

Practice in Perspective: Youth Engagement and the Canadian Context

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2005

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Abstract

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This study focuses on exploring the personal perspectives and understanding of youth engagement within the Canadian context according to youth engagement researchers, practitioners and funders. This study applied a qualitative research strategy and employed phenomenological methods of interviews and focus groups. This study seeks to highlight the key characteristics and trends from the participant's perspective within the Canadian youth engagement landscape. Building on the tenants of Transformational Learning Theory and the historical understandings of youth engagement, this study explores how youth engagement is both conceptualized and perceived across three key sectors: researchers, practitioners and funders. Finally, reflecting on the key characteristics identified by the participants this study also discusses the further understanding of the complexity of youth-adult partnerships, the civic role of young people and the potential of developing a collective and shared understanding of youth engagement by practitioners, funders and researchers.

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Chapter One: Practice in Perspective

Engaging young people as civic agents has evolved and developed considerably over the past twenty years. A shifting landscape for young people's involvement in the decision making processes surrounding them is particularly evident within the Canadian context, with new initiatives and youth programming focused on leadership and capacity building gaining ground across the country (Cook, Mack & Blanchet, 2010; Latendresse, 2010; McKinnon, Pitre & Watling, 2007). However, a widespread approach and understanding of what engagement actually means, and how young people go about achieving it meaningfully, remains an elusive 'tangible' for practitioners, researchers and funders (Hart, 2008, Pittman, 2000, Camino, 2005, Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter & Zukin, 2002).

My interest in specifically understanding how practitioners, funders and researchers perceived, experienced and in turn practiced youth engagement relates comes from my own involvement in a national youth engagement initiative funded by the J.W. McConnell foundation and administered by the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD); a program called *YouthScape* (www.youthscape.ca). The *YouthScape* project brought together five communities across Canada to experiment with the concept of directly granting young people money to complete community change projects. The initiative experimented with granting directly to youth, creating supportive adult ally teams and advisories and also examining the process and learning for young people through developmental evaluation and national gatherings. My role in the initiative was to manage and coordinator the Victoria, British Columbia site through the YouthCore program

which I also co-founded. The initiative lasted three years and had a \$200,000 annual budget.

My role in the project provided me with numerous learning experiences – including exciting surprises, emotional and programmatic challenges and most importantly spurred a deep connection to the concept of youth engagement and a strong curiosity to better understand the phenomenon. Some of the biggest observations I had as the manager and coordinator was the lack of understanding by adults on what it meant to genuinely engage young people as equals and how the systems which put adults in power over positions with young people had absolutely no infrastructure to support a co-learning and innovative environment. It was obvious from my interactions with adults in power positions that they felt that involving young people was important, but usually within specific terms and boundaries from which they retained the majority of the power and authority. I saw the role of adults as an extremely critical part of the overall success or failure of the initiative and I felt that the nature of the project and the overall focus on youth engagement, not the adult's development or capacity, was lacking. As I continued to work on the project I found that the overall focus only on young people's experience and building on their capacity was essentially eliminating any potential culture shifts for the adults involved. My research goals for this study therefore reflect my own curiosity in terms of how adults, particularly power holders and adults in authority positions within the field of youth engagement, understand the phenomenon, both theoretically and in practice.

Another element to the national *YouthScape* project involved deepening participants' understanding of the key characteristics and elements of youth engagement that were emerging across the country. As practitioners we were asked to examine what we were doing in terms of the mechanisms that functionally created the practice of youth engagement. As the project unfolded, I realized that all the sites (and their leaders) across Canada had very different understandings, definitions and attachments to the concepts of frameworks or philosophies underpinning youth engagement both generally and in relation to specific programs/projects. My experience with *YouthScape* did not allow me to delve into these observations about the adult experience or the conceptualization of frameworks/philosophies but did shape my ambitions and motivation for this research. However, it has been the catalyst for the research questions I am investigating in this work.

My research is focused on exploring how practitioners, researchers and funders perceive the phenomenon of youth engagement, while also exploring their understandings of the critical characteristics and elements of youth engagement. It is situated in two powerful and important ideas: asset based approaches to youth development and transformational learning theory. In the sections that follow I provide an overview of these foundational theories/approaches to working with youth.

Research Questions

The objective of this research was to understand the current youth engagement landscape within Canada. Initially, my research objectives were developed with the intent to identify, expand and develop a capacity building framework for youth engagement that was informed by the tenants of Transformational Learning Theory and the real lived experiences of youth researchers, funders, practitioners, politicians and local businesses.

After developing the research objectives further, it became evident that in order to gain an insightful and relevant exploration of youth engagement and the aforementioned attributes and characteristics, it was necessary to understand youth engagement as a phenomenon from the people who were taking leadership roles within the field. Focusing on a person-centered approach to understanding how youth engagement is understood by the very people who are setting the agenda for how youth are included in community projects through their funding decisions and their beliefs about what youth engagement strategies should look like was another important perspective to document. The question therefore became: *From the perspective of the participants, what is the current youth engagement landscape in Canada? In other words, how do researchers and practitioners conceptualize and operationalize youth engagement across diverse sectors?* Going further, more specifically, from the perspectives of the participants: What are the key and critical components of a youth engagement framework that could enable youth engagement across diverse sectors? Once the participant landscape in youth engagement has been mapped, what can be learned from

considering these practitioner understandings through the lens of contemporary frameworks developed by youth engagement scholars?

Research Design

The research question was designed in an effort to surface the textured and complex lived experiences of participants in the field of youth engagement. The chronic lack of a cohesive understanding of 'youth engagement' as a phenomenon required an inquiry approach that was grounded in the lived experience and perspectives of those adults in the field. After exploring research design options, a phenomenological approach was selected.

Phenomenological inquiry is a qualitative approach that focuses on surfacing the lived experiences of those involved in a phenomenon. Schwandt (1999) describes the approach as the "...phenomena of understanding" (p. 451) and Lester (1999) describes, "...phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize the importance of personal perspectives and interpretation" (p. 1).

With the selection of phenomenology inquiry two research methods were selected: focus groups and interviews. A total of ten interviews and two focus groups were completed for this research. As with any phenomenological inquiry, the actual lived experiences of the participants accompanied by the current literature and frameworks surfaced dynamic answers and new questions at the end of the research project.

Significance of the research

Research of this type is important because youth engagement remains a marginalized and misunderstood concept and practice by larger systems and institutions (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Lerner, Dowling & Anderson, 2003; Pittman, 2000,). Currently, the majority of the literature influencing the Canadian context for the practice of youth engagement focuses on information gathered in the United States and the United Kingdom (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Hart, 2008; Pittman, 2000,). This research intended to gain a Canadian perspective from the participants about current practices in youth engagement and how (or if) existing theoretical frameworks and philosophies driving youth engagement within the nation. In addition, the research sought to consider the philosophies and practice of youth engagement through a holistic lens drawing upon the tenets of Transformational Learning Theory (TLT).

While the interest and action around youth engagement may be growing in Canada, the perspectives and foundations that inform the practice remain vague and undocumented. Instead the majority of the literature and tools (frameworks, guidebooks etc.) for practitioners, researchers and funders focuses on what can be described as “entry points” for framing and implementing youth engagement within a local context. However, the gap in literature and practice remains the real application and understanding of youth engagement from the perspectives and experiences of those researching, coordinating and funding youth engagement in

Canada. There is a need to begin exploring how these perspectives and ontological understandings are shaping the strategies and approaches to youth engagement.

Not surprisingly, youth engagement organizations do not have the necessary systems, supports or resources in place to document youth engagement strategies. And even if researchers or funders provided the needed resources to better document their practices, the limitations placed on practitioners by funders and the complexity of their social, cultural and political contexts greatly impacts the ability of practitioners to provide useful insights about their ability to promote or expand youth engagement opportunities.

Defining Youth Engagement

There is not a commonly held definition of youth engagement; instead it is presented by different people, theorists and practitioners based on their own principles and values associated with their perspectives on youth engagement. There has, however, been a shift in the thinking of scholars in the field, as will be made evident in the literature review in Chapter 2. This shift occurred as scholars moved from deficit-based models to more strength/asset-based approaches the conceptualization and defining characteristics of youth engagement, and have most recently circled around an emphasis on the civic young person, their rights to participate and the pathways in which they have the opportunity to do so. To illustrate this point, I will briefly cite several scholars who exemplify emergent thinking about youth engagement.

Contemporary Thinkers in Youth Engagement

Lansdown (2001) describes youth engagement within the context of the United Nation's CRC' (spell this out) s (1990) Article 12: The Right to Participate. He argues that youth engagement

Requires us to begin to listen to what children say and to take them seriously. It requires that we recognize the value of their own experience, views and concerns. It also requires us to question the nature of adult responsibilities towards children. (p. 1).

Another common thread that has emerged in the literature is this emphasis on the civic role of young people as legitimate and significant. For example, Camino & Zeldin (2002) describe youth engagement as fundamentally a civic identity-building exercise met through inclusive participation:

...Inclusive participation is the primary component of civic society. The assumption of inclusive participation is that *all* citizens have legitimate opportunities to influence decisions concerning the identification, leveraging and mobilization of community resources. (p. 213, emphasis added)

The Centre for Excellence for Youth Engagement (2010) describes youth engagement as, "A meaningful and sustained participation in an activity within a focus outside the self. Full engagement consists of a cognitive component, an affective component, and a behavioural component, Head, Heart, Feet." Balsano

(2005) describes youth engagement as an act of civic involvement, explaining that youth engagement,

...has been described in terms of prosocial behaviours exhibited by youth through involvement in activities that have benefit both to them and to the institutions within the context through which they are supported; these institutions include schools, local community-based organizations, and the political institutions of civic society (p. 188).

The connecting thread throughout these definitions is focused on citizenship as an outcome of youth engagement, and the act of civic identity at the forefront of the youth engagement literature.

Biesta, Lawry & Kelly (2009) explain that youth engagement is intractably linked to the rights of young people as citizens and that youth engagement is actually an experience of citizenship learning for youth.

A focus on young people's citizenship learning in everyday life settings allows for an understanding of the ways in which citizenship learning is situated and in the unfolding lives of young people and helps to make clear how these lives are themselves implicated in the wider social, cultural, political, and economic order (p. 8).

