support and modelling by interested and caring adults has been shown to be a protective factor that helps moderate the effects of risk and increase resilience to adversity (Green et al., 2000). In order to create an environment conducive for belonging and learning, staff also commented that their approach is intentional:

> *We use, accept all abilities, challenge yourself, and encourage others as our kind of three guiding principles.*

Overall, there was an overwhelming response for how helpful this approach from staff members was in positively impacting the lives of both youth and parents.

Opportunities

This theme relates to various chances that the Autism Spectrum Program afforded its participants to be involved in potentially growth-enhancing experiences. For example, Young Royalty thought of many of the activities he has done with PTB:

> *We would kayak, do gardening stuff, go on adventure therapy days, we'd go to Mary's Farm, kayak obviously, Mt. Washington, we'd snowboard there which is pretty fun.*

Opportunities for positive experiences during the transition from adolescence to adulthood has been found to be correlated with resilience (Werner, 1993).

Fun and unique activities. Engaging in fun and unique activities was mentioned by all participants but one. These included opportunities to try things that youth participants would typically not be given the chance to do in their daily lives, such as various water sports, farming, and camping. Leisure contexts provide unique opportunities to take on challenges, try new

experiences, explore varied characteristics and interests of the self, and develop competencies (Hood & Carruthers, 2007). Blaze talked about the opportunities that Power To Be has provided:

> *I haven't really changed that much. I mean, I have more connections, I do more stuff now. I don't do that much outside of Power To Be, but Power To Be does allow me to do the things that I normally would probably not be doing, haha!*

Similarly, Blinde and McClung (1997) noted that their participants commented on how the adaptive recreation program got them out of the house and gave them opportunities to do different things. Blaze also comments:

> *Kayaking is quite fun. It's very relaxing and it's pretty easy to do; I'm not too bad at rowing.*

Dane expressed that he could not choose his favourite activity, because there had been so many fun things to try:

> *My favourite part is that Power To Be brings me to rock climbing and to Gayley's Farm and Mary's Farm, and geocaching.*

Participants in a study by McAvoy et al. (2006) shared similar satisfactions of their adaptive canoeing and camping trips, stating that they had fun, were relaxed, and would hope to do those activities again.

One parent talked about how there were lots of exciting and new activity choices in the program, along with opportunities for growth even within activities her daughter has done in other settings:

> *Kayaking is new, rock climbing is new, camping on her own. Now she's camped in huts with other camps specifically for her needs. But this one, she actually went to Sidney Spit, she went twice with them and she was in her own tent. So really, she's becoming incredibly independent. Yeah, she's really grown.*

Mickey's mother describes how there are always varied and interesting activities:

> *This week they went to Fort Rodd Hill, and they were doing some gardening-type activities. Whatever it is there that they have planned, he's right in there. And he seems*

> *really enthusiastic about it. Next time's going to be the wall climbing. There are just opportunities to do things that he would never get the chance to do.*

When asked about what she thinks contribute to the changes in youth she observes, a PTB staff member reported:

> *I would definitely say the activities that we do. I think they're unique to a lot of different groups out there. No one's really offering the different types of program that we are. Within the actual activity of, kayaking, surfing, rock climbing, all those kinds of activities. But also the goals and the intentionality that we put behind it in terms of creating the space, the circles where they're setting up goals.*

The youth participants described the fun involved in interacting with nature and trying out the different activities they are offered at Power To Be. The program appeared to have allowed them to let go, have fun, and ignore the presence of what they were struggling with, which is what any young person would want. At the same time, they are encouraged to challenge themselves physically, mentally, and socially within the fun and adventurous activities. Fletcher and Hinkle (2002) comment that, although it may not appear that adventure activities are anything more than fun, the opportunities for connections between self and others and intrapersonal reflections can lead to the discovery of a different self, a self that is less conflicted and more capable at coping with personal reactions and the surrounding environment.

Werner (1993) identified that participation in extracurricular activities played an important part in the development of resilient outcomes for youngsters who were diagnosed with developmental disabilities. Larson (2000) contributes to a possible explanation for this, stating that programs that engage youth can help them to develop the skills and feelings of autonomy that may help them be motivated to put these positive qualities to good use. In the present study, it appears that the activities themselves provided youth with a sense of enjoyment, promoting willingness to take on new challenges, goal setting and achievement, soft (e.g., social, coping) and hard skills (e.g., outdoor), and a desire to give back to their communities. Larson argues that

initiative must emerge at least partly from experiences of stimulation and fascination that occur regularly within adolescents' lives. Thus, the role of PTB as a regular (weekly) and ongoing (continued participation opportunities beyond adolescent years) recreational experience is important in fostering wellness and sustainable positive effects on development.

Learning about and connecting with nature. All participants talked of this subtheme. Interacting with natural elements and animals through opportunities and activities are a major part of the Autism Spectrum Program. One staff member discussed this as being an important component of the changes they see in the youth:

> *I would also say the nature-based activities. Having them outside and in the environment whether it's hiking, geocaching, or kayaking, being in the nature setting. Taking them out of their typical contexts and their experience of inside with videogames or in the school or gym.*

She described this as helping them break away from some of their daily routine. She adds:

> *I think the indoor gym is great and being inside offers them new different type of challenge. But I think [it is] the calming sanctuary safe space of being outside – the fresh air, and the sunlight, or even the rain – that can all bring a different level releasing of anxiety, once they become familiar with the place or the activity. That initial anxiety that they might experience kind of melts away and makes them more excited. And every time they are taking something new away. And that bubble gets bigger in terms of wanting to explore. First, this is a new boat, and I'm sitting in it, and it's something I haven't done before. And once they get past that, they start to look around and say, okay what am I taking in? I'm seeing the birds and I'm seeing the nature, and I'm smelling the saltwater. And it gets bigger and bigger, like I want to go over there and explore that island over there or this side of the beach, or I want to play a game or practice my skills.*

The observations made by the staff member in the present study seem to have particular significance for these youth because their interactions not only provided enjoyment and excitement, but they also represented changes to move past the barriers they live with (e.g., anxiety, low tolerance for uncertainty etc.) to really engage with their natural surroundings. Similar comments were made by participants in the study by McAvoy et al. (2006). Participants

in that study talked about canoeing, seeing lots of animals, being in the sun and feeling the breeze.

Young Royalty described the unique experience to explore his surroundings in a different way:

> *It's just relaxing, you're hiking on the water, where you wouldn't be able to do on foot, and you get to see other places of the world that you wouldn't be able to see on foot.*

His experiences in kayaking and connecting with nature seemed to provide him with a sense of freedom. It allowed him to explore new physical territory, outside his previous description of being "locked up at home." He was also able to discover a new and relaxing way of experiencing the natural world that is not available through means such as walking. Wells and Evans (2003) found that living near nature in a rural environment helped to buffer the effects of stress and increase well-being among children, as compared to children who did not live near nature and experienced higher stress levels. The experience of being around natural environments appears to contribute to young people's coping with stress, and the Autism Spectrum Program provided a means to interact with nature regularly.

Participants talked about how the program helped them actively interact with and learn about nature. Blaze described his favourite activity, the underwater learning days:

> *We do programs, like there was this scuba diving thing, where these scuba divers brought out these things in a touch tank and we got to feel sea cucumbers, those are so strange! It was really cool.*

He added:

> *My very favourite type of crab in the area that we usually see is the decorator crab. It is a ridiculous thing that, instead of a shell, it has this flaky stuff on it like seaweed to blend into the surroundings.*

This example highlights the importance of nature and adventure in helping Blaze construct his identity – in his interview, he described how he was very interested in deep sea creatures, and

wanted to become a Marine Biologist. The program facilitated his connection to and deep interest in these animals and their adaptations. The activity also seemed to cultivate a passion for learning about nature. Dane also noted his appreciation for learning about nature at Power To Be:

> *A guy at Power To Be [taught me about all old man's beard]. When we go to do geocaching he told me about all these different types of moss and things that like trees to stick on.*

Louv (2008) comments that children can attune themselves to all kinds of natural knowledge if they are given appropriate developmental experiences to cultivate learning from nature. One participant's mother described how Power To Be exposes her to nature, which is very important to their family:

> *From childhood, we've always gone camping and she's experienced nature, and we've also lived on a mountain surrounded by forest. And she grew up with a pond and exploring. It's been really good being back in Victoria for all the services. But this component also keeps the nature aspect to her life.*

Another parent described the importance of the amount of time they spend outdoors at Power To Be:

> *He can run around, he can get fresh air, he can get exercise and he comes home tired which is a big bonus, hahaha. And he's happy! If he was inside a room sitting for two hours, he'd be extremely agitated, I would get him back, he'd be more frustrated. Um, he probably would have had a meltdown, and it wouldn't be a fun night.*

She contrasts this setting with how he is when he goes to counselling after school. She mentions later that even in group counselling settings where he is with other kids his age, he finds it very distracting and tiring to be in a small room indoors:

> *He loves nature, he loves being outside in the fresh air. I don't know what the exact thing is I'm still learning. But as soon as you put him in a room, he doesn't do as well. And I think it's more of an open space outside so he can relax a bit.*

This parent described the relaxing and enjoyable effect nature has on her son, feelings he rarely experiences in other settings. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) assert that people tend to prefer

environments in which they feel that they are functioning most effectively. In nature, people can explore nature, understand their relationships with it, and enjoy its restorative properties (Kaplan & Kaplan, 2003). The benefits of interacting with nature include experiencing feelings of peace and the cognitive relaxation to combat mental fatigue that may have been cultivated in a highly demanding environment such as school (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2008). Kaplan and Kaplan theorized that these effects are due to two processes: soft fascination and being away. Soft fascination refers to the involuntary attention (i.e., as opposed to directed attention) required to view natural scenes. Therefore, while attention is captured by aesthetically pleasing environments, it does not require cognitive strain and is experienced as relaxing. Being away refers to leaving the person's typical day to day environment, which is commonly full of daily hassles (e.g., school work) and stressors (e.g., noise pollution), in order to interact with natural environments.