The above makes clear the importance of civic agency/learning/understanding by young people as integral to strategic youth engagement.

Working Definition of Youth Engagement

Therefore for the purposes of this research my definition of youth engagement will focus on *meaningful* youth engagement:

Meaningful youth engagement is the intentional establishment and support for the genuine involvement of young people in the design, creation, coordination, implementation, and evaluation of the processes, practices and decisions that shape civic life.

The Notion of Civic Engagement

Throughout the literature and the discussions with the participants in this research the discussion around civic engagement emerged as a central concept in the youth engagement landscape. The notion of civic engagement or civic *competency* as Camino (2005) describes, is a highly contested term. For the purposes of this research, I reviewed some basic definitions maintaining some of the key elements considered in the development of the definition of meaningful youth engagement, including strength-based approaches and recognizing youth as citizens with rights and responsibilities. I believe that is important to explore some interpretations of civic engagement as it links to the literature review, participant responses and the finally, the discussion points of this research.

Golombek (2006) writes that citizenship conjures traditional understandings within our society, "It is commonly defined as the legal status with duties such as paying taxes, serving in the armed forces, obeying the laws, and participating in community improvement efforts. Citizens also enjoy certain rights such as voting, participating in public interest groups and being elected to public

office” (p.13). He goes on to say that while traditional methods and conceptualization of citizenship are important they nonetheless reflect contemporary *adult* conceptualizations of an engaged or as he describes, “good citizen” (Golembek, 2006, p.13).

Youniss, Bales et. al (2002) highlight that while developing a comprehensive definition of citizenship is an ongoing process, is the development of the very defining traits that need to be part of the citizenship experience and that this process reflects civic competence, “...civic competence to refer to an understanding of how government functions, and the acquisition of behaviours that allow citizens to participate in government and permit individuals to meet, discuss, and collaborate to promote their interests within frameworks of democratic principals” (p.124).

For the purposes of this research examining citizenship within the context of the youth engagement landscape requires us to examine “citizen” not only in terms of how one acts but also in terms of how one *learns and participates*. Developing new spaces for this type of conceptualization of learning as a critical reflection of the *engaged youth citizen* lends to a more comprehensive connection to meaningful youth engagement. Biesta et al (2009) explain, “Young people learn at least as much about democracy and citizenship – including their own citizenship – through their participation in a range of different practices that make up their lives, as they learn from that which is officially prescribed and formally taught” (p.7). Civic competence, therefore for the purpose of this research, is reflected in

the actions as described in the definitions above and within the informal and formalized participatory learning processes which youth engagement could provide.

Historical Contexts

As noted earlier, the landscape for youth engagement began to shift in the early ninety nineties from that of a deficit based model to a asset-based model (Pittman, 2000), and this shift started with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC, 1990). The importance of this shift is central to understanding the development of the youth engagement field and so its history will be briefly documented in this introduction to my study.

Deficit-based approaches to youth engagement emerged in the 1960s as key youth behaviours considered uncivil began to emerge more prominently in the mass media, including issues such as teen pregnancy, high school dropouts and youth delinquents. Pittman (2000) argues that it was at the end of this decade that the “indirect costs associated with the loss of skilled human capital was emerging” (p. 19) and, in turn, public funding began to focus on interventions dealing with these ‘deficit’ or ‘delinquent’ behaviours.

Near the end of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s concepts of prevention, and accompanying programmes, began to emerge. Pittman’s (2000) research suggests these “programs build on, rather than squelched, young people’s sense that they could make a difference.... calls for programs that addressed young people’s needs before they ran away, dropped out, or became pregnant began to grow” (p. 19). The impetus for change emerged from the traditional cost-benefit

analysis – investments in programming that might mitigate the costs of the perceived increase in delinquent behaviour and decrease in social capital (Pittman 2000). However, this shift also created an opening for a new way of thinking about how young people could be instead conceived of as ‘civic agents’ within their own lives, their families, communities and beyond.

The shift from deficit-based thinking to asset-based / strength-based approaches required young people’s development be supported and nurtured prior to becoming an issue was a considerable deviation from society’s acceptable ‘norms’ of the time (Lerner, Dowling & Anderson, 2003). The perceptual shift from deficit-based to asset-based illustrates the need to acknowledge capacity within young people as young citizens and requires the creation of the spaces, experiences and conditions which supported building new categorization. The shift also creates openings in the policy, research and programming agendas within communities interested in supporting asset-based approaches. As Block (2008) describes

Youth are a unifying force in community. Hard to argue against the next generation (sic). An alternative future opens when we shift our view of youth (say 14 to 24 years) from problem to possibility, from deficiency to gift (p.165).

Yet mainstream thinking in communities and governments has traditionally lacked the foundational, philosophical and structural underpinnings to support this new way of thinking about youth as contributing citizens. Pittman (2000) argues this gap was addressed through the creation and adoption of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC, 1990). Its primary mantra

was particularly important in a Western context in which deficit views had been dominant. In addition to a legal document describing the rights of the child, psychologists began unpacking the developmental capacity of young people as civic agents with the emergence of the UN CRC (1990); an approach described in this study and the literature as *Positive Youth Development*. The significance of the UN CRC (1990) is discussed more comprehensively in Chapter Two but it is important to briefly identify how it functioned as a fundamental anchor for the overall exploration of youth engagement for this research.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UN CRC (1990) remains the only legally binding commitment from the government of Canada that supports explicitly the involvement of young people in the decisions that affect their lives. In particular Article 12 of the UN CRC (1990), described as the Right to Participate, articulated the opportunity for young people to move from passive recipients of rights to active citizens with rights and responsibilities. The UN CRC (1990) represented a critical starting point to help shift from deficit-based models to asset-based models, supporting the creation of capacity building processes in youth-oriented programs internationally and in Canada. As such, it frames the asset based approach assumed to be necessary to effect change among youth engagement practitioners and the analysis of the data collected for this study.

Transformational Learning Theory: Anchor & Worldview

Another important anchoring concept in this study is that of Transformational Learning Theory. Transformational Learning Theory (TLT)

supports my personal worldview and ambition for both better understanding youth engagement and building capacity within the field. TLT is an emergent learning theory, one that allows the creation of spaces for growth, new interpretation, and ways of knowing around any subject matter, experience or phenomenon (Morrell & O'Connor, 2002). TLT embodies a holistic foundation in attempting to understand, grow and nurture any issue, subject, experience or person's personal understand. Morell and O'Connor (2002) provide a broad definition of TLT,

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premise of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift in consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body-awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living, and our sense of possibilities for social justice, peace and personal joy (p. xvii).

TLT conveys the need for experiential learning as a critical component for real, transformational change. Change is understood not only as a change in behaviour or policies that we as citizens can see but also change in the habits, psychological, cultural and even spiritual conceptions of the individual and their relationships to the larger context – from family, to peer group, to community and

beyond. TLT has the potential to create a spill over of cognitive learning understandings to real of social action learning; from the individual to the collective. TLT aspires to create an experiential individual and collective learning environment that enlightens and at once empowers through active engagement, or experiential learning (Dirkx, 1998; Morrell & O'Connor, 2002).

This idea of learning as an active, life changing experience links directly with the concept of meaningful youth engagement which is the phenomenon being explored in this research. It was essential that a theoretical anchor support this holistic worldview about the educative potential of youth engagement for three primary reasons.

First, the act of engaging young people in a meaningful way requires that the psychological, cultural, physiological and ecological (social systems) aspects of the individual and the community be considered and weighed equally. Second, for a meaningful youth engagement experience to be available and present an active learning foundation must be established. Third, meaningful youth engagement requires the active involvement of young people in all aspects of any processes, practices and decisions which shape their civic and personal lives for the learning to be transformational and not simply informational. The importance of transformation cannot be under estimated. For youth engagement to achieve these ends, TLT needs to be understood as the means through which this transformative change can be achieved.

Engagement to Enlightenment & Social Movement Learning / Action

One of the foundational attributes of TLT is the concept that when one goes through a transformational learning event or experiences the act of engagement, an 'enlightenment' of sorts occurs. Mezirow (1997) has examined the concept of learning as a transformative act for many decades. His work has focused on the relationships between engaging in a learning activity or experience that then shifts a personal change permanently, to what he describes as a kind of enlightenment. This concept functions well within the definition of meaningful youth engagement for the purposes of this research project. Based on this definition the act of being involved and being part of a youth engagement experience / opportunity, should or could influence the actual ways in which a young person's civic life is shaped as a whole. The connection between the youth engagement experience and a personal shift is therefore intended.

TLT is not simply about change in the individual however; it is a holistic approach and therefore the opening for community and social change also exists. In other words, both individual and collective changes are outcomes of TL. This is another connection as to how TLT supports a foundation for meaningful youth engagement, providing a meta-map for youth engagement initiatives in that it allows for creating dual spaces for young people to act and engage as citizens with personal and collective impacts in mind.

Hall & Clover (2003) examined this complexity of links between the personal and collective change potential rooted in TLT by examining what they call Social Movement Learning and Action,

Social movement learning refers to (a) learning by persons who are part of any social movement and (b) learning by persons outside of a social movement as a result of the actions taken or simply by the existence of social movements (p. 584-589).

Similarly, Youth engagement is an act of civic participation, as ascribed by the UN CRC's Article 12: The Right to Participate (1990); the right to participate enables both personal and collective experiences. The personal acts contribute to the collective reality; this is at the centre of both TLT and social movement learning. Hall (2006) explains, "What comes out of social movement action is neither predetermined nor completely self-willed; it's meaning is derived from the context in which it is carried out and the understanding that actors bring to it and/or derive from it" (p. 233). Hall (2006) expresses that boundaries between social movement theory and action, and the concepts structured in hard, academic knowledge are in fact artificial boundaries and should be broken in order to support personal action which positively impacts collective change.

Re-Framing the Way We Are In the World

TLT is a theory based on the idea that through active, engaged and genuine learning experiences people are changed and therefore the world around them is changed. This deep, complex learning requires a major shift in the way society supports learning—particularly in the context of learning with youth—and how learning is understood to be take place, both contextually and cognitively. Kegan (2001) explains this shift in thinking as the capacity to re-framing the way we are

and the world around us and that these attributes consist of a transformational learning experience. As Kegan (2001) writes,

further learning of a transformative sort might involve the development of a capacity for abstract thinking so that one can ask more general, thematic questions about the facts, or consider the perspective and biases of those who wrote the historical account creating the facts. Both kinds of learning are expansive and valuable, one within the re-existing frames of mind and the other reconstructing the very frame (p. 49).