Young Royalty talked about how much he appreciates learning about nature in the program:

> *I thank them every day for teaching and showing me what great things we still need to learn about nature and how to work with and respect nature the way nature wants us to, with kindness, acceptance, love and care, just like Power To Be*.

This supports Ungar et al.'s (2005) observation that being in nature can make us aware of our relationships with the natural environment as well as human relationships. Here, Young Royalty talks about qualities that would be beneficial in relationships with others. This may help transfer to the way he approaches some of his social interactions with peers. Ungar and colleagues note that personal growth and recreation within a natural context are some of the primary focuses of adventure-based therapies.

I would like to conclude this section with an excerpt from my research journal which describes some of my observations of one of the youth participants interacting with nature:

October 3, 2011

> *[The youth] was very nervous when he first arrived today. He was breathing heavily, looked distressed, and his mother mentioned that he might be thinking of this as a doctor's appointment, which she told me is quite scary for him. We took a quick walk around the building and returned to the office with some toys he could play with during the interview. We had some casual conversations and then went over the consent letter, but his mother noticed that he was very distracted by sights and sounds around the office. He decided that he would be more comfortable doing the interview outdoors. At first, I was concerned about the ethical implications of interviewing in a more public space, and was unsure whether the outdoor environment would be more distracting. Though there certainly were some distractions, it was really interesting to watch him become more at ease and expressive throughout the interview as he rolled around on the grass, picked up sticks, and chased squirrels. Moving from the small office to an open space outside gave me some insight into the difference between how this youth functions working in artificial conditions indoors versus being able to stretch explore outdoors as he spoke. This added to the youth's own descriptions of what it is like for him to be outside all day when he goes to Power To Be. I only wish I could have observed a session or two at Power To Be, to see this youth and others as they actually engage in the activities and connect with nature in a variety of outdoor settings. However, I am grateful that we took this risk to have our interview outdoors, because I have the sense it would not have been so rich if we stayed in the small office.*

Overcoming Challenges

This theme relates to some of the barriers and transitions that the youth participants challenged and/or overcame through their involvement in the Autism Spectrum Program.

Existing life challenges. All participants addressed this subtheme, describing how youth participants adapted to the emotional and social difficulties they struggled with in their lives before and during their involvement in the program. One participant with autism commented on some of the challenges he experiences:

> *Well with autism it's just not always easy because we can't really predict 100% what things are happening.*

When talking about his life before the program, Star Player described his difficulty in connecting with friends:

> *Sometimes it is hard to see my friends, when you want to do something with your friends that I know from school, like hang out with each other.*

One parent shared that her son experienced similar difficulties:

> *I think he started when he was 10 in the older program, and it was a good time for him to start. But he'd lost a lot of friends at one point, because of moving away and switching schools. And he had a hard time with that cause he wasn't able to see them every day.*

These above quotes illustrate some of the difficulties commonly experienced by special needs youth, particularly during transitional periods. However, as observed by the participants, the Autism Spectrum Program provided a setting that allowed them to interact and form social relationships with individuals that were all unique in their own ways, but shared aspects of life challenges. One parent commented:

> *He doesn't get the social cues, just understanding how it works to work with other kids, so that's a big challenge. And he doesn't have a lot of friends so it's a great place for him to go and accept all of him.*

And a youth added:

> *It was pretty neat with all the people who were supporting me!*

Masten and Coatsworth (1998) define competence as a pattern of effective adaptation, resulting from complex interactions between a young person and his or her environment. That is, a person's ability to be capable and successful depends on the provision of and approaching of opportunities in the environment. A child who has the potential to be capable may not be successful because of barriers to action, as can occur with members of an oppressed or marginalized group in a society. One mother discussed how the program helped her daughter cope after experiencing some hardship:

> *Giving a voice in the family is different than being given a voice outside of the family. When we were down east, things were very oppressive in a way... she would just be lost and she wouldn't get the help that she needed...So just that constant not being given the room to make choices like that, independent choices, her own preferences. It was very frustrating for her, whereas at Power To Be, she makes all the decisions. If she doesn't want to do something, she's not forced to do it*

She described their family's move as another difficult transition:

> *Coming into a new school and a city, whereas we were very rural before. So there was that transition, and that hurdle to overcome.*

This parent described her daughter's challenges, including restricted opportunities to make decisions and experience autonomy and self-efficacy, as well as the difficulties inherent in having to adjust to all of the different components involved in moving to a new city. She asserted that Power To Be helped in that transition by facilitating her daughter's experience of autonomy and acceptance for her needs and wishes. Bandura (1997) notes that social structures, such as school and community groups, can either impose constraints or provide resources for personal development.

A PTB staff member commented:

> *It's always fun and lots of games, and lots of trying to allow them to not be seen just as their disability, what any kid would want to do between these ages. And seeing them doing that, and actually forget maybe that they're struggling with something...where there's seemingly no barriers.*

Participants in Groff and Kleiber's (2001) study reported decreased awareness of disabilities in the adapted sports program they participated in. Overall, participants in the present study commented on the Autism Spectrum Program as being an important resource in helping the youth to cope with some of their life transitions and to make progress with or even overcome challenges in accessing social and recreational opportunities.

New challenges. Most participants referenced this subtheme. This theme discussed goal-setting and achievement with challenges encountered specially at Power To Be. Dane excitedly expressed:

> *I used to be scared that the boat would sink and I'm not anymore because Power To Be made me fight my fear and that really helped…They have these things that help to keep the boat sturdy when the waves were hard, but now I don't need them!*

The process facilitated by the staff appeared to assist Dane's progression into unfamiliar and daunting territories. Dane also wanted the readers of this study to know that taking "baby steps" is the key to overcoming fears. This highlights a consideration from McAvoy et al. (2006), who suggest that therapeutic recreation professionals help participants develop skills incrementally over time, starting with easier tasks for the participant's ability, and gradually working up to more difficult challenges as the participant learns basic skills and becomes more aware of their own competence. Dane's mother discussed another hurdle Dane overcame at the beginning of the program:

> *So we tried it with his worker to go get him settled in. And after about three times of that, they didn't need the worker, and he just jumped in. And it's been great.*

Experiences of success with past challenges can foster a belief that future obstacles can be overcome, which is associated with resilience (Werner, 1993). That finding was also supported by a study by Davidson (2007), who found that overcoming challenges in outdoor education enabled participants to feel more competent, feel positive about themselves, and be optimistic and excited about the future. Staff members recognize that some of the reasons youth come to Power To Be include challenging themselves, conquering fears, and expanding their limits of both what they are actually skilled to do and what they believe they can do. For example, a PTB staff member explained a concept they talk about a lot in the program:

> *Another big one is this concept of growth-grown. We intentionally are trying to challenge the youth in terms of their day-to-day routines, and provide them with opportunities that are supported in a group with staff and volunteers. Intentionally push them a little bit so that they can try new things, hopefully be successful in those things, hopefully do more of those things, and transfer that to other aspects of their life. So in trying out kayaking and trying out cycling, and talking in a group, and taking leadership roles, and overcoming group experiential activities, we try to translate that and transfer that knowledge into other areas. It's a very intentional use of challenge. And that unease that they might feel, we try to normalize and say, "that's your growth-grown zone, you want to be challenged at Power To Be."*

A story that reflected this concept was told by another the staff member. She described a youth who was initially hesitant to kayak. When he finally decided to try, he flipped his kayak, and was subsequently scared to try it again. With encouragement from others and by pushing himself, he got back in and tried it. The staff member reported that the youth now loves kayaking so much, his mom is raising money to get him his own kayak so that he can kayak on his own time, outside of the program. She recalled seeing him laugh about the experience afterwards, and she hypothesizes that he was able to overcome this difficult situation because he had it within the safety of a supportive environment. These findings are supported by studies that have identified that perceiving social support in an adventure group experience was related to persistence and the growth of resilience despite challenging conditions experienced both inside and outside the program (Ewert & Yoshino, 2011; Neill & Dias, 2001).

Regardless of the novel and challenging nature of adventurous activities, participants did not speak of negative experiences. What they spoke of instead were the experiences of overcoming personal challenges and being supported by gradual and individualized plans. The opportunities to experience success in coping with the difficulties they experienced appeared to support the development of positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience.

Overall Well-Being

This theme relates to how the Autism Spectrum Program contributed to the health, happiness and overall wellness and functioning in multiple domains of the youth's personal, family, and community lives.

Experiencing positive emotions and mood states. All participants talked about how the program helped elicit positive emotions and moods from the youth, such as happiness, pride, relaxation, and excitement. Young Royalty described how having the structure at Power To Be has helped his energy and positive mood, and how having his needs met has affected him:

> *What I need is rules, boundaries and limitations, and before Power To Be I wasn't getting that. But with Power To Be I've been getting that. And that I think has been making my energy more like confident, relaxed, easy going happy, extremely happy.*

Similarly, Werner and Smith (1982) observed that resilient youth demonstrated an appreciation for some structure in their lives. Young Royalty went on to state enthusiastically:

> *Where I've broken the happiness meter!*

A PTB staff member describes the staff's intention:

> *Providing all these opportunities for them to be engaged and enthused and have some sense of enchantment about life.*

Anderson et al., (1997) found that well-being, in terms of attitude and enjoyment of the program, was increased in adults with and without disabilities after participating in a canoe program. Blaze reflects this in his description of how he feels while at the program:

> *It's exciting, it's fun, and sometimes it's even very interesting.*

Hood and Carruthers (2007) note that people learn best when they are enjoying the process, since positive emotions can foster an attitude supportive of attempting new challenges and subsequently expand personal capacities. Blaze added:

> *It's after school so you can kind of let go, and just kind of, have fun and just get rid of some of the stress during the day.*

Blaze has fun and experiences catharsis when he is able to go to PTB. Participation in adapted sports programming has been shown to facilitate emotional expression of youth with disabilities (Groff & Kleiber, 2001). Specifically, youth in that study talked about experiencing fun, excitement, happiness, pride, and the opportunity to overcome the boredom by getting out of the house to do something active. One parent in the present study also spoke about the change she noticed in her son's emotional responses across settings:

> *I would say in the younger years when he first started Power To Be, he was reluctant because he didn't have the expertise that he finds that he has now. But in gym class he does attempt as much as he can, anything that the teacher asks him to do, although sometimes he does fail very badly. And sometimes he gets to the point where he's just in tears and he just can't handle it. But I haven't heard that he's been in tears at Power To Be. Or been that frustrated. Because most of the kids in the Power To Be have different abilities and they have similar abilities as he has. Might not be as coordinated as, I guess you could say 'the norm' of kids. But he hasn't come home frustrated to that extent. He's come home happy and enjoyed the time and says it was great!*

Thus, it appears that it is not just getting active that helps this participant's mood, but it is also the presence of an adapted environment that is appropriate for and supportive of his abilities. In addition, having a more similar peer group is very helpful, similar to results found in by Groff and Kleiber, who found that social interactions with other individuals with disabilities helped expand the reference groups that these youth could use as a source of information during the identity formation process. That is, rather than comparing themselves to typical youth who may not require accommodations, the Autism Spectrum Program allowed youth to consider that other youth need certain adaptations to facilitate success. Another parent discussed how positive her daughter is upon coming home after PTB:

> *She's tired. But it's a good tired. Very content, very pleased with what she was able to accomplish. Speaks about the other participants in a very positive way. That's another thing too. The person who comes home from school is very different than the person that*

> *comes home from a Power To Be event. School, there's lots of drama and all that carryon. But from Power To Be, it's always very positive, you know, "we did this, we did that."*

These parents describe excitement and happiness – the positive mood they observe in their children after PTB experiences. This would appear to contribute to the youths' subjective experience of quality of life and holistic well-being that involves physical, social, psychological, and emotional health. Positive experiences in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which several of these youth navigated while in the Autism Spectrum Program, has been shown to be a factor implicated in the development of resilience to adversity (Werner, 1993).

Well-being and functioning of family and community. The participants stated that the impacts of the program extended to the family and community. This subtheme also includes descriptions of how Power To Be works interdependently with other community organizations and families to create the successful program it is today. Finally, it contains a few comments that they youth shared about their appreciation for the program as a while. One parent in the present study talks about the many effects the program has on her daughter and the family as a whole:

> *Because she wasn't having that interaction in the community, it's taken a burden off our shoulders that, okay now she's actually becoming an active participant in her community. She's become very independent, and because there's a crossover between the groups, she now has made friends and they will go and do other activities outside of Power To Be in the other group. So there's friendships being formed. Which is really good for the family because now, it becomes less about us controlling what she does. You know, "you need to do this, you need to do that". A lot of the emails still come to me, and I'll say this is what's going on, and she'll say "I want to go to that one but I don't want to go to that one." And that's great because she's making that decision on her own. I'm not saying, "well this is what you have to do." So it takes that parenting role, takes a little bit of the backseat. Which is great because that's the goal. She's an adult now, and you need to take that step back. And of course it's a little harder with a child who has different needs, but that's the ultimate goal, to give them their legs. You've raised them to make good decisions, you just need the community to support that, and this is what Power To Be does.*

The parent above described how the PTB experience facilitated her daughter to become more independent by making her own decisions about how she wants to participate. Blinde and McClung (1997) affirm that getting out into the community can represent the foundation on which future physical and social growth can occur, since the person has more opportunities to socialize and try activities that are not as readily available within their school or home environments. Mickey's mother talked about how Mickey's involvement in the program has also allowed her to step back as a parent:

> *It takes some of the pressure off us feeling like we have to do everything, cause like we've only got a limited amount of time and energy. We would just never get around to doing those kinds of things. My husband used to take him scouting when he was younger. So they did lots of outdoor activities, so he is used to doing that. But now we're too busy and he just doesn't have the equipment, and you know it's just too hard to organize. And one-on-one it's just not the same either, because you don't have group interaction, which is what he really needs, like he spends enough time with us as it is! So to be out with other people his age and stuff is like really important.*

These parents agreed that the PTB program offers them some respite from the ongoing role as a parent and caregiver. Many therapeutic recreation studies appear to be concerned solely with individual functioning, disregarding the effects that extend to the family. A few studies (Mactavish & Schleien, 1998; Zabriskie et al., 2005) have found that therapeutic recreation programs enhanced quality of family life, but these authors researched programs that included families in the activities themselves. While these inclusive contexts appeared to be important in the development of positive quality of life for families in those studies, a parent in the present study reported that this is not what she would want of the Autism Spectrum Program:

> *As far as interacting with the other families, not with this group, because she needs that separation. We get that in other groups, meeting with other parents. This is really for her....we all need our own thing, and this is her own thing. And if I start making friends with some of the other parents then it ceases to be about her because all of a sudden, if I become really good friends with someone, then I'm over at someone's house, and it ceases to be her complete thing to do.*

Therefore, this study contributes the novel finding that a youth-centered program can impact family well-being without actually including family members in the program.

Below in an entry into my research journal as I reflected on why I wanted to do this research:

> *December 7, 2011*
>
> *One reason I really wanted to include narrative elements in this thesis is because I was really interested in the idea of (re)writing identity. I've worked with many youth and families with autism, and a consistent theme I keep seeing and hearing is that of burnout. Yes, burnout from the time and energy consuming efforts of getting their kids into and around programs to help them adjust. But burnout and frustration mainly came from the sigma attached to autism and mental health, and the fact that many existing programs that were supposed to help, "just don't get it." I saw lots of families and youth frustrated and stuck in problem-saturated stores, in the form of daily meltdowns and ☹'s written down in the kids' school daybooks by classroom aides. In hearing about what PTB did, I had a sense that these stories could be changed.*

The above journal entry relates to overall well-being and family impact and addresses the effect that stigma and inappropriate programs can have on youth and families living with autism and other special needs. Parents in a study conducted by Woodgate, Ateah and Secco, (2008) expressed feeling isolated because of their perception of society not understanding what it was like to care for a child with autism. They reported that the system of child-related services and institutions led most to their feelings of isolation and frustration, with poor accessibility, unsupportive professionals with little training in autism, and inadequate or inappropriate resources necessary for helping their children develop positively. Even within recreation programming, parents in a study by Scholl et al. (2003) stated that there are many programs and staff that "just don't get it" (p. 51); that is, they do not have the compassion or willingness to understand disability. While parents in these studies reported feelings of hopelessness, defeat, isolation and frustration, the parents I interviewed in the present study spoke of their gratefulness for Power To Be. Star Player's mother comments:

> *I find that we're really fortunate that we've been able to connect with Power To Be. And obviously Power To Be has made a connection through the Teen Community Connections program which is also a branch from Community Living Victoria. All of these different groups sort of work together and recognize what the needs are. There's really not a lot programs out there for kids that are in transition.... So when you have opportunities like at Power To Be or whatever it may be, it gives the youth that are especially in transition in high school, an opportunity to interact with other peers who are in a similar age group, or that have been through school.*

She also commented after her interview that all of these organizations contribute to his storyline of growth over the years.

A PTB staff member talked about the interdependence among PTB and the youth, families, and other community organizations that work with them collaboratively:

> *I think there's a lot of great people that just believe in Power To Be, whether it's the staff or families or participants. They've trusted in this organization, and it's because it's proven itself to be a worthy place to put their trust into. And families see it in more than just a recreation opportunity; they do really feel that it's a community. Because their kids come home so happy from their experiences that they've had with us. And then that lightens the load off the parents. And community groups don't have to try to provide just a recreation opportunity, they can seek us out and contract our services. All the stakeholders that are involved can contribute and support this organization in different ways. Families come out and speak at our events and that in turn helps to fundraise and bring money in the door so we can run more programs. So we all definitely rely on the support from everyone.*

This quote discusses how PTB depends on the community in a variety of different ways. This represents interdependence because the organization can use those resources to then provide programming that supports youth, their families, and others in the community. This interchange of resources can promote resilience. Other therapeutic adventure programs have been shown to promote youth resilience; For example, the presence of neighbourhood resources was found to be a protective factor that buffered the risk among low-income minority youth who participated in an adventure-based ropes course (Green et al., 2001). The present study contributes to a more holistic understanding of resilience as a process that mutually benefits participants and their communities.

One youth participant highlighted how Power To Be is not simply an event, but is truly an important part of his life. When I asked this youth how often he participates, he responded:

> *Whenever I can; I'm always open for Power To Be. And yeah, usually it's done first and then my other schedules. So I have Power To Be, and then I schedule around that. Yeah it's like basically my life cause, like I said before they're like my family*.

In contrast to some of the other programs evaluated in the adaptive recreation and outdoor adventure literature, the Autism Spectrum Program does not simply offer a chance to participate in its program once, for a few weeks or a few days of one's life. Rather, participants are encouraged to continue to come back for several years if they wish, and to contribute by being leaders, mentors, and volunteers.

At the end of his interview, Dane adds:

> *Thank you so much Carinna and Megan and everyone there like the volunteers, and Dave, and Brent, and all the people that I can't remember their names. I just want to thank you for always being there.*

Dane's mom succinctly sums up:

> *It's about time that something like this is out there.*

Summary

High-risk youth in a study by Ungar and Teram (2000) constructed mental health as being centered on the human needs of personal power and social acceptance. The youth in that study observed that social institutions such as communities and helping professions tend to disagree with this description of mental health, resulting in a lack of opportunities given to these youth to experience feelings of control and personal acceptance. In contrast, participants in the present study identified that Power To Be gave the youth opportunities to feel accepted within an inclusive peer group, to feel personal success, and subsequently to recognize their own self-efficacy. The impact of these experiences appeared to affect youth's ability to adapt to some of

the challenges in their lives, experience positive emotions and well-being, recognize and develop personal skills, strengths, and selves, and contribute to the overall well-being and functioning of their families and communities. It appeared that the youth in the present study felt the personal and social empowerment and acceptance that the youth in Ungar and Teram's study identified as important to feel mentally healthy.

Mitten (1999) describes the necessary elements of a community-based therapeutic adventure program – it has to involve working within nature in a respectful manner, safe and constructive leadership centered on skill development rather than task mastery, an environment that is supportive of individual differences and needs, collaboration with others within the group and between other community groups, a focus on strengths and respect for individual contributions, and fostering individualized goal setting and accomplishment to help all participants to experience personal growth. The present study found support for all of these elements representing youths' and parents' experiences within Power To Be's Autism Spectrum Program.

In this chapter, I have presented the results of the across participant-group analysis, with links to relevant literature. The themes and subthemes described emphasize the similarities among all thirteen participants' interviews. Participants described how the program helped the development of the youths' self-concepts and skills. Two major themes were the inclusive social environment and supportive staff that facilitated feelings of belonging and encouragement. Participants spoke of the importance of opportunities for the youth to overcome challenges and participate in fun and unique activities, including a chance to connect with nature. Finally, the participants recognized how important the program was in contributing to their overall well-being and holistic functioning within their community. These findings reflect much of what has

been previously reported in existing research about adaptive adventure therapy, resilience, and identity development. Like Ungar and colleagues' (2008) findings, there was no single pattern of which factors specifically helped these youth adapt and grow, evidenced by the fact that not all participants commented within each subtheme. Rather, the internal factors (e.g., self-concept, skills, well-being) and external factors (e.g., support from peers and caring adults, opportunities to explore) do not operate in isolation, but rather work together to help youth develop resilience despite significant life challenges.

Chapter VI – Summary, Implications and Final Reflections

"Each time we learn how to join together and mend our ties with our own little place called home, we link our souls with the soils that sustain us, and nurture the network that is healing the Earth" (Shapiro, 1995, p.239)

In this final chapter, I briefly summarize the major findings of the present study. I then discuss the implications of my findings for theory and research. Implications for practice in the fields of counselling and adaptive adventure programming are presented, as well as some limitations of the study. The implications discussed may not transfer across genders, since no female youth participated in the present study, as will be discussed in the boundaries of the study. I have woven suggestions for future research into these discussions and also identify how the results of the present study could be extended to other contexts. I conclude with some final reflections on the process of completing this study, and how it has influenced my growth as a researcher and a practitioner.

Summary of Findings

The present study adds to the body of research demonstrating the positive effects of adaptive adventure programming for youth living with autism, developmental disabilities, and mental health challenges. The case study methodology allowed me to draw data from a number of different sources, including reflections in my research journal, perspectives from the youth participants, parents, and staff, as well as information gained through informal meetings with staff and reading online documents. Using Rhodes' (2000) *ghostwriting* allowed me to share the individual youths' stories of participation in the program, while acknowledging my role in organizing and presenting the information. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that the Autism Spectrum Program delivered at Power To Be provided these youth with access to opportunities, positive challenges, and supports that enhanced their development, well-being, and

resilience despite obstacles. In the context of the Autism Spectrum Program, the activities, the setting, and the staff have interacted to support these youth to achieve significant developmental, physical, and social goals. These results are consistent with other studies in the literature by Ungar et al., (2008) and Werner (2003) who have also found that providing youth with culturally appropriate opportunities to express their identities, develop personal power and efficacy, and build relationships with supportive adults and peers can help them navigate effectively toward health resources and resilience. As Hobfoll (2002) notes, this resource development becomes a positive spiral, such that those with internal and external resources are more likely to continue seeking support in future times of stress. A discussion of resilience as *process* (Rutter, 1987), in contrast to an *outcome,* is more applicable to the present study because the youth interviewed were not finished the program nor finished developing as adolescents and young adults. Identity, like resilience, represents an ongoing process of identification, imitation, and self-awareness though personal and vicarious experience as well as social evaluations from others (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Raskin, 2002). What can be seen at this point are descriptions from the youth, parents, and staff members providing numerous specific examples that illustrate how the PTB program has enabled these youth to overcome some of their functional limitations and experience positive success and acceptance through personal, social, and physical challenges.

With respect to the themes and subthemes identified, youth participants in this study described their development on several aspects related to self-concept, including increased self-efficacy and self esteem. They described how the setting and outdoor activities fostered existing strengths, provided opportunities to explore identity alternatives, and promoted the discovery of independent and interdependent selves. The parents and staff interviewed also noted developments in these self-concept domains. The inclusive social environment facilitated by

program staff was associated with helping the youth to discover their own strengths, interests, and identities, and to build new skills in outdoor activities, coping and stress management, and social proficiency – all while cultivating a sense of belonging. The program's structured outings gave ample opportunities for varied and enjoyable activities. Youth engaged in outdoor adventure sports such as kayaking and camping, in addition to learning about and connecting with the animals and other natural elements in their surrounding environments. Participants also described many examples of how the youth set goals and overcame challenges that affected their lives both inside and outside of Power To Be, including goals and obstacles they might encounter in the future. Youth described experiencing a range of positive emotions and mood states including happiness and relaxation; parents and staff also observed these positive emotions and moods during and after activities. Youth participants were able to explain how their involvement in the PTB program influenced their own well-being. Parents and staff members observed how the program worked interdependently with families and other community organizations to reinforce and extend this positive impact.

Most of the 7 themes and 14 subthemes were consistent with other literature related to the development of resilience and self-concept among youth with disabilities and other life challenges. However, there was more emphasis on two aspects related to the program that do not appear to have been previously highlighted or explored in depth – the importance of social inclusivity and interdependence. Participants talked about social inclusion and interdependent processes that were associated with every subtheme identified. The social and collaborative nature of the program appeared to be significant in helping the youth to feel important and accepted as they are, but also supported and encouraged to explore their potentials. This will be elaborated upon further in the implications section.

Despite the many commonalities across themes and subthemes, it is important to note that each participant had a unique and different view about how the different aspects of the program related to their own development and change. Clearly, each youth attached particular and somewhat different meanings to the same events. This was especially evident to me as I listened to each participant's description of their experiences within the program, and heard the passion in their voices as they talked about the most significant impacts for them. This was highlighted in the presentation of the youth participants' ghostwritten stories, and indicated that the qualitative methods I employed were effective for tapping into participants' unique and rich worldviews.

Implications for Theory

Findings of the present study have several important theoretical implications that relate to social constructionist and constructivist understandings of self-concept and resilience among youth living with disabilities. Social constructionism and constructivism were appropriate theoretical frameworks for the present study, as they helped to frame the individual-cognitive and social, historical, and cultural forces that impact identity development among adolescents living with disabilities. Constructivism helped to describe how youth discovered aspects of themselves and made meaning of their personal experiences at Power To Be. For example, many youth reflected on the skills and alternative identities that they acknowledged arose from their participation in the program. This supports descriptions in the therapeutic recreation literature that illustrate how recreational pursuits can influence adolescents' self-perceptions as they identify with others (e.g., athletes) who participate in certain adventurous activities, enhance beliefs about their personal abilities, and increase self-confidence to try new activities (Blinde & McClung, 1997; Groff & Kleiber, 2001). Similar to findings by Blinde and McClung, these self-perceptions allowed youth to challenge and rise above historical descriptions that emphasize

disability rather than ability, skills and strengths. Additionally, youths' identities were socially constructed by a variety of forces. For example, the socially produced descriptions of strength, growth and resilience as noted by parents and staff members, and the interdependent and inclusive culture at PTB, contributed to the ways that youth described, understood, and appreciated themselves. Furthermore, youth appeared to be able to construct and reconstruct their selves, which Gergen (1991) notes can happen as individuals interact with multiple contexts. Although several studies describe disability identity development consistent with the lens of constructivism (see Blinde & McClung; Groff & Kleiber; Zabriskie et al., 2005), this study adds to the lack of therapeutic recreation studies that consider how the social processes involved in identity development interact to help young people living with disabilities to establish positive self-concepts. The present study supports a relational view of the self.

Steinberg and Morris (2001) observe that youth development researchers have been gradually focussing less on individual psychosocial characteristics of the young person and increasingly on the contextual influences on behaviour and positive functioning. Ungar (2008) adds that resilience theory shifts focus from disorder and disability to individual characteristics and social processes that promote young peoples' healthy adaptation despite risk. Resilience is context-specific and arises from complex interactions between a child and his or her environment. Consistent with social constructionism, the perspectives of youth, parents and staff of the present study contribute to the co-constructed understanding of resilience. Experiences shared by participants appear to support the resilience definition as proposed by Ungar et al. (2008). That is, a description of resilience as the process by which youth with developmental and mental health challenges, their families, and resources within the community can collaboratively help the youth progress towards healthy mental and social adjustment, despite the barriers and

challenges they may live with. This highlights the role of interdependence among youth, families and their communities in promote resilience, supporting the African proverb, "*it takes a village to raise a child*." This study contributes to the dearth of studies in the therapeutic recreation literature that emphasize the importance of facilitating interdependence among young people living with disabilities and their communities.

Implications for Research

The use of qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study. The case study approach was helpful in studying this group because it allowed for the inclusion of multiple people, perspectives, and texts in providing a detailed depiction of the impacts of the Power To Be Autism Spectrum program. The study demonstrated that semi-structured interviewing can be used successfully with youth who have a variety of developmental and mental health challenges. Using a semi-structured interview design provided some organization to help youth structure their experiences over time, while permitting youth to talk about the aspects they saw as most important. Additionally, the inclusion of Rhodes' (2000) *ghostwriting* approach facilitated the presentation of the unique worldviews each youth participant held. Using this narrative presentation provided a vehicle for the youth to share their Power To Be experiences, even though lengthy narratives could not be shared by many of the youth due to, in part, some expressive language difficulties.