The concept of re-framing the way a young person is able to be in the world, not only the way they see the world is part of the transformational learning process which TLT supports.

For the purposes of this research Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) provides a compass for both understanding the research data and also investigating potential openings for the future of meaningful youth engagement. Like any holistic approach, TLT is complex and the summary above only scratches the surface of the nuances and specificities being developed in the theory's field. However, TLT remains the only theoretical container able to support the personal, collective and social change capacity of a transformational learning experience; the theory provides a strong foundation to explore the perspectives of practice and experience within the youth engagement landscape. TLT is a theory based on the idea that through active, engaged and genuine learning experiences people are changed and therefore the world around them is changed. This deep, complex

learning requires a major shift in the way society supports learning and how learning is understood to be take place, both contextually and cognitively.

Positioning Myself, My Privilege

I am aware that my position of privilege, my personal history and my work experience affects my understanding of youth engagement concepts and the interpretation of the potential implications these concepts represent. I am a white, educated, heterosexual female with the privilege of participating in advanced graduate studies at a university level, in a democratically structured country. I also have strong beliefs in the emancipatory and system-changing potential within feminist theory, and understand that feminism is my dominant lens of interpretation – both academically and personally. For me to explore youth engagement I undoubtedly bring these biases and subjectivities to my work.

However, my position of privilege does not negate the fact that youth engagement ideas are applicable to the broader academia and community, beyond my own understanding and relationship to these concepts and observations. The practicality of bringing my position of privilege, experience and professional background to the forefront of this research is intended to provide a contextualized setting for my analysis to come. In addition, I am aware that everything that makes me interested in exploring youth engagement also influences the ways in which I will read the data collected for this research.

The Power of Investigating your own Practice

Anderson, Herr & Nihlen (2007) describe the opening that researching within your own professional may provide, “Practitioners (insiders) already know

what it is like to be an insider, they must work to see the taken for granted aspects of their practice from an outsider's perspective" (p. 37). My hope for this research is to understand the very world I work in more fully and also allow for potential new ways of interpreting, understanding and experiencing youth engagement can emerge for my practice and me and for academic research.

I believe that it is important to understand both my own biases and subjectivities but also acknowledge that I cannot escape who I am or my professional background. While I did have personal reactions to some of the participant's responses and opinions, I have done my best to take a transparent analysis of the data and detail this process exhaustively. At the core of this research stands my passion for empowering young people to be civic agents. My work over the past ten years has provided me with the privilege of getting to know and learning from hundreds of young people in British Columbia and across the nation. I have learned many important things about the capacity of young people as change agents when opportunities and supports are in place.

As mentioned my experience is diverse, working on the front line with at-risk, marginalized and experiential youth, being a research assistant for a youth legal literacy project, as well as designing, developing, implementing and evaluating youth engagement projects and programs over the course of my career; and now researching the field and phenomenon more broadly. I have personally struggled and navigated the funding system associated with community projects and I have also had to navigate and deal with funding cuts that challenge young people on a daily basis. Therefore my experience does inform and colour my understanding of

youth engagement. But it also provides me with an opportunity to expand the field through this research, albeit in a small way.

Motivations for Exploring Youth Engagement

It is in fact my experiences that motivate me to do this research. I am particularly drawn to the topic of youth engagement from my own ten years experience working front line with marginalized, at-risk, experiential and leadership youth. Throughout my career I have had the unique opportunity to actually experience all three of the positions that this research was able to gain perspectives from: researchers, funders and practitioners within the field of youth engagement in Canada. In the past ten years I have worked front line as a youth coordinator for drop in, shelter and programmed activities for youth and particularly marginalized youth, I have managed a youth funding initiative as part of a national youth engagement project and I have also participate as a co-research, in addition to my own research, focusing on youth engagement. I believe that my unique experience provides me with a dynamic intersection of knowledge and experience for this research. Engaging in the academic field of attempting to understand more fully the perspectives that were currently informing the Canadian youth engagement landscape, I have focused my Masters of Arts research in Adult Education and Community leadership on the topic. Accompanied by my personal ambition to understand the very field I worked in on a daily basis, I wanted to understand and contribute to a de-marginalization of the actual act and focus on engaging young people as citizens. While I believe it is imperative to continue working to understand how young people themselves experience the phenomenon

of youth engagement and what enables or undermines their ability to shape civic life, I also maintain a real interest in understanding how the adults involved in these processes and practices are influencing the actual opportunities and experiences of youth. Therefore, while I considered researching young people for my thesis project, I instead focused on the adult perspectives.

Overview of the Thesis

The following is a brief summary of each of the remaining chapters of this thesis. In Chapter Two I discuss the main theoretical and philosophical frameworks in the field of youth engagement. I highlight the main attributes and assertions from these perspectives and present them in a historical, chronological context. In Chapter Three I focus on describing the methodological paradigms of my research and discuss my qualitative approach, employing a phenomenological epistemology and detail my methods and preparations for doing the research. In Chapter Four I provide a description of the data collected and highlight the key meaning clusters that surfaced from the data using traditional phenomenological coding strategies. Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the main outcomes of this research and the participant's rich contributions to my ontological and theoretical understandings of meaningful youth engagement.

Chapter 2: Examining the Youth Engagement

Landscape

Many theorists within the field of youth engagement have begun to explore the opportunity for civic youth engagement since the departure from deficit-based models and a refocusing on asset/strength-based models (Biesta, Lawry & Kelly, 2009; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Hart, 1994; Lansdown, 2001, Lerner, Almerigi & Theokas 2005; Pittman, 2000; Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001). The literature is, however, fragmented, in that it maintains a lack of cohesive definition of youth engagement as a phenomenon and therefore there is not a prescriptive framework or overall ontological anchor embedded in the literature (Andola, Jenkins, Keeter & Zudin, 2002, Camino, 2000). For this study I attempted to identify an anchoring document about youth engagement that supported both my working definition of youth engagement and the tenants of my ontological foundations in TLT. As described in Chapter 1 a working definition of meaningful youth engagement for this research includes:

The intentional establishment and support for the genuine involvement of young people in the design, creation, coordination, implementation and evaluation of the processes, practices and decisions which shape civic life.

With these considerations, I selected to focus on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC, 1990) as this represents the only

legal blueprint available to us. The UN CRC (1990) functioned as a base for the literature review and the selection of the key philosophies and frameworks to be explored in relation to this research.

A critical aspect of my overall research design was the exploration of how funders, practitioners, and researchers conceptualized the use of frameworks and specific youth philosophies in their practice. As such, the literature review for this research needed to explore existing, asset-based frameworks and philosophies but also required some clearer parameters for selection. As discussed earlier in Chapter One, the abstract nature of ‘youth engagement’ has created many inconsistencies across the field and in some ways has created a “non-field” –since there is no universal definition of youth engagement, there lacks a consistent thread for researchers, practitioners and funders to work with. This became evident throughout the literature review but the essential frameworks/philosophies that defined the emergence of asset-based, strength-based youth engagement initiatives are included in this chapter, along with more recent critical work around involving youth in civic life. I therefore focused on exploring literature which explored frameworks and philosophies which:

- Supported an asset-based / strength-based approach to youth engagement
- Supported a civic youth engagement agenda/lens
- Linked to the tenants of the UN CRC (1990)

Focusing on these attributes, a literature review was completed and a total of five major frameworks/philosophies associated with youth engagement that supported

some or all of the tenants of the meaningful youth engagement defined for the purposes of this research were identified. A more detailed discussion on the selection process for the literature review is also included in Chapter Three of this research.

This chapter will first discuss the importance of the UN CRC (1990) as a fundamental document for civic youth engagement, building and expanding upon the discussion in chapter 1. The chapter will then summarize and discuss the following five frameworks/philosophies:

- Promoting Children’s Participation in Democratic Decision-Making
- Positive Youth Engagement
- Hart’s Ladder of Participation
- Community Youth Development
- Five Pathways for Youth Civic Engagement

The Relevance of the UN CRC (1990) / Youth as Citizens

The UN CRC (1990) is used as a meta-map for the context of this research in order to begin unpacking the textured and complex nature of youth engagement as an opportunity for genuine civic agency of young people. The UN CRC (1990) was signed in 1989 and ratified by Canada in 1990. The document represents the only ratified, legally binding commitment by Canada which explicitly states that children – anyone under the age of 18, therefore youth are included for the purposes of this research – have the right to participate, the right to be heard legitimately and the right to be part of the very decisions that affect their day-to-day lives; this is stated in Article 12 of the convention.

Article 12 of the UNCRC (1990) states:

1. Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UN CRC, 1990, p.4).

While the UN CRC does not discuss how its legal language should be operationalized, interpretations for Article 12 in particular were quickly captured by practitioners, funders and researchers (Lansdown, 2001), and created an opening across ratified countries to re-examine the roles and responsibilities associated with young people under the age of 18. Golombek (2006) explains that conventional citizenship includes community activities outside of traditional democratic structures such as voting or running for office,

...Activities such as writing letters to local newspapers to express opinions about a community issue, organizing a neighbourhood clean up project, meeting with public officials to request the placement of stop signs at dangerous intersections, participating in interest groups and organizing, or publicly debating the proposed

building of a ten-story garage to replace a historical landmark are expressions of citizenship. In each of these instances individuals engage in activities that connect them to larger issues to sustain and strengthen their community – the traits of “good citizens” (p. 13).

Golombek (2006) goes on to point out that while adults are expected to participate in these types of activities, young people under the age of 18 are/have been participating but without acknowledgement or validity, as “...conventional definitions of citizenship do not include minors as active participants in community building” (p. 13). Essentially, the UN CRC (1990) was the first document in Canada to state otherwise, not only as an ideological standpoint or part of our national identity, but as law.

While the UN CRC (1990) provided a declaration of the rights of children/youth as citizens, the allocation of those rights has not been fully unpacked or completely understood in a comprehensive manner (Lansdown, 2001). Instead, there is great disparity across communities, organizations, funders, governments and academic researchers in the interpretation and application of the UN CRC (1990). This variety is demonstrated in the dynamic and diverse philosophies, frameworks and interpretations that will be discussed later in this literature review.