Including perspectives from parents and staff members helped the co-construction of these youths' stories, since these adults witnessed effects on the youth during program activities, and at home after programming. Future studies might include the perspectives of siblings, friends, or teachers to create an even fuller description of identity development in multiple contexts, since identity development is a socially co-constructed process. Also, this study could

be extended to include younger children and older adults who have participated in adaptive recreation programming. Future studies could also use non-verbal methods, such as drawing or photo elicitation of stories relating to the youth's adventure therapy experiences. One participant showed me software on his portable computer tablet that used a text-to-speech format to permit non-verbal youth who can express language manually (i.e., by writing and typing) to communicate verbally. Use of this and other adapted forms of the interview process such as story writing could help give non-verbal youth an opportunity to share their voices in the research.

Findings of the present study provided evidence that community-based programming for youth with disabilities can play an important role in the positive adaptation and capacity for resilience that can be shared amongst youth, their families and their communities. Zabriskie et al. (2005) note that these outcomes play a significant role in helping to minimize the disparities between those with and without disabilities, in terms of opportunities to experience social inclusion, adventure, positive identities, and wellness. Supporting these positive adaptations may have important implications for reducing the impact of some of the social stigma and vulnerability to mental illness experienced by youth with disabilities.

Although the Power To Be Autism Spectrum Program has a particular focus and delivery, the experiences shared and themes identified in this study are to some extent transferable to the experiences of any youth participating in an outdoor program that combines supportive challenge, group membership, community engagement and service, opportunities for leadership, goal setting, adaptive recreation and adventure, and connection with nature. This program was specifically geared towards youth living with developmental disabilities and mental health issues; nonetheless, a nature-based adventure program may foster similar changes among any youth, since adolescence is full of challenging life transitions regardless of pre-existing

difficulties. Still, further investigation is required to explore the importance of aspects such as family well-being, inclusive communities and interdependence, and identity development in therapeutic recreation programming.

The present study contributed the finding that family members need not necessarily participate in the adventure program itself in order to be positively impacted by the program. For instance, the benefits of the youth participation in the Autism Spectrum Program, such as positive moods and interdependent qualities, extended to support the well-being and functioning of the family and community as a whole. Because existing studies (i.e., Mactavish & Schleien, 1998; Zabriskie et al., 2005) that have explored the effect of family quality of life were based on programs that included participation from families, more research is necessary to explore how non-integrated programming might influence others who surround the participants.

The importance of the ongoing community of support is a fairly novel finding. Other studies such as Blinde and McClung (1997), McAvoy et al. (2006), and Zabriskie et al. (2005) have recognized social settings in recreation experiences to be important. However, the majority of participants in these studies participated in the programming anywhere from three days to ten weeks in length. It was unclear whether impacts of these programs would have been able to foster long-term developmental processes, such as more established feelings of belongingness and social selves. The present study addressed a program that aims to provide an ongoing community of support for participants, through ongoing opportunities to participate as a youth participant or a mentor/volunteer in the Autism Spectrum program or other adaptive recreation opportunities. Some of the participants of the present study have been around for approximately 5 years – almost since the beginning of the program – and stated that they would be interested in continuing their involvement for the foreseeable future. More research is needed to examine

other youth-serving programs that take a similar approach in establishing longer-term involvement with youth.

The role of interdependence in therapeutic recreation communities has received little investigation. Interdependence has been discussed in a theoretical manner by several authors such as Josselson (1988), Markus & Kitayama (1991) and Condeluci (1995). To my knowledge, only one study has mentioned interdependence as being an important aspect of therapeutic recreation programming in promoting well-being (Devine, 2004). However, that study was based on integrated recreation settings in which there was only one person with a disability among all of the rest of the non-disabled participants. The present study was able to expand on this discussion by presenting the interdependence that exists among youth, families and the community at large. Staff members and parents commented on how they each rely on each other in order to continue to provide appropriate and meaningful resources to support youth growth. Furthermore, youth in the present study displayed interdependence by giving back to their communities, through volunteering and helping out at Power To Be or at other organizations in the Victoria community.

Being dependent on one another does not signify helplessness, which is how disability has been viewed historically. However, interdependence signifies that the person is willing to have an effect on others and be sensitive, responsive, and engaged with the needs of others in order to promote collective well-being (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). More research would be beneficial to contribute further to understanding how interdependence can help promote growth, adaptation and resilience not only within the youth themselves, but also among youth, families and communities as a whole.

Finally, this study explored a therapeutic recreation program that intentionally included interaction with nature and environment as a goal for its' youth participants. Participants in the present study discussed connecting with animals and the natural elements, and explained how it impacted their moods, abilities to function and enthusiasm in learning. Since participants commented on their interactions with nature and their interest in learning about nature, it would also be interesting to explore longitudinally how youths' relationships to nature change over time through involvement in a nature-based adventure program. Although some participants touched on interdependence with the environment when discussing leadership opportunities, it would be interesting to explore explicitly whether youth who have opportunities to connect with nature develop environmental identities (i.e., a belief that the environment is an important part of the self; Clayton, 2003).

Implications for Practice

This study has identified several areas of youth development and components of community programming that are important to consider when creating and delivering programs to support positive youth development and resilience. Murray (2003) suggests that promoting agency, self-esteem, problem solving skills, and building relationships are among the most important targets for intervention in supporting the transitions of youth with disabilities. Recognizing the needs that are particularly prominent in the adolescent years, such as exercising autonomy, acquiring competence, and being around positive peers and adults, may help provide direction for structuring youth-serving programs. Counsellors and youth care workers might consider breaking away from an individual-therapy modality and moving towards building communities of inclusion for these youth. Promoting community-based interventions for youth is important because it is can be preventative, can be introduced at any age, and can act in

conjunction with other protective factors that help youth and their communities experience resilience (Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). McAvoy et al. (2006) suggest that therapeutic recreation professionals create a positive and cooperative culture that emphasizes respectful communication and acceptance of all abilities.

Similarly noted by Harper and Scott (2006), participants of the present study recognized that the nature based program offered them some unique learning experiences. It is important to acknowledge that Power To Be, through extensive fundraising efforts and support from community partners, is able to provide a lot of physical support from staff and volunteers to assist the young people in the Autism Spectrum Program. Although not all settings may be able to devote this amount of resources to facilitating young people's development, the present study highlighted the importance of facilitating an accepting and supportive context, permitting youth to set individualized goals and experience small successes, navigate adventure and interact with nature, experience positive emotions, and contribute to their communities. If other settings do not have a local community-based therapeutic recreation program to refer clients to, they may be able to develop some opportunities for youth to experience some of these goals. For example, a school-based environment may consider creating a class or a club for students with disabilities that allows them to explore some of the natural settings around the school and volunteer for the community. Kaplan and Kaplan (2003) add that extended periods of time in natural settings are not required, but rather people can experience the benefits of nature with at least some amount of regular contact.

In the present study, supportive staff and an inclusive social environment highlighted the importance of doing these activities within a community of supportive peers and adults. Some authors (e.g., Hobfoll, 2002; House & Paisley, 2008) focus so much on promoting individual

abilities and independent functioning that they may ignore the fact that adolescents with disabilities, like any adolescent, have social needs that are crucial in this period of transition and growth (Howlin, 2003). Although there are attempts for inclusion in school settings, participants in the present study described having a difficult time connecting with others outside of Power To Be. However, just one hour per week where the youth could be around others with disabilities and "be themselves" without being judged or criticized noticeably impacted their feelings of belonging and ability to develop positive self-concepts. Furthermore, the opportunity to come back to participate term after term, either as a participant or volunteer, provided youth with an ongoing community of support where they could continue to explore and understand themselves and grow. Some of the youth participants of the present study had already graduated high school, and they and/or their parents commented that there were few or no opportunities outside of school to feel included and participate more fully in society. Therefore, the creation of an ongoing accepting social environment appears to be a significant element in programming that aims to promote healthy development of the self. Zabriskie et al. (2005) suggest that community-based therapeutic programs provide longer and more consistent programming to promote more long-term benefits of recreation programming.

Building identity is not an event, but a process of ongoing self-discovery, connecting with other beings, dealing with adversities and frustrations, and achieving goals. This study has illuminated several contextual features of identity development. By adopting a relational and contextualized concept of self – a self that includes social, community, and nature-based influences as important to development – counsellors can attend to a broader awareness of clients' potential goals and needs. This can increase sensitivity to culture and differences in worldview. Problems in identity, rather than being deficits in personal attributes and capabilities,

can be viewed as constrained opportunities to connect with others in a variety of social and environmental realms. Fletcher and Hinkle (2002) comment that one opportunity to explore different aspects of the self may be through adventure activities. These opportunities can help the individual to form meaningful connections with others and discover versions of the self, although it may not appear that adventure activities are anything more than fun, the opportunities enabling the person to feel more capable, worthy, and interconnected with beings around them.

Setting goals and overcoming challenges in the Power To Be program appeared to promote the development of a positive self-concept through boosting self-efficacy, self-worth, and the discovery of identity alternatives. Helping youth with challenges learn to set goals and sub-goals and create plans to meet those goals can help empower them to build on small successes, enhance self-efficacy, and transfer those experiences of success to other settings. This life skill has the potential to help these youth adapt to a variety of adolescent and young adult transitions, such as leaving school and obtaining a job or volunteer position. The present study also illuminated the importance of individualizing steps to achieve goals according to the participant's particular abilities, comfort levels, and goals. Understanding what aspects of adventure programming actually help to create change for participants will lead to more effective programs and better use of wilderness and adventure as therapeutic (Anderson et al., 1997).

The youth, parents and staff members all described positive experiences in terms of bringing the youth out into the community to help restore parks and gardens, connect with animals and work on a farm, and enjoy nature while hiking. These may be accessible and cost-effective activities to help youth develop skills, explore identity alternatives, and connect with others in a meaningful way. Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown and Leger (2006) contend that nature is an under-utilized public resource in terms of human health and well-being, and that

using parks and natural areas can offer affordable and accessible resources to preventing problems and restoring mental health for many people in modern society. This could be particularly relevant when practiced in a supportive and inclusive community, as was presented in the present study. Community-based experiences where youth can connect with nature may also give insight into potential leadership, volunteer, and work-related possibilities to help youth develop a positive sense of self as contributing members of their communities. All people, regardless of ability or disability, both desire and deserve opportunities to experience pleasure, contribute to their communities, and enjoy equality in relationships (Carruthers & Hood, 2007). Building our community resources and cultivating the capacities of youth with disabilities to connect with nature and engage in adventure can contribute to helping those with significant life challenges discover their multiple selves and enjoy a life of meaning.