Yet Golombek (2006) suggests that this shift to seeing young people as citizens, prompted by the UN CRC (1990) illustrates that our conceptual understandings of young people is in flux and evolving. Indeed Golombek (2006)

asserts that the shift to naming youth as citizens is a conceptual framework in and of itself: “This conceptual framework advocates for a recognition and inclusion of children’s options, worldviews, and experiences into all relevant processes – from participatory research to community building” (p. 14).

In summary, the UN CRC (1990) is the conceptual anchor that informed my research. Supplemented by the paradigm shift Golombek (2006, p. 14) has identified and, invoking the approach to learning promoted by TLT, I have constructed a strong philosophical framework for exploring the operationalizing of youth engagement programs and practices. With this framework in mind, I will discuss five qualifying philosophies/frameworks or strategic processes that were found in my review of how youth engagement programs have emerged or evolved since the declaration of the CRC.

Framework 1: Promoting Children’s Participation in Democratic

Decision Making

Lansdown’s (2001) “Promoting Children’s Participation in Democratic Decision Making” framework provides a comprehensive outline for potential characteristics, key elements and strategies for governments, practitioners and funders to support the operationalization of the convention. Lansdown (2001) explains that the heart of the convention’s intent is embodied in Article 12, as a young person’s participation in the very decisions that affect their day-to-day lives ensures that “...children are subjects of rights, rather than merely recipients of adult protection, and that those rights demand that children themselves are entitled to be heard” (p. 1).

Lansdown (2001) explains that while her discussion and typologies presented in her paper provide a starting point, the concept of a universal framework may not be possible within the realm of youth engagement and more specifically, youth/children's activation of the right to participate. She argues, "There are no predefined strategies, no ideal or universal models. The methods used will depend on the issue, the project, or activity – whether the process is local, regional, national or international. It will also depend on the aim of the process" (p. 9).

Lansdown's (2001) begins by identifying specific areas where involving young people could take on meaningful participatory roles. These include research, monitoring their own institutions such as schools, evaluating services intended for younger people, peer representation, advocacy, project design, management, monitoring and evaluation, campaigning and lobbying, analysis and policy development, publicity and use of the media and conference participation.

While these settings provide the spaces for engagement by children and youth, their meaningful participation is dependent on specific conditions. According to Lansdown (2001), "...if their [youth's] participation is to be meaningful, it is imperative that their engagement is directly linked to their own first-hand experience and is identified by the children themselves as an area of concern" (2001, 9). Lansdown's (2001) focus on the settings in which meaningful participation, or engagement, take place is valued at a premium as she indicates that it is these settings, or spaces, that "...maximize children's opportunities to

explore and initiate activities themselves” and is therefore a mechanisms to fulfill the spirit of the UNCRC (1990)” (p. 8).

While the settings noted by Lansdown (2001) further describes specific characteristics of what she calls “effective and genuine” participation (2001, 11). These characteristics included three levels of descriptors: the project (what the actual purpose of the activity is to be), the values (specific characteristics regarding the organizational and personal values associated with the activity and the people involved) and finally, the methodology (the actual mechanisms from which engaging in effective and genuine participation would required within the contextual settings she has identified).

Lansdown (2001) goes on to detail specific expectations for each of these characteristics in her framework. One of the more significant details of her interpretation is the emphasis on the role of the adults and their responsibility to ensure that genuine participation foundations are being set. This emphasis reflects one of the unique aspects of the UNCRC (1990): the legally binding requirement of adults to hear children’s experiences, expectations and ideas and to give them genuine weight and legitimacy. Lansdown (2001) implores society to connect the voices and experiences of young people as both legitimate and relevant,

If we want to make the best decisions, then we need the best information available. Consulting children and drawing on their perceptions, knowledge and ideas are essential to the development of effective public policy.

Furthermore, children are often less cynical, more

optimistic and more flexible in their approach to the future and the capacity for change (p. 14).

Lansdown's (2001) operationalization of the UNCRC (1990) provides a very comprehensive framework for action based specifically on Article 12 and embodies many of the respective characteristics of other leading youth engagement frameworks/philosophies. Her typologies also reflect that the UNCRC (1990) has yet to be embodied across sectors and within the day-to-day lives of our communities. While Lansdown's (2001) work emerged in the early 2000s, Hart's Ladder of Participation (1994) emerged almost in tandem to the UNCRC (1990) and also provided one of the first frameworks for operationalizing many of the similar tenants of Article 12 discussed above.

Framework 2: Hart's Ladder of Participation

In 1994 Hart published UNICEF's Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship. The publication represented one of the first typologies for the practice of youth engagement that linked youth's participation and the concept of children's rights. Published shortly after the ratification of the UNCRC (1990) (1990), Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1994) has become a landmark typology within the field of youth engagement: it was the first practical and universally examined youth engagement framework. Presented using a ladder as a metaphor, Hart's work focused on identifying a series of ways in which young people were being included in society and hierarchically organized so as to reflect ideals or principles for inclusion and participation. The simplicity of the model provided a jumping off point for practitioners, researchers and policy makers to

identify where they were on the ladder and where they aspired to be. The following section will identify the rungs of the ladder and also provide a brief reflection on the impact of the ladder on the youth engagement landscape as per the observations of the ladder's creator, Hart (1994) who described the model as one "...for people who know that young people have something to say but who would like to reflect on the process... for those people who have it in their power to assist children in having a voice, but who, unwittingly or not, trivialize their involvement" (p. 4).

Hart organized the typology into two dichotomies: non-participation and participation. Using a hierarchical metaphor with the selection of the ladder, each rung on the ladder represented a different level of participation based on these two categories: participation and non-participation. A total of eight rungs were identified, the lower three representing non-participation and the upper five representing degrees of participation. The bottom three rungs are identified as: children are manipulated; children are decoration and children tokenized. Manipulation is explained as any activity, program, project etc. where "...if children have no understanding of the issues and hence do not understand their actions, then this is manipulation" (p. 7). Decoration refers to the involvement of children/youth as essentially background dressing for events and initiatives, where the youth have no actual involvement in the planning, design, or implementation but are instead just 'told' where to be and how to act. Hart describes instances where children are used as decoration describing, "...those frequent occasions when children are given T-shirts related to some cause, and may sing or dance at an

event in such dress, but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organizing of the occasion” (p. 7). Finally, the concept of tokenism is identified on the third rung of non-participation. The term is defined by Hart as “...those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions” (p. 7). Hart goes on to describe tokenistic occasions such as including youth as “the youth” on panels or inviting youth to “participate” in a conference but not having any youth involved in the actual organization or planning of the conference. He asserts that tokenism is the favoured youth engagement tactic within the Western world, where young people are included but not really heard or involved, “There are may more instances of tokenism than there are genuine forms of children’s participation in projects. Commonly, as far as adults are concerned, the projects are in the best interest of the children, but they are manipulative nevertheless” (p. 7). Finally, the ladder’s degrees of participation focus on the following rungs: children are assigned and informed, children consulted and informed, adult-initiated, shared decisions with children, children lead and initiate action and children and adults share decision-making (p. 11-14).

Hart’s (1994) work represented the first approachable and ‘simplistic’ operationalization of the UN CRC (1990) – making the ladder metaphor a landmark framework within youth engagement and remaining in use still today.

Hart’s (1994) typology is inherently hierarchical and this is deliberate. He describes his understanding that participation is not a static, finite experience but

is instead dynamic both in the relationship to the subject matter and to the age and capacity of the child/youth. Hart refers to the concept of social mobilization of children as a phenomenon throughout the globe but without a universal definition; he further explains that the idea of children/youth as civic change agents is both an emerging concept and dynamic in nature and practice (p. 10). Therefore, the rungs of the ladder representing degrees of participation are to be considered with this dynamic nature in mind, essentially, a flexible continuum. He writes, "This continuum ranges from regime instigated to voluntary activity" (p. 10).

The top five rungs of the participation ladder should, therefore, be considered as a continuum. Hart (1994, p. 11) does describe, specific characteristics that must be present in each of these rungs for it to be "...truly labeled as participatory" and these include:

1. The children understand the intentions of the project;
2. They know who made the decisions conceiving their involvement and why;
3. They have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role;
4. They volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them.

The Ladder of Participation (1994) views participation as a continuum with the four fundamental values outlined above embodied in each. As Hart (1994) argued: "...it is not necessary that children always operate on the highest possible rungs of the ladder. Different children at different times might prefer to perform with varying degrees of involvement or responsibility. The important principal again is one of choice: programmes should be designed which maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability" (p. 11).

Hart's Ladder of Participation (1994), coupled with the UNCRC (1990) created a strong interest among policy makers and practitioners alike who were looking for understand ways in which their work could move from deficit-based models to asset-based/strength based models, and could include the concept of youth as citizens. Despite Hart's (2008) statement four years later that the ladder was never intended to be used as a concrete evaluative tool for youth engagement practices, this has become one of its primary uses in the field.

Hart (2008) acknowledges that the ladder provided a very simple and practical tool for practitioners and different helping institutions to consider where they were in terms of involving young people's voice and where they wanted to be (p. 22-23). But, like any metaphor, the use of the ladder involves distorting reality as one tries to reduce the complexity" (2008, 23) and therefore more dynamic and sophisticated frameworks should be developed. While Hart (2008) does not name specific tools or frameworks that should be considered more legitimate than his own, he continues to express a strong belief that youth engagement needs to be understood as a spectrum of experiences and is not an either/or experience or process. Given the significance attributed to the ladder in much of the youth engagement literature, it is important to explore these ideas more fully.

First, Hart (2008) identified that the use of the ladder as a linear process was one of the main challenges of its application both in the field and theoretically (p. 24). Specifically, he saw the ladder as a touchstone for opportunity, not a hierarchical process, "The ladder should thought as some kind of scale of competence not performance: children should feel that they have the competence

and confidence to engage with others in the way outlined on any rungs of the ladder, but they should certainly never feel they should always be trying to perform in such ways” (p. 24). Second, Hart (2008) warned that the systematic rungs were not evaluation tools and that they were instead only beginning points for dialogue and assessment considerations. Third, Hart (2008) acknowledged the cultural limitations of his early work (Hart, 1990) and suggests applying more holistic understandings in the ways in which young people can be considered participating meaningfully. Hart (2008) contends,

What is now needed are programmes of collaboration between academics and those who work directly with children as well with children and youth themselves. In particular we need to find ways of monitoring and evaluating the way that we work with children and the quality of the realization of their participation rights (p. 29).

Framework 3: Positive Youth Development

As the practice of youth engagement evolved, so did the curiosity of multiple sectors of academia – with engagement of young people in meaningful and genuine ways spanning the fields of psychology to environmental studies. Between 2000 and 2003 the term *Positive Youth Development*, was coined by Lerner (2005) who examined youth engagement through primarily a psychological lens. Positive Youth Development (PYD) spoke to the shifts of conceptualizing youth from the binary categories of “good” and “bad” and instead introduced a developmental

approach to engaging young people. One of the most distinctive characteristics of PYD is that it pushed the discussion of youth engagement beyond an abstract sector of the population, i.e. “general youth”, and instead began to examine how engaging young people impacted their ability to meet certain developmental criteria or processes which would encourage them to meet their fullest potential. PYD opened the discussion of not only what youth engagement could/should be but also how young people were being engaged, contexts for example, could impact their ability to participate and gain a positive experience.

PYD is premised on the perspective that young people will thrive to meet their fullest potential when spaces and opportunities are provided which support, nurture and empower their natural gifts and abilities in ways that benefit the larger community (Lerner, 2005, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Lerner explains that while the original emphasis on intervention-style youth engagement focused on preventing the so-called negative behaviour (deficit-based), all youth can equally benefit from the opportunity to experience the “...promotion of desired outcomes, and not only the prevention of undesired behaviour (Lerner, 2005).

PYD’s framework for supporting a new type of youth engagement introduces the concept of plasticity; the idea that nothing in human development is fixed and everything is influenced by not only the personal biology of one’s make up but also the external impacts of the systems around them. Lerner (2005) contextualized plasticity when he writes,

These models of human development eschew the
reduction of individual and social behaviour to a fixed

genetic influences and instead stress the relative plasticity of human development and argue that this potential for systemic change in behaviour exists as a consequence of mutually influenced relationships between the developing person and his or her biology, psychological characteristics, family, community, culture and physical and designed ecology and historical niche (2005, p. 11).

PYD represents one of the first academic shifts in pushing asset-based approaches beyond conceptual statements or linear hierarchies (such as the UNCRC (1990) and Hart's Ladder of Participation, towards a more holistic practice. This concept of plasticity promoted programmatic approaches to shift from dealing with negative behaviour to a focus on preventing undesirable behaviour through the promotion of desired 'outcomes' (Lerner, 2005). "From this perspective, youth are not broken, in need of psychological repair, or problems to be managed. Rather, all youth are seen as resources to be developed" (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, as cited in Lerner, 2005, p. 11).

The concept of programmatic outcomes focused on positive youth development grew into a typology within the field. Key characteristics have emerged within the typology over the past decade and include: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring and contribution (King, 2005; Lerner, 2005). Programs taking a PYD lens should also embody the following practices and support networks, "...positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, youth skill-

building activities and opportunities for youth in and leadership of community-based activities” (Lerner, 2005, p. 12).

The sum of the PYD concepts is focused on young people developing healthy relationships with their community as critical tools in creating hopeful futures for young people, one that is linked to a strong and positive social support network and that includes opportunities for positive engagement within complex systems, “...if young people have mutually beneficial relationships with the people and institutions of their social world, they will be on the way to a hopeful future marked by positive contributions to self, family, community, and civic society. Young people will thrive” (Lerner, 2005, p. 12).

Framework 4: Community Youth Development

Community Youth Development (CYD) formally introduced the idea and initial processes for including young people in the decision-making processes and practices associated with community development. CYD is anchored in the spirit of the UNCRC (1994), the concept of genuine participation from Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1994) and Positive Youth Development (PYD) and infuses this with a strong emphasis on the values, policies and practices of the institutions and practitioners. Originally developed by the National Network for Youth, composed of a complex consortium of youth engagement practitioners and policy writers in the United States, CYD is described as a blueprint which supports a “partnership for action” between youth and systems within society (Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001). The objectives of CYD embody the philosophy that youth’s overall health

depends on the overall health of their community and vice versa. This interaction is described as follows

Understanding community youth development means promoting factors that provide all youth, regardless of their level of risk, with the critical elements needed for successful development, while concurrently engaging them as full community partners... community youth development emphasizes the things that all youth need in order to thrive and become engaged partners in their own development as well as in their communities' development (Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001, p. 45).

The intent of the CYD model is to engage young people as collaborators and co-creators at every level in their own development and the development of the world around them (p. 41).

The primary intended users of the model are institutions that engage young people and which provide policy development and community planning responsibilities. CYD is organized in a structured using a logic model template which outlines for whom the development is intended, the underlining assumptions associated with each strategy and specific policy, field, youth and community outcomes. In addition, CYD details in their logic model policy impacts. The model's creation was intended to address

...that communities and youth-serving institutions do not fully understand how community's actual actions and institutional programs must be transformed to successfully develop a community landscape that provides optimal opportunities for healthy youth development. (Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001, p. 41)

Two beliefs were used as building blocks to support the philosophical tenants of CYD: Positive Youth Development (PYD) and the concept of protective factors (usually referred to as Risk and Resiliency). The key aspects of PYD were identified above and so will not be repeated; a brief description of Risk and Resiliency theory follows.

Risk includes the activities which young people engage in which increase their risk for unhealthy outcomes, such as smoking, vandalism, unprotected sex. In the literature, risk was described by CYD practitioners within the context of the United States and described CYD as a new concept that sought to, "...raise the level of accountability, significance, and urgency for developing comprehensive responses to the "epidemic of risk" facing America's youth" (Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001, p. 40). Risk factors include but are not limited to poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, low socio-economic status, lack of access to or completion of education, language barriers, etc. Conversely, the concept of resilience is embedded in the "...ability of individuals to withstand the stressors of life and the challenges to their healthy development" (Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001, p. 44).

Protective factors are those factors in one's life that increase their resilience to risk factors. CYD is focused on augmenting the protective factors in a young person's life through their participation in the community and decisions affecting their lives.

Focusing on protective factors is at the core of the CYD philosophy: "These protective factors have a dual affect of decreasing the likelihood of negative consequences from exposure to risk and increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes" (Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001, p. 44). There are many different factors which resiliency efforts can focus on, but CYD focuses primarily on an effort to support resiliency efforts for young people which impacts, "... the availability of external support systems that encourage and reinforce an individual's coming efforts" (Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001, p. 44).

Building on these foundations, CYD explicitly promotes the building and expanding of young people's assets as the individual outcomes for youth engagement work, coupled with the collective impact of social and systems change. Their model describes the first comprehensive attempt to create a youth engagement framework that addresses both the individual rights and the collective well being through a focus on growing, nurturing and supporting protective factors in young people. "Community youth development involves creating opportunities for young people to connect to others, develop the skills, and utilize those skills to contribute to their communities. This, in turn, increases their ability to success" (Perkins, Borden & Villarruel, 2001, p. 47).

CYD is a framework for youth engagement which assumes that young people have the right to increase their protective factors, build their existing assets,

expand their developmental potential and engage with adults as co-creators of their lives and the communities' they live in. In addition, the model pushes the role of participation of young people into the realm of decision-making outcomes that impact policies and practices within the actual community or adult decision making structures. The model is complex and uses many different mechanisms for engagement, representing the only comprehensive approach reviewed within the parameters of analysis set out earlier in this chapter. While the model is complex Perkins, Borden & Villarruel (2001) capture the fundamentals of the framework when they write:

Community youth development is a process by which youth's developmental needs are met, engagement in problem behaviors are prevented, and most importantly, youth are empowered to use their developing competencies/skills for their communities' betterment. Thus, community youth engagement enables youth to be healthy contributing citizens now and as adults (p. 49).

Framework 5: Pathways for Youth Civic Engagement

While Community Youth Engagement emerged in the youth engagement landscape in 2001, in 2002 Camino & Zeldin explored the specific pathways for youth civic engagement and discussed specific supports and barriers which existed within society in an attempt to understand and surface tangible strategies for adult systems to engage young people in meaningful ways.

Camino & Zeldin (2002) describe the meaningful participation of young people as the “primary component of civic society” (p. 213) and frame youth engagement as the opportunity for young people to learn, create, demonstrate and actualize their civic responsibilities. Their work identifies five specific pathways that they assert formulate critical entry points for young people’s meaningful involvement. Essentially, these five settings consist of spaces where young people’s voice either is currently not legitimately considered or does not exist at all. Camino & Zeldin (2002) intend, “All the pathways, at their core, seek to concurrently promote positive youth development and community change” (p. 215). The five domains are: public policy consultation on youth issues, community coalitions for youth development, youth infusion in organizational decision making, youth organizing and school-based service learning (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 215-218).

Camino & Zeldin (2002) discuss the essential role of young people in the public policies associated with youth issues specifically (p. 216). Camino & Zeldin (2002) write, “The aim is to ensure that no public policy deliberation or action, particularly that focused on youth issues, is taken unaided by the perspective of youth” (p. 216). The researchers explain that while many communities articulate that they have young people consulting on public policy issues, in particular youth matters, there is tokenistic representation and young peoples voices are not being legitimately weighed alongside those of their adult counterparts.

The creation of stand-alone organizations specifically focused on organizing and mobilizing youth agendas across a broad spectrum of youth issues is the core tenant of the second pathway, community coalitions for youth development. The

coalitions, according to Camino & Zeldin (2002), should support a mix of youth-adult partnerships in all administrative and executive decisions and centre on issues, as the respective community's contexts require. Camino & Zeldin (2002) state:

...community coalitions are able to move on whatever youth issues are at the centre of the community's interest... can engage in cross-sector networking and resource sharing, they hold the great potential to transform communities, particularly in their ability to build community capacity for positive youth development and potentially, to create and strengthen pathways for youth civic engagement (p. 216).

The call for a youth-driven agenda pushed forward through the mechanism of coalitions is a transformative tool according to Camino & Zeldin (2002).