Boundaries of the Study

There are interpretive boundaries around, or limitations to, the present study, which may have affected data quality and outcomes. As with all qualitative research, findings from the present study are not generalizable. Qualitative research is explicitly anti-positivist, and a black-and-white concept of generalizability is not appropriate (Mason, 2002). *Generalizability*, in a qualitative sense, involves the extent to which a researcher can make wider claims on the basis of the analysis of a study, rather than simply stating that one study is entirely distinctive (Mason, 2002). The findings of this study can be used to inform research and practice with other children/youth, parents, and workers in similar programs, as was discussed in the implications sections presented previously. However, it is important to note that the PTB Autism Spectrum Program is a particular and specialized program. While it is similar to other adaptive recreation

programs in a number of aspects, there may be unique program and/or staff impacts that specifically affected these participants' experiences.

As a counsellor, I know that trust and openness, particularly on sensitive topics, usually take time to develop. While I spoke over the phone or via email with participants when setting up the interview, and made an effort to engage in casual conversations when they arrived, I had only just met all of my youth participants immediately before the interview, and thus, there was limited opportunity to develop rapport. Some of the youth seemed somewhat nervous or unsure at times, which may have been related to being interviewed by a stranger, to the topic, or to individual characteristics. This may have limited the amount of information they shared with me. Multiple interviews over time may yield more comprehensive and detailed data. Another possibility would be to engage in the program as a participant-observer prior to interviews. In this way, the researcher would be a familiar face and presence to the youth. Davidson (2007) commented that this observation process was beneficial in developing rapport with participants she later interviewed. Future studies might benefit from using observational methods for increased triangulation of data (e.g., seeing if the effects of the program noted by youth, parents, and staff are apparent by watching the youth in action), or as a method of gaining information about some of the less verbal youth in a program.

Before the study began, I had not anticipated that all of the youth would be continuing in the Autism Spectrum program year after year. Therefore, to explore how they had changed over time, I asked how youth had felt while they did activities in the program (e.g., while kayaking), then how they felt and would describe themselves now, despite not having finished their participation in the program. However, a longitudinal study design would provide more accurate information about how the participants were functioning at different points in time. Also,

participation in the program ranged from several months to several years, thus, there was limited data on identity development from those who were fairly new to the program.

It was necessary to have youth who were able to verbalize and self-reflect in the interviews; however, this screening meant that some youth in the PTB Autism Spectrum Program were not recruited for the study. Even with screening, some youth participants experienced some expressive language difficulties, as would be expected with this population. However, the youth participants were able to explain a broad range of experiences. Moreover, their interviews lasted less than an hour, which is similar to interview lengths with many adolescents in this age range. There was a considerable range of age and apparent cognitive development among the youth. Some youth had difficulty with more abstract questions, especially the ones requiring a theory of mind, (e.g., what would others, like your family, say about how you have changed?). Additionally, since the participants recruited were considered high-functioning among those with developmental and mental health challenges, it is possible that they were the most successful participants in the program. A larger participant sample with methods that were sensitive to non-verbal youth would be desirable with such a varied ability group.

Though both male and female youth were sought for the study, only male youth participated. This may be because the majority of youth in the Autism Spectrum Program are male, and only one of the eight youth originally recruited was female. I interviewed one parent of a young woman, who shared some perspectives of the changes she has observed over the course of time her daughter participated in the program. However, I have no direct data of the experiences of young women in the program. Although not ideal in terms of transfer of findings, I believe that the study results do not represent a male-gendered perspective. My impression

from all participants was that everyone is expected to participate in all PTB activities to their ability and that male and female youth are not treated differently. Additionally, while I would have expected that female interviewees might talk more about the social aspects of the program, social inclusion was still a large theme among the male youth interviews. Additionally, although I invited all parents of youth in the Autism Spectrum Program to participate, only mothers elected to participate in interviews. Therefore, I have no perspectives from fathers, and the data may not be an accurate representation of parent perspectives. It is possible that gender differences might be observed with a larger sample of youth and parents involving both genders in each group.

Final Reflections

When I spoke with one of the staff members at Power To Be, several mentioned how there is a great need for research on adaptive recreation for those living with disabilities. One staff member in particular expressed her frustration that in the adaptive recreation research that exists in the field, perspectives have primarily been sought from parents and caregivers, not from youth who have actually participated in the program. Crucial perspectives are overlooked if the youth participants themselves are denied the opportunity to participate in research that is about their experiences. Before pursuing this research, I was aware that there would be some significant challenges in interviewing. Adolescents are already typically self-conscious and less verbally expressive than adults, and adolescents with distinct difficulties in cognitive, social, sensory and verbal domains may not be considered the best candidates for qualitative interviewing. However, I, too, was frustrated when I began looking through the literature on adaptive recreation only to find that the majority of studies are quantitative in nature. I wanted to use narrative methods to empower youth to share their stories in their own voices, something that

does not happen often in their communities, let alone in research settings. Using Rhodes' (2000) *ghostwriting* approach permitted each youth to co-construct the story of their Power To Be experiences with me and share it with readers. I hope that these stories will have an impact on readers as they see how this program has empowered these youth to re-write parts of their identities and stories that have not always been viewed so positively in the past.

During the analysis phase of this study, I reflected on my years of working with those affected with autism, developmental delays, and other mental health challenges. In my experience, stories of burnout, frustration, stigma, and meltdowns dominated many of these youths' and families' lives. Sometimes it is rare to catch youth and families living with these challenges in conversations of pride, hope, and joy. I am not typically moved to tears when I hear stories of sadness and other negative emotions; I describe myself as having developed a thick skin over the years. However, when I engaged in the interviews, listened to and read them, and co-constructed the ghostwritten stories, my eyes often welled up with tears – even after repeated listenings and readings! The stories of strength and resilience I was fortunate to hear were truly moving, and I feel extremely privileged to help share these stories with others.

Writing this thesis has been by far the most challenging personal project I have ever undertaken. I experienced a tremendous amount of struggle deciding how to fit a thesis into my professional and personal life. I also experienced many intense and lengthy periods of anxiety, as I could not imagine how it I could possibly collect the motivation, persistence, and expertise necessary to complete this thesis. Knowing that self-reflection is a useful tool in helping anyone to learn more about problems and solutions, I engaged in reflexive processes throughout this research. In one of my journal entries, I wrote about how the unknown is always scary, whether it is the first time writing a Master's thesis, having to think about how a program will affect a

person's future, or the experience of getting into a kayak for the first time having feared water your whole life. By listening to the stories of participants and through my own experiences, I have learned that conditions like self-doubt, an exclusive focus on weaknesses, and disconnection from both people and natural elements can limit personal potential, self-knowledge, and desire to contribute to community. However, I realized that personal effort, skill-building, social support, and nature-based adventure experiences can help breed the passion, confidence, and drive to persist through any of life's challenges. Growth-enhancing opportunities and supportive environments can help all of us to recognize ourselves and our place in the world, to experience feelings of pride, joy, and purpose. This thesis has been a powerful learning experience in terms of the process of qualitative research, but perhaps more importantly, in understanding life, and the conditions necessary to enable those living with significant challenges to thrive and be resilient.

I would like to close with a quote from one of the youth, who concluded his interview by sharing with me what it was like to be a part of Power To Be:

> *You get to meet amazing people, and you get to learn some really cool stories that you never would have known probably. There's never a dull moment here, 'cause you've probably seen some of the staff here. You'll know why eventually. Um yeah and it's just cool cause like I know it's all for a good thing, so it just makes me feel good, like at the end of the day in whatever I do with them. And I like seeing other people laugh and like enjoying life, as they should be.*

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Appendix A: Individual Interview Questions for Youth

Questions for first two participants

Hi, thank you so much for meeting with me. My name is Rebecca, and I'd like to learn a little bit about how your experiences in the Fern/Fiddlehead or Mosaic group of the Power To Be Adaptive Recreation Program have affected you, and how you or others see yourself. Remember, you are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer, without any consequences or any explanation. While I ask questions, you might find it helpful to think of your experience like a storybook; the beginning of the story talks about who you were before the program, the middle of the story talks about you during the program, and the end talks about who you are now.

1. Tell me a bit about yourself and what you like to do.
2. I'm going to ask you to think about yourself like a character in this story.
    - If you were to choose an animal or thing to be the character that represents you before you started the program, what would it be?
        i. The animal or thing that I was like before the program was…
        ii. What are some words you could use to describe yourself before the program?
    - If you were to choose an animal or thing to represent yourself during the program, what would it be?
        i. The animal or thing I was like during the program is…
        ii. What are some words you could use to describe yourself during the program?
    - If you were to choose an animal or thing to be the character that represents you now (after the program), what would it be?
        i. The animal or thing that I am like now is….
        ii. What are some words you can use to describe yourself now?
            1. Tell me a little bit about each of those animals/ things
            2. Tell me what made you choose them as the characters to represent your "before self" or "current self"?
            3. How did you change over the course of the program?
                a. For example, how has your confidence in your abilities (e.g., outdoor skills, ability to relate with others such as friends) changed?
            4. What would others, like your family, say about how you have changed?
            5. What do you think led to these changes?
3. Do you think the program helped you adapt to some of the challenges you've experienced in your life? How?
4. Can you think of any ways your experiences in the program might help you in the future?
5. Is there anything else about your experience in the program that you would like me to know about?

Thank you for your participation in today's interview!