The third pathway, youth infusion in organizational decision-making, supports many of the tenants of the first two pathways in that it espouses a fundamental shift in the way decisions are made by organizations particularly those working on youth-related issues. Simple steps such as including young people in program evaluations are suggested, as well as including larger policy initiatives such as including young people on boards with equal voting powers as their adult counterparts (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 216-217). Described as "youth-infused" organizations, the researchers articulate this pathway as a critical catalyst in transforming long held beliefs that young people do not have the capacity to

make fundamentally adult decisions with widespread impact (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 216).

The role of youth organizing is also identified as a pathway for civic youth engagement, with the roots of this model described as lying in social action organizing (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 217). Youth organizing pertains to young people organizing, creating, designing, implementing and evaluating their own community change projects. The model asserts that for genuine youth engagement to take place, “effective youth development and concrete social change go on the same time” (R. Sherman, quoted in Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 217).

Finally, the pathway of school-based service learning is identified as the fifth pathway. This pathway is the only domain specific engagement setting described by Camino & Zeldin (2002), identifying the school setting as a critical opening for youth civic engagement. “School-based service learning is an instructional method that seeks to maximize individual learning while concurrently addressing community needs” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 217). Unlike traditional community service learning projects, Camino & Zeldin (2002) describe an experiential learning opportunity for students to engage with and elevate their critical reflection, understanding and real-life knowledge skill sets (2002, p. 217). The goal of youth engagement through this pathway is for young people to be “...consistently challenged to strengthen their decision-making and collective problem-solving abilities...as a catalyst for social change” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 218).

For each of the aforementioned pathways, Camino & Zeldin (2002) identify specific characteristics, which are necessary within each of the pathways to meet

the criteria of civic youth engagement. The three defining qualities are: ownership, youth-adult partnership and facilitative strategies and structures (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 218-219).

The role of ownership reflects the recruitment and engagement of young people in these pathways through “authentic” roles (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 218). Authenticity is only established when young people are able to participate voluntarily, understand the scope and boundaries of their role and responsibilities, have access to information on why a project or consultation is being requested and by whom and have the opportunity to be ‘owners’ through a wide variety of roles – including planning, implementation, advising, etc. (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 218).

Youth-adult partnerships are identified as a critical catalyst for the pathways to be effective in supporting the goals of meaningful youth engagement. Aspects of youth-adult partnerships identified include “...coaching, dialoguing, connections to institutional resources and community leaders” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 218). Camino & Zeldin (2002) link the role of youth-adult partnerships to the capacity building of young people as leaders both now and in the future and that this is a fundamental aspect of human capital, “...youth-adult partnership are critical to the efficacy of the pathways because they have the potential to engage a full range of human capital” (2002, p. 218). This human capital is also represented through the interplay of leadership qualities and capacities ideally exchanged within these youth-adult partnerships. They argue: “...leadership is not a skill per se. It is rather a complex set of skills, behaviours, actions and attitudes best developed through apprenticeship and experiential-type learning processes, which

necessitate close partnership between novices and older hands” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 218).

Facilitative policies and structures within the pathways are necessary to function as the foundation for the actual implementation of the opportunities in realistic, tangible and sustainable ways. Camino & Zeldin (2002) explain that without the facilitative policies and structures that require larger institutions and established processes (such as government decision making and budgeting for example), to genuinely engage young people in their processes, practices and outcomes, youth engagement is usually an afterthought. To respond, Camino & Zeldin (2002) write, “Accordingly, the need to enact policies and build structures to support youth civic engagement becomes salient. Policies and practices provide the scaffolding that articulate the vision, expectations and support for the pathways” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 219).

Limitations and Opportunities

The five frameworks summarized for the purposes of the literature review have limitations and potential in relation to this research. One of the key limitations is that the source of these frameworks/philosophies are primarily Western and focused within the United States. This US-bias means that youth engagement in the Global South, and anywhere outside the US is ignored and obfuscated, even if it may meaningfully contribute to our knowledge of how to work with youth. In addition, none of the frameworks/philosophies identified could provide a ‘completed’ landscape of the current youth engagement literature since a universal definition of the phenomenon continues to elude researchers and

practitioners alike. Essentially, the literature summarized above provide a variety of road maps for interpreting, understanding, implementing and acting on the concept of engaging young people as civic agents within their own lives, their families, their communities and beyond. As a result, the literature selected for this research cannot be considered exhaustive. As described in the introduction, the key frameworks and philosophies selected were based on the tenants of the UN CRC (1990) and the notion of meaningful youth engagement within a civic context specifically.

With these limitations in mind, this study builds on the current literature and will contribute to knowledge emerging in the field of youth engagement. These new or enhanced understandings will be discussed in more detail in Chapters four and five.

Chapter 3: Methods

A Qualitative Approach

This study is grounded in the qualitative tradition of research and focuses on employing strategies that permits an exploration of personal perspectives as well as community-based practices for three types of youth engagement practitioners: front-line practitioners, researchers and funders. Selecting a qualitative approach was inspired by the qualitative tradition of honoring the personal experiences of local practitioners with community work settings. Furthermore, qualitative approaches also provide a space for exploring the connections between perspectives offered by the very people who shape social change through their work with youth in community contexts, researchers who attempt to study and capture this practice and funders who play pivotal roles in resourcing and setting the agenda for youth engagement.

For the purposes of this study's objectives it was critical to identify a research strategy that allowed space for innovative approaches from community practitioners themselves to be identified, captured and analyzed. Creswell (1998) writes,

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions in inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researchers builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of

informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting
(p. 15).

This research attempted to provide a new space for the perspectives and experiences of *people* in the field of youth engagement to reflect, articulate and express their understanding of youth engagement in Canada. A qualitative approach laid the foundations for participants to allow their own “heart” to surface and be counted. The philosophical underpinnings of the qualitative approach supports the opportunity to capture the experiences of the individuals, surface similar assumptions, motivations and approaches and highlight potential openings within a select phenomena or experience for growth and expansion. Scwantd (1999) writes, “The phenomena of understanding lives at the heart of the qualitative inquiry enterprise” (p. 451). It is both the metaphor of the heart beating through research and the experience of the heart that makes qualitative approaches ideal for exploring and attempting to understand, but not “know.”

Purpose and Objectives of the Research

This research was initially guided by a personal ambition to understand how specific tools and frameworks were supporting and informing the experiences of youth engagement by practitioners, researchers and funders. In reflection of these specialized goals the objective emerged as a focus on exploring and allowing the voices of the people working in youth engagement (funders, practitioners and researchers specifically) to be heard on their experiences and perspectives about youth engagement. While the outcomes of my research did not address all the

initial ambitions, a full overview of the data collected is provided in Chapter Four and a discussion on the data in Chapter Five.

Three guiding questions were outlined to help guide the information gathering with the purpose to engage participants in exploring their experiences, they were:

1. What are the key and critical components that a framework would need to have so as to enable youth engagement across diverse sectors?
2. In what ways could this research be used to map how researchers and practitioners conceptualize and operationalize youth engagement across diverse sectors?
3. What are the key limitations and opportunities general frameworks provide for youth engagement praxis (the integration of practice and theory)?

Overall, this research intended to 'capture' a slice of the youth engagement landscape currently embodied and emerging across the Canadian landscape.

Epistemology: Phenomenology Inquiry

Phenomenology was selected as the epistemological standpoint for this inquiry. As a practitioner who works in the youth engagement "field" and drawing on the literature review, the actual phenomenon of youth engagement is at its core a lived experience – both by the adults supporting a process and the youth engaged in that process / experience. Phenomenological inquiry is a person centered qualitative approach. As Lester (1999) describes, "The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation" (p. 1). Reflecting on my own research objective, phenomenological inquiry spoke to my ambition to

hear the real lived experiences of the participants and gain a better understanding of how these perspectives were shaping the tangible practice and general landscape of youth engagement in Canada.

Due to my own experience with youth engagement it was critical that I identify an epistemological method that incorporated space to be clear about my own motivations, background and assumptions while also valuing the knowledge and experience of the inquiry participants, as transparently as possible. Phenomenological inquiry represents the greatest opportunity to meet this ambition.

Lester (1999) writes,

Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual... phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize the importance of personal experiences and interpretation. As such they are powerful for understanding subjective experiences, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom (p.1).

Therefore, phenomenological inquiry requires space for understanding phenomenon grounded in the experience of people themselves.

Two other aspects of phenomenological investigation supported the needs of this research: the analysis process and the reporting traditions. Conventional methods associated with phenomenological inquiry surface textured data that is not easily organized and instead allows for the complexity of real, lived experiences and perspectives to surface. In the case of my research this would be true, two methods for data collection were identified – interviews and focus groups – both producing extensive data without structured organization. While interview and focus group schedules would be created, the data would require extensive processes to garner any sense of the whole and critical understandings of the important pieces. Conventional coding strategies for phenomenological inquiry purport a very structured and transparent process, allowing the researcher to identify their own subjective understandings and beliefs, and also critically attempting to understand and find common meanings within the overall data collected (Hycner, 1985; Groenewald, 2004).

Finally traditional phenomenological reports allow for the researcher to honour the voices of participants and also acknowledge their own (the researchers) perspectives and interpretations. For the purposes of this research, my aim was not to identify a summary of elements or a list of variables or causes moving youth engagement in one direction or another. Instead, the goal was to allow the participants to be heard and connect opportunities and highlight common clusters of experiences and perspectives. My approach reflects what Lester (1999) highlights, “...the aim here should be to faithful to the participants,

and be aware (insofar as is possible) of biases being brought to the inevitable editing, which is needed... “ (p. 3).

Based on these characteristics and the overall goals and purpose of my study, phenomenological inquiry was identified as the most suitable epistemological approach.

Ethics

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board. Included in the ethics process was the completion of a full ethics form, the development of consent forms for participants in interviews and focus group and also the inclusion of sample interview questions and focus group facilitation guides. A copy of the approved ethics application is in Appendix A.

Methods

Two phenomenological methods were selected for this research: interviews and focus groups. The selection of these methods reflected the objective of the research to understand youth engagement from the perspectives and through the words of the practitioners, researchers and funders themselves. While, an interview and focus group schedule were developed (please see Appendix B), the process intended to be intuitive and provide space for a shared experience. This reflects a phenomenological approach, as Lowes & Prowes (2000) explain, “...the products of the phenomenological interview are ‘co-created’ by both the interviewer and the respondent – products of human interactions where each one has the affect on the responses of the other” (p.474).

Project Participants: Recruitment Summary

Two separate processes took place to recruit and engage participants in this study. Ten interviews and two focus groups with eight participants were completed. A total of eighteen individuals contributed to the data for this research.

For the purposes of this research I specifically wanted to speak with adults who were practitioners in the field of youth engagement, youth engagement researchers or youth engagement funders. In regards to the interviews I used a snowball sampling process. I initially made a list of people in these three areas of youth engagement that I had worked with through my own professional experience. I then asked them to refer two colleagues from their professional network for me to approach. In total I identified twenty stakeholders who would be suitable to complete the interviews and successfully coordinated and completed interviews with ten of them.

Two focus group sessions were organized and held in Victoria. To recruit members I again identified a pool of participants from the three areas described above and asked them to refer peers and colleagues who might be interested in participating. One change in the focus groups did emerge after consulting with colleague – the elimination of funders from the group discussions. Since Victoria is a small town, with limited local youth funding it was identified by some participants that having funders in the focus groups could impact the setting for honest and genuine sharing.

Participants: Researchers, Practitioners and Funders

Three specific sectors were represented in the participants of this project. They were, researchers, funders and practitioners involved in the youth engagement field across Canada. I will briefly describe these participants to help contextualize the data for this research.

First, practitioner participants in this research are those working front-line with young people as drop-in centre workers, coordinators of youth specific programming and service providers for youth within a community setting. The practitioners engaged in this research reflected many different spheres of front-line work interaction with youth – from program coordinators to youth centre drop in staff, to delivering employment support services for youth. Second, the funders who participated in this research represented large funding agencies within Canada who have or do fund youth engagement activities; both short and long term initiatives. Third, researchers who have or are currently researching elements of youth engagement practice, experiences and evaluation tools were engaged in the project as participants.

The participants discussed their personal and professional experiences within the youth engagement landscape; and some emphasized their professional roles more than others. Overall, the practitioners discussed more concrete, tangible actions that they were practicing and experiencing as those working directly with young people in youth engagement arenas. Versus the researchers and funders, who tended to emphasize more higher arching goals and values for youth

engagement. I would describe the interacting participant data as complex and multifaceted intersections from these three perspectives.

Defining Youth Engagement

I developed a working definition of youth engagement that would help frame and inform the interviews and focus group discussions. I felt it was important to be transparent with the participants in the research as to my own conceptualization and working knowledge of youth engagement, and also provide an initial starting point for some of the discussion and interview questions – contextual outline for what youth engagement *could* be. I created a working definition based on some of the general attributes that emerged around civic youth engagement in the literature review and also attempted to build in elements of Transformational Learning Theory. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, the working definition of youth engagement was:

The intentional establishment and support for the genuine involvement of young people in the design, creation, coordination, implementation and evaluation of the processes, practices and decision which shape civic life.

The Interviews

Ten interviews were completed for this research. Each participant received a consent form and a copy of the interview schedule prior to our discussion. A copy of the interview schedule is available in Appendix A. Of the ten interviews three were face to face, and the other seven were completed over the phone and Skype.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. Each of the participants received their transcribed interview to review and comment on. Participants were given the opportunity to exclude any / all information they were not comfortable having included in this research. The audio recordings of the interviews were destroyed after the transcriptions were completed.

In general, the interview process was very straightforward and successful. However, as with any phenomenological exploration, the interpretation of the questions to be discussed was a challenge at times, particularly with the diversity backgrounds involved.

The Focus Groups

The two focus groups were organized after work hours between 6 and 8 pm, and lasted in duration for approximately one hour each. A total of eight people participated in the focus groups. The focus groups were comprised solely of front line youth engagement workers or youth project coordinators. No researchers or funders participated in the focus groups. Instead two grouping emerged in the focus group process, the first composed of recreation and institutional youth engagement projects and the second group of social service workers. The focus group was facilitated using guiding questions outlined in Appendix B of this study. Questions to be posed during the focus groups were distributed prior to the meeting date along with a consent form. At the beginning of each focus group participants were given a copy of the facilitation scheduled and guaranteed anonymity. To capture the focus group, I took notes and also used audio recordings. After the focus groups were completed I transcribed the summaries and the audio

recordings were deleted. Each of the focus group participants received a copy of the summary notes from the focus group they participated in. They had the right to take out any comments or notes they felt they would like removed.

In retrospect the focus groups most likely yielded less personal perspectives primarily because of the recruitment methodology. Set within a group context the discussions were more controlled and responses from participants much less exhaustive. The fact that the participants all knew one another and their respective organizations may have influenced their more controlled responses. Despite the promise of anonymity, I did sense throughout the process a lack of openness from the focus group participants during the discussions.

Coding

Qualitative data represents a complex and textured set of information for researchers to explore, and this research was no different. The coding strategy was developed to organize and interpret the data from the participant interviews and two focus groups using inductive methodology and applying traditional phenomenological coding strategies. The following is a summary of the process I used for coding.

First, I transcribed the data into text and noted my own observations taken during the interviews and focus groups with the transcriptions. Next, I read over all the data as a whole to get an overall sense of the information and the experiences from the participants – attempting to gain a sense of the ‘whole.’ I then reviewed the data a second time in an effort to “bracket” any initial personal connections, perspectives and interpretations. I set this “bracketed data” aside and folded them

into the analysis in later steps. The process of “bracketing” allowed me to engage the data while also including my own biases and subjective understandings of the participants’ perspectives; reflecting my own historical experience within the youth engagement landscape. Reviewing the data a third time, I began to identify initial codes or energy points which fused ideas from different sources together; this step allowed me to form broad, unstructured initial observation codes and a set of field notes.

After reviewing the broad connections, I attempted to pull out specific words and phrases that seemed to capture key thoughts and concepts, it was at this point I also began to incorporate some of my initial brackets and perceptions in an attempt to identify trends and links. From here I worked on identifying initial coding schemes and began merging the codes into categories. Creating overarching categories from the codes, I continued organizing key thoughts, quotes and concepts under these categories. Finally, from these categories meaning clusters were then organized; grouping categories where possible, and highlighting clusters of patterns, themes and common threads. I organized the clusters with the supportive quotes and developed a list of defining traits from the data for each of the meaning clusters.

In the following chapter I discuss what meaning clusters were identified and describe the overall characteristics of the data.

Chapter Four: Description of Data

The data collected for this research materialized as extremely rich and textured from the engaging and responsive participants experiences and perspectives. Exploring any phenomenon that remains abstract and universally undefined presents an interesting challenge for any research, and this remained true for this research project. A total of ten interviews and two focus groups were conducted in the fall/winter of 2009/2010, with a total of 18 participants contributing to the overall data. Applying a phenomenological research design, these two methods of data collection, along with returning the data to the participants for clarification. I applied triangulation as a strategy to support rigour and trustworthiness in both the quality of the information gathered and the process by which the information was analyzed. The following chapter is a description of the data's key meaning clusters and their defining traits as surfaced in the data.

Meaning Clusters: Common Threads from the Data

During the coding process of the data, a variety of connections within the responses and perspectives were noted. I chose to use the term meaning clusters for the outcomes of my data analysis as an attempt to identify connections within the data without identifying "conclusions". The idea of meaning clusters reflects that the data is the voices and experiences of researchers, practitioners and funders within youth engagement in Canada and therefore represent complex human experiences. The data did have connections across the participants' perspectives

and I used the term “clusters” to describe these connections. The discussion points in Chapter Five reflect the themes of the data, and the following details the meaning clusters. The data provided many comprehensive responses that could niche into more than one meaning cluster, and to hold true to the quotes I have provided dual quotes in some instances. Primarily, the data surfaced 6 specific meaning clusters. The following sections will discuss each meaning cluster and provide defining traits within the clusters from the data. Critical discussion and analysis of the meaning clusters will be presented in chapter five.

Summary of Meaning Clusters

The six meaning clusters which I identified from the data were:

- Key characteristics of meaningful youth engagement
- The lack of shared understanding or sense of purpose regarding youth engagement as a phenomenon
- Strengthening the quality and opportunity for youth involvement
- Youth as community assets
- Valuing youth as citizens how
- Frameworks as a tool to justify and evaluate youth engagement

The following sections will discuss these meaning clusters in detail.

“Meaningful opportunities for shared experience, decision-making, and shared purpose”: Key Characteristics of Meaningful Youth Engagement

Describing the key characteristics of meaningful engagement was embedded throughout the discussions with both interview and focus group participants. The data gathered from participants was overflowing with attributes, descriptions and

characteristics of how they perceived meaningful youth engagement. The following is a synthesis of these conversations drawn from the transcripts.

A number of characteristics of a meaningful youth engagement definition were identified by participants and included: positive processes and experiences for youth and adults involved; outcomes of youth participation need to have an impact evidenced by tangible change; engagement needs to be action oriented; to be of importance of youth to diverse and inclusive communities; providing young people opportunities to connect outside of their traditional kin groups such as peers and immediate family; including youth at decision-making tables with real decision making powers; and establishing supportive resources including money and human resources/expertise. However, by far the most critical characteristic described by the participants was the role of adults as essential allies, supports, and resources for meaningful youth engagement. The important and complex role of adults could be highlighted as the critical theme of the data throughout.

Most important: Putting Youth at the Centre of our Practice

While the list of key characteristics could be applied to many different approaches and frameworks for establishing a meaningful youth engagement definition, it was the belief, value and practice of putting youth “at the centre” by the participants which surfaced the connection and passion these participants had about empowering young people to meet their fullest potential as the primary goal for youth engagement. One research participant who was a practitioner expressed that meaningful youth engagement, “...meets youth where they are at, celebrates their abilities, nurtures their potential, appreciates their contributions and invites

both participation and ownership.” Another participant who was a practitioner provided the following, “Youth engagement is the development of positive relationships between young people and their community through formal and informal programs that are structured to benefit both the youth and the host organization/institution.”

The defining characteristics described by the participants further added to their purposeful positioning of youth at the centre and making them the priority – both their personal and collective leadership experience. This represented another critical aspect of the key characteristics throughout all the attributes discussed by participants: placing young people at the centre and making them a priority. One practitioner described youth engagement as, “... working together with youth to have them be leaders in programs and youth services so that their needs are met in ways that work for them.” Another participant who was a practitioner described the process as, “Young people wanting to participate in something positive, enjoying that process and feeling like they contributed to it in a meaningful way... they feel like they are giving back and changing the world.”