** Prompts (e.g., "tell me more about that") and clarifications to questions will be used to facilitate the interview process where needed **

Questions modified for last three participants
Individual Interview Questions for Youth

Hi, thank you so much for meeting with me. My name is Rebecca, and I'd like to learn a little bit about how your experiences in the Fern/Fiddlehead or Mosaic group of the Power To Be Adaptive Recreation Program have affected you, and how you or others see yourself. Remember, you are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

1. Tell me a bit about yourself and what you like to do.
2. What were you like before you started the program with Power To Be?
    - What are some words you could use to describe yourself before the program?
3. What are you like when you are doing some of the activities in the program? (e.g., like kayaking, rock climbing, camping….ask for examples of the activities they did)
4. What are you like now?
    - What are some words you can use to describe yourself now that you have had a chance to participate in the Power To Be program?
    - How did you change over the course of the program? (pause)
        1. For example, how has your confidence in your abilities (e.g., outdoor skills, ability to relate with others such as friends) changed?
        2. What would others, like your family, say about how you have changed?
        3. What do you think led to these changes? (e.g., Activities? Staff? Relationships with others?)
5. Do you think the program has helped you adapt to some of the challenges you've experienced in your life?
    - How?
    - Can you give me an example?
6. Can you think of any ways your experiences in the program might help you in the future?
7. Is there anything else about your experience in the program that you would like me to know about?

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions for Parents

Hi, thank you so much for meeting with me. My name is Rebecca, and I'd like to learn a little bit about what you think about the Autism Spectrum Program at Power To Be, and about any changes you have noticed in your children as a result of the program. Remember, you are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer, without any consequences or any explanation. I'm going to ask you some questions and give everyone an equal opportunity to share their views.

1. What do you think about the Autism Spectrum Program?
2. How would you describe your children before the program started? During the program? Now – at the end?
3. What are some of the changes you have noticed that you believe are directly or indirectly related to their involvement in this program?
    a. Probe: in terms of school, peer relationships, family relationships, confidence etc...
4. What are a few aspects about the program you think influenced these changes?
5. What can you say about opportunities for families and community programs to work together to help youth living with mental health challenges and/or developmental disabilities adapt and grow?
6. Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on regarding how the program has impacted your children/family? What, if anything, would you like to see changed?

Thank you for your participation in today's interview!

Appendix C: Interview Questions and Recruitment for Staff at Power To Be

My name is Rebecca Dorris and I am a Master's student in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies (Faculty of Education) from the University of Victoria. My supervisor is Dr. Anne Marshall (amarshal@uvic.ca) I would like to invite you to participate in a study entitled, *"The Power to Adapt: Exploring the Self-Descriptions of Youth who have participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program."* I am seeking a short interview with staff who are affiliated with the Autism Spectrum programming of the Adaptive Recreation program at Power To Be. This is part of a larger study involving individual interviews with youth aged 12-21 who have participated in the Autism Spectrum Program, as well as a group interview with parents of youth who have participated.

Your participation would be completely voluntary, meaning you could withdraw at any time. The interview will not be recorded or transcribed, but notes will be taken on the interview during and after the interview. Interviews will begin in August 2011.

Attached are the questions I will be asking if you decide to participate. If you are interested in participating and/or would like more information, please contact Rebecca Dorris at rdorris@uvic.ca or by phone at (250) 380-9841.

Thank you!
Sincerely,

Rebecca Dorris

Hi, thank you so much for meeting with me. My name is Rebecca, and I'd like to learn a little bit about what you think about the Autism Spectrum Program at Power To Be, and about any changes you have noticed in the youth who have participated in the program.

1. What do you think about the Autism Spectrum Program?
    a. How was it designed? What are the goals and objectives of the program?
2. Are there any changes you have noticed in the youth who have participated that you believe are directly or indirectly related to their involvement in this program?
3. What are a few aspects about the program you think influenced to these changes?
4. What can you say about opportunities for families and community programs to work together to help youth living with mental health challenges and/or developmental disabilities adapt and grow?
5. Is there anything else that you'd like to comment on? What, if anything, would you like to see changed?

Thank you!

Appendix D: Invitation to Participate

Hello Everyone,

I have recently met with Rebecca Dorris, a Master's student in Counselling Psychology at the University of Victoria. She is interested in conducting a study on Adaptive Recreation for youth living with a mental health challenge and/or developmental disability. I am supportive of this project and would like you to consider participating. Information will be completely anonymous and will help us improve our program.

I have attached this information below in a poster for the youth and a letter for the parents. Please contact Rebecca Dorris if you are interested in participating or have any questions. She can be reached at (250) 380-9841 or at rdorris@uvic.ca. Please note you are under no obligation to participate in the study and that your decision will in no way impact the services you are receiving or may receive from Power To Be. Power To Be staff (including myself) will not be informed who decides to participate and who does not.

Kind regards,
David Segal
Research and Evaluation Manager
Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society
250 385 2363
david@powertobe.ca

_____

Appendix E: Recruitment Letter for Parents

Dear parents,

My name is Rebecca Dorris and I am a Master's student in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies (Faculty of Education) from the University of Victoria. My supervisor is Dr. Anne Marshall (amarshal@uvic.ca). I would like to invite you to participate in a study entitled, *"The Power to Adapt: Exploring the Self-Descriptions of Youth who have participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program."* I am seeking individual interviews with youth aged 12-21 who have participated in the Autism Spectrum Program (Mosaic or Ferns/Fiddleheads), and seeking a group interview with parents of youth who have participated. I am interested in learning more about how the program has shaped how the youth view themselves, and in knowing what changes, if any, parents have noticed in their children due to their participation in the program. It is not necessary that youth and parents both participate together.

Youth: If your son or daughter chooses to participate, he/she will meet individually with Rebecca for one interview which will take approximately 45-60 minutes. The interviews***** will be held in a private meeting room at the University of Victoria and will be audiotaped. She/he will be given $10 in recognition for taking the time to meet with me. Please give the poster on the next page to your son/daughter.

*** Note:** Participants sought for participation in the study will require the ability to understand and respond to the interviewer's questions, since interviews are verbal.

Parents: If you choose to participate, you will meet in a small group with several other parents of youth who have been involved in the Autism Spectrum Program at Power To Be. You will be compensated for parking and/or childcare costs if you participate in the group.

Your participation would be completely voluntary, meaning you could withdraw at any time. All of your information would be kept confidential and no identifying information would be connected to interview transcripts or to any published results from the study. Interviews will begin in August 2011.

If you are interested in participating and/or would like more information, please contact Rebecca Dorris at rdorris@uvic.ca or by phone at (250) 380-9841.

Thank you!
Sincerely,

Rebecca Dorris

Appendix F: Recruitment Poster for Youth

University of Victoria

Participation Opportunity

Are you a youth between the ages 12-21 who has participated in the Mosaic or Ferns/Fiddleheads group with the Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society?

My name is Rebecca Dorris and I am a Master's student in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies (Faculty of Education) at the University of Victoria. My supervisor is Dr. Anne Marshall (amarshal@uvic.ca). I would like to invite you to participate in a study that will help me learn more about you and your experience in the Ferns/Fiddleheads or Mosaic group.

I will be holding interviews beginning August 2011. Individual interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes and $10 compensation will be provided for your time.

If you think you would like to participate or if you have any questions, give me (Rebecca) a call or send me an email, at (250) 380-9841 or rdorris@uvic.ca

Thank you!

Appendix G: Free and Informed Consent

Consent Letter for Youth Interview

**Note: Parental consent and signature, in addition to the youth's consent and signature, is required on this form for any youth aged 16 and younger who decide to participate in the individual interview*

Education Psychology & Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Victoria
Participant Consent Form

Project Title: *The Power to Adapt: Exploring the Self-Descriptions of Youth who have participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program*

Primary Researcher:
Rebecca Dorris, B.A., Graduate Student
Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies
University of Victoria
Telephone: 250-380-9841
Email: rdorris@uvic.ca

Research Supervisor:
Anne Marshall, Ph.D., R.Psych., Faculty
Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies
University of Victoria
Telephone: 250-721-7851
Email: amarshal@uvic.ca

Objective of the Research:

- The purpose of this research project is to learn more about the identity-shaping stories of youth living with a disability and/or mental health challenges, before, throughout and/or after their experience in the Power To Be Autism Spectrum Program. The research question is, "*In what ways has participation in a nature-based adaptive recreation program designed for youth living with disabilities influenced participants' descriptions of selves?"*

Importance of Research:

- Research of this type is important because there has been little investigation into how nature-based recreation programs may impact the identity development of youth living with disabilities.

Participation:

- You are being asked to participate in this study because you are between 12-21years old and have participated in the Mosaic or Fern/Fiddlehead group with the Power To Be Autism Spectrum Program.
- Participation in this project is entirely voluntary

Procedures:

- Your participation will consist of one interview with Rebecca. In the interview, I will ask you to share the story of your life and identity before, during, and after your experience in the Autism Spectrum Program. This will take about 45-60 minutes. The interview will be recorded on a digital audio-tape and transcribed by myself. Written notes will also be taken.
- Individual interviews will take place in a p7rivate meeting room at the University of Victoria.
- A short story about the experiences you share will be written after the interview. Within two months of the interview, you will be asked via email to check that the story is accurate, and provide any revisions

Inconvenience and Risks:

- I do not anticipate that involvement in this research would involve any inconvenience for you, other than the time to travel to and participate in the interview.
- It is possible that you may experience some emotional discomfort as you reflect on your experiences. If so, I will ask whether or not you would like to stop the interview. If the interview has to be stopped, I will provide you with the names of community counsellors, if that would be helpful to you.

Benefits:

- The experiences shared by the participants will contribute to the knowledge and development of therapeutic adventure and adaptive recreation for youth living with significant life challenges. This may help clarify the importance of adventure programming for these youth

Compensation:

- You will be given a $10.00 honorarium at the time of the interview.
- If you would not participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

Withdrawal of Participation:

- If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time, or refuse to answer certain questions without any consequences or any explanation, and may keep the honorarium.
- Should you withdraw, you will be asked for your consent to keep your data in the study. If you agree, you will be asked to sign a release form allowing me to keep your data in the study. If you do not agree, your taped interview will be erased and the transcript, field notes or data associated with you will be destroyed.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

- Due to the nature of interviews, participants will be known to me.
- Your name will not be shared with Power To Be staff. However, you have been referred to the study by David Segal from Power To Be, so he may be able to identify you.
- Your age and gender will be reported in the results of the study. Due to the small number of youth who have participated in the program at Power To Be, there is a chance that staff or others who know you have participated in the program may be able to identify you on the basis of some aspects of your story
- Your name will not be recorded on the transcribed data, on the interview tapes, or in the reports of the research results. You may choose a code name in place of your name. A key to the code names and the signed consent forms will be kept separately from the interview data. All physical data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet while electronic data will be in password protected files. Files will be made anonymous by removing identifying information prior to storage. Only me and my supervisor will have access to the data. Audio-tapes from the interview, transcribed data, and any notes taken during the interview will be destroyed after five years.
- All information from interviews will remain confidential, unless I have reason to believe that you or another child is in need of protection, or if I believe you are in imminent danger of harming yourself or another person. If so, I would have consult with my research supervisor, contact someone who can help, and/or report the matter to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. I will tell you if such a report needs to be made.

Research Results will be Used/Shared in the Following Ways:

- Anonymous and summarized research findings will be communicated to participants of the study, and the staff at the Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society. The results of the study will be included in the researcher's Masters thesis (which will be made available online on the University of Victoria's library website) and presented in scholarly meetings the University of Victoria.
- Anonymous and summarized research findings may be reported in a published journal article and/or scholarly presentations.

Questions or Concerns:

- In addition to being able to contact the researcher and/or project supervisor as above, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Consent:

- Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Name of Participant	*Signature of Participant*	*Date*

Name of Parent/Guardian	*Signature of Parent/ Guardian* (Required for youth aged 16 or younger)	*Date*

- Your signature below indicates you have received $10.00 from Rebecca

Signature: _____ **Name:** _____ (please print) **Date:** _____

Consent Letter for Parent Focus Group

Education Psychology & Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Victoria
Participant Consent Form

Project Title: *The Power to Adapt: Exploring the Self-Descriptions of Youth who have participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program*

Primary Researcher:
Rebecca Dorris, B.A., Graduate Student
Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies
University of Victoria
Telephone: 250-380-9841
Email: rdorris@uvic.ca

Research Supervisor:
Anne Marshall, Ph.D., R.Psych., Faculty
Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies
University of Victoria
Telephone: 250-721-7851
Email: amarshal@uvic.ca

Objective of the Research:

- The purpose of this research project is to learn more about the identity-shaping stories of youth living with a disability and/or mental health challenges, before, throughout and/or after their experience in the Power To Be Autism Spectrum Program. The research question is, "*In what ways has participation in a nature-based adaptive recreation program designed for youth living with disabilities influenced participants' descriptions of selves?"*

Importance of Research:

- Research of this type is important because there has been little investigation into how nature-based recreation programs may impact the identity development of youth living with disabilities.

Participation:

- You are being asked to participate in this study because you have a child who has participated in the Power To Be Autism Spectrum Program
- Participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and it is not necessary that both youth and their parents participate, though the primary focus of the study is in hearing the youth's stories.

Procedures:

- Your participation will consist of one audio-taped focus group with other parents of children in the program. This will take about 60-90 minutes. The focus will be to contribute to a deeper understanding of the changes you have observed in your children as a result of the program.
- Focus group interviews will take place in a private meeting room at the University of Victoria.

Inconvenience and Risks:

- I do not anticipate that involvement in this research would involve any inconvenience for you, other than the time to travel to and participate in the interview.
- It is possible that you may experience some emotional discomfort as you reflect on your experiences. If so, I will ask whether or not you would like to stop your participation in the focus group. If the interview has to be stopped, I will provide you with the names of community counsellors.

Benefits:

- The responses shared by parents will help provide background knowledge to the youth's stories of their experiences and identity development. This will contribute to the knowledge and development of therapeutic adventure and adaptive recreation for youth living with significant life challenges. This may help clarify the importance of adventure programming for these youth.

Compensation:

- Parking and/or childcare costs will be reimbursed (approximately $3 to $12)
- It is unethical to provide undue compensation to research participants. If you would not participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

Withdrawal of Participation:

- If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time, or refuse to answer certain questions without any consequences or any explanation, and may keep the honorarium.
- Should you withdraw, you will be asked for your consent to keep your data in the study. If you agree, you will be asked to sign a release form allowing the researcher to use your data, and your data will remain in the study. If you do not agree, your taped interview will be erased and the transcript and all field notes or data associated with you will be destroyed.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

- Participants in the focus group will be known to each other, but will be asked not to disclose information about other participants. Due to the face-to-face nature of focus groups, confidentiality of the information shared cannot be guaranteed and therefore parent participants are asked not to share any information that they wish to keep private.
- Participants will also be known to the interviewer.
- Participants' identities will not be shared with Power To Be staff.
- Your name will not be recorded on the transcribed data, on the interview tapes, or in the reports of the research results. Signed consent forms will be stored separately from any data.
- All physical data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet while electronic data will be in password protected files. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. Audio-tapes from the interview, transcribed data, and any notes taken during the interview will be destroyed after five years.
- All information from interviews will remain confidential, unless I have reason to believe that a child is in need of protection. If so, I am required to consult with my research supervisor, contact someone who can help, and/or report the matter to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. I will inform you if such a report needs to be made.

Research Results will be Used/Shared in the Following Ways:

- Anonymous and summarized research findings will be communicated to participants of the study, and the staff at the Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society. The results of the study will be included in the researcher's Masters thesis (which will be made available online on the University of Victoria's library website) and presented in scholarly meetings the University of Victoria.
- Anonymous and summarized research findings may be reported in a published journal article and/or scholarly presentations.

Questions or Concerns:

- In addition to being able to contact the researcher and/or project supervisor as above, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Consent:

- Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

- Your signature below indicates you have received ____$ for childcare and/or parking from Rebecca

Signature: _____ **Name:** _____ (please print) **Date:** _____

Consent Letter for Key Informant Staff at Power To Be

Education Psychology & Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Victoria
Participant Consent Form

Project Title: *The Power to Adapt: Exploring the Self-Descriptions of Youth who have participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program*

Primary Researcher:

Rebecca Dorris, B.A.
Graduate Student
Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies
University of Victoria
Telephone: 250-380-9841
Email: rdorris@uvic.ca

Research Supervisor:

Anne Marshall, Ph.D., R.Psych.
Faculty
Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies
University of Victoria
Telephone: 250-721-7851
Email: amarshal@uvic.ca

Objective of the Research:

- The purpose of this research project is to learn more about the identity-shaping stories of youth living with a disability and/or mental health challenges, before, throughout and/or after their experience in the Power To Be Adaptive Recreation Program (Autism Spectrum Program with the Mosaic or Ferns/Fiddleheads group). The research question is, "*In what ways has participation in a nature-based adaptive recreation program designed for youth living with disabilities influenced participants' descriptions of selves?"*

Importance of Research:

- Research of this type is important because there has been little investigation into how nature-based recreation programs may impact the identity development of youth living with disabilities.

Participation:

- You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a staff member of Power To Be and are affiliated with the Adaptive Recreation Program (Autism Spectrum Program)
- Participation in this project is entirely voluntary

Procedures:

- Your participation will consist of one interview with Rebecca. This will take about 20-30 minutes. The focus will be to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Autism Spectrum program and how it might contribute to changes in the youth who have had the opportunity to participate in this program.
- Interviews will not be audio recorded, but Rebecca will take notes to record the interview content
- Interviews will take place in a private meeting room at the Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society, or over the telephone if an in person interview is not possible for you.

Inconvenience and Risks:

- I do not anticipate that involvement in this research would involve any inconvenience for you, other than the time to travel to and participate in the interview.

Benefits:

- The responses shared by staff members will help provide background knowledge to the Autism Spectrum program. This will contribute to the knowledge and development of therapeutic adventure and adaptive

recreation for youth living with significant life challenges. This may help clarify the importance of adventure programming for these youth.

Withdrawal of Participation:

- Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time, or refuse to answer certain questions without consequences or explanation.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

- Participants will be known to the interviewer.
- If you choose to participate, your name and job title will be used in the study to describe your answers to the interview questions.
- All physical data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet while electronic data will be in password protected files. Only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the data. Notes taken during the interview will be destroyed after five years.

Research Results will be Used/Shared in the Following Ways:

- Anonymous and summarized research findings (from the data obtained from youth interviews and parent focus group interviews) will be communicated to participants of the study, and the staff at the Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society. The results of the study will be included in the researcher's Masters thesis (which will be made available online on the University of Victoria's library website) and presented in scholarly meetings the University of Victoria.
- Anonymous and summarized research findings may be reported in a published journal article and/or scholarly presentations.

Questions or Concerns:

- In addition to being able to contact the researcher and/or project supervisor as above, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Consent:

- Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

Appendix H: Letter of Support

June 3, 2011

To whom it may concern,

This letter signifies Power To Be's agreement to support the research study being conducted by Rebecca Dorris, titled "*The Power to Adapt: Exploring the Self-Descriptions of Youth who have participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program."* Specifically, Power To Be agrees to contact participants from the Autism Spectrum Program and inform them of their voluntary opportunity to take part in the study. This will be done through email or regular mail. Youth aged 13 years or older will be sent a recruitment poster, and all parents will be sent a recruitment letter, both created by the researcher, Rebecca Dorris.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call.
Sincerely,

David Segal
Research and Evaluation Manager
Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society
250 385 2363
david@powertobe.ca

_____

Appendix I: Release Form for Data to Remain in Study upon Withdrawal

I am withdrawing from the study, "*The Power to Adapt: Exploring the Self-Descriptions of Youth who have participated in an Adaptive Recreation Program."* However, my signature below denotes my consent to keep my data in the study.

_____ _____

Name (please print) Signature