This placement of youth at the centre did not only focus on youth’s individual development as the only critical outcome, but instead paired young people’s thriving as mutually important with the outcomes of the institutions and communities they would be engaging with as critical to the operation of the youth-adult relationship. This mutuality of benefits was explained by one participant who was a funder, in this way, “Engaging is looking outwards; you are using that strength and voice to connect with young people and issues bigger than yourself.

That is where things like adult-youth partnerships become important. To engage with a system larger than your experience, you need those relationships. Without them, you bump up against systems in unproductive ways; you don't take no for an answer, but you need to know how to talk to change it."

Putting youth at the centre requires support – that is the message from participants. The emphasis on youth-adult partnerships also described the necessary characteristics of youth engagement practitioners and adults as bridge-builders, gatekeepers and resource raising assets. This partnership based approach surfaced throughout the transcriptions; for example, one participant who was a practitioner, summarized this approach as: "You need young people stepping up, parents saying this is important for me because I have young people who want to do more, you need teachers saying I have amazing young people and some are falling through the cracks and some are doing well and both need attention." Another participant, who was a funder, explained, "Empowering for me means you're providing opportunities, space and freedom that the young person is asking for, while still providing the skills that you have to share, to help them be successful. You aren't doing them a service without giving them basic structure and support."

While the previous description of data represents a more holistic snapshot of the overarching characteristics of meaningful youth engagement that emerged from the data, additional meaning clusters were also identified.

“Engagement on what? And for whom?”: The Lack of Shared Understanding or Sense of Purpose regarding Youth Engagement as a Phenomenon

Participants discussed the lack of agreement and cohesion around the call to action for young people to be involved as citizens. Participants expressed that there was a need for “issue-based” mobilization to push youth engagement into the mainstream Canadian culture. One participant, a funder, explained, “Youth engagement for the sake of youth engagement is not enough, there needs to be a cause or sense of urgency” or as another participant, who was a researcher, stated, “I think it may take a national crisis.” One participant, a funder, described that until an issue needs youth to mobilize and solve it, there will be no real cohesion around youth engagement: “It takes a crisis... if you think about where the greatest discussions and changes have happened, it occurred around national crisis.”

According to participants, this “fragmented” connectivity means there is a lack of cohesion and sense of direction within the youth engagement field. One participant, a funder, explained, “I’m not sure youth engagement is a field... As a field it is very fragmented, but those who do it well often have the same values and strategies without knowing it. For them to work effectively, they do need to identify an issue and galvanize around it.”

The lack of a common definition of youth engagement was embedded in this meaning cluster. Specifically, participants called for a working definition that might provide some specific value statements and guideposts that would offer some sort of cohesive starting point for describing youth engagement as a phenomenon.

The lack of opportunity to communicate about youth engagement, the varied approaches across the sector and by organizations, accompanied by the lack of resources to build capacity around youth engagement all surfaced as challenges to this meaning cluster. One participant, a researcher, explained, “Without having the necessary discussions around youth engagement and its impacts on our government and society and then taking meaningful and coordinated actions, we will never move forward.”

In addition to a lack of cohesion, understanding the term ‘youth engagement’ was also explored, with participants explaining that perhaps issue based approaches with young people involved or completely different language may be required to jump-start a culture shift. A participant, a funder, explained, “I don’t understand why, but my gut tells me that naming this “youth engagement” is wrong. Thinking about it further, I suppose the term “youth engagement” runs the risk of downplaying the importance of providing emotional, social, physical and intellectual supports for young people.” Finally, one participant, a funder, summarized, “Engagement on what and to whom? These have not been defined in youth engagement as they should be.”

“Engaging youth in genuine and productive roles is a strategic and good practice decision”: Strengthening the quality and opportunity for youth involvement

The participation of young people was an element agreed upon by all participants as an important aspect of Canadian culture and for the creation of healthy communities. However, the quality of their involvement was a common

thread surfacing throughout the data. While I have applied the term quality, I selected this term to highlight that the participants discussed expanding 'engaging' methodologies beyond just having young people 'involved' and instead pushing forward a deeper engagement agenda. Providing opportunities that expanded young people's capacity both as leaders and civic agents were key characteristics of this meaning cluster. One participant, a practitioner, summarized,

Engaging youth in genuine and productive roles is a strategic and good practice decision. Providing opportunities for youth to participate within the organizations in task-oriented, skill-developing activities is a bonus for everyone involved. The organization receives the benefit of having young people to bounce ideas off, act as ambassadors and share the public workload.

Other participants who used different words like citizen, civic agent and community member also alluded to the descriptor of "public workload".

Participants described the ongoing tokenistic involvement of young people and proposed more 'empowering' opportunities. One participant, a practitioner, explained how empowerment connected to the need for greater quality of involvement by young people,

Basically, if you just bring people to the table all the time and do the token thing by asking them questions you already know the answers to and questions that you

think you should but don't really listen to the feedback then you won't really have a meaningful experience. It won't mean anything.

Creative suggestions were put forth in the interviews supporting innovation in augmenting the quality and number of opportunities for youth. Suggestions included providing multiple opportunities in a variety of settings, incorporating fun and creativity, ensuring a safe environment, and always supporting the youth with basic structures and supports – such as an adult coordinator, a budget and opportunities to seek expertise. Participants connected the increase in quality and opportunity to achieving the goal of genuine community involvement by young people. One participant, a practitioner, expressed, “Community engagement is important and young people should be allowed a number of opportunities to contribute and shape their world as everyone else.”

“Everyone has something to contribute”: Youth As Community Assets

Another key meaning cluster involved the description of young people as untapped community assets with many gifts and abilities. The participants discussed not only young people's untapped potential but many linked the lack of acknowledgement of this potential to negative perceptions of youth as being uninterested or apathetic to their community's development. One participant, a practitioner, described their work with young people to surface their internal assets, “Our work often begins with months of beginning to understand that they all have skills that they can contribute back to the community. Everyone has something to contribute. They will feel like they are needed.” An asset-based

approach also focuses on what young people's capacities are, not their deficits. One participant, a funder, explained, "Until people figure out what they have, how can they figure out what they need? When we come in not knowing what they need we denigrate their integrity."

Taking time to identify key assets and built opportunities for these assets to contribute to decision-making processes within the community was part of this meaning cluster. Described by some as a "deeper level of engagement", and as an opportunity for young people to build genuine relationships within their community outside of their peer groups and immediate families were elements of pursuing asset-based approaches. One participant, a practitioner, described their experience focusing on assets,

Working specifically with youth over the last two years has re-energized me. Seeing how members of our youth council respect one another, develop authentic peer-to-peer relationships, show compassion for one another, and are genuinely excited and passionate about the causes they support has made me appreciate what this age group can contribute to any community.

One participant, a practitioner, described an asset-based approach as creating even the opportunity for young people to acknowledge they have existing capacities and gifts to share, "Mindsets need to recognize existing capacities, and building to fill the gaps rather than service delivery models."

“Youth are not seen as citizens”: Valuing Youth as Citizens Now

The focus on asset-based approaches to youth engagement also brought forth a strong connection across the participants of the devaluing of young people’s status as citizens within society. While only two participants, a practitioner and a researcher, discussed the UNCRC (1990) specifically, a common thread about the rights of young people to be taken seriously as citizens did surface during analysis. One participant, a practitioner, described the situation as follows, “Youth are not seen as citizens, and there are barriers they are not citizens tomorrow, they are citizens in their own right today.”

Some key characteristics about the importance of acknowledging youth as citizens arose from the participants including knowledge transfer, loftier goals for the future, young people participating in the decisions that affect their day to day lives, their rights to be involved as citizens and the idea that engaging youth as citizens builds stronger communities. One participant, a researcher, described the importance of valuing youth as citizens, “...builds stronger communities. The benefits are so substantial, there are so many ways to do it and that’s what’s exciting about it.” In terms of decision-making, one participant, a practitioner, pointed out, “We need something to focus on the fact that young people aren’t at the table and should be, and we need someone to act as a conduit to be that person to get them to the table.” Connecting the concept of citizenship to positive community action, another participant, a practitioner, explained, “... it’s important because it gives youth a voice, it empowers them to make their own decisions and to take action in the world.”

The idea of citizenship was also linked to the concept of valuing youth engagement as part of acknowledging young people's citizenship. One participant, a researcher, explained, "Youth engagement inherently is of value as it does engage young people in their own development for themselves and how they contribute to their life, their community and their world." The road towards the culture shift of youth as citizens was linked to youth engagement and was highlighted to be process oriented by one participant, a researcher,: "I think that youth inclusion is important. I think that our society and culture should be totally inclusive of youth, however, I understand that we are away from that goal and so youth engagement is a key step along that path."

The last two meaning clusters, youth as assets and youth as citizens did have some overlapping links and connectivity. The meanings from the participants synthesized into the message that for young people to be viewed as citizens their gifts, abilities and capacities need to be acknowledged, honoured and cultivated through specific youth engagement opportunities.

"Frameworks are listings of variables rather than a holistic approach":

Frameworks as a tool to justify and evaluate youth engagement

The discussions from participants both in the interviews and the focus groups did not yield any specific frameworks suggestions, nor did the data discuss any specific frameworks currently being applied, researched or funded. Instead the discussions around frameworks surfaced a lot of frustration and dislike mainly from the front line workers and youth project coordinators. Adversely, funders specifically associated frameworks as critical evaluation tools and important to

funding deliverables. The following section describes the conflicting views of these two participants' perspectives..

The frontline workers and coordinators who participated in the research noted that they mainly saw frameworks as being part and parcel of external funding requirements and not developed for the enhancement of youth engagement as a practice. One practitioner explained, "It's [frameworks] to validate the work. If the funders actually came and watched you... they would believe in the work without needing the language, pretty documents and diagrams. Why do we need so much documentation? Is it because we feel it justifies what we do or is it actually useful for what we do? We spend a great deal of time justifying our work." Another participant, a practitioner, described applying frameworks as lacking a comprehensive or holistic approach, "Frameworks are listings of variables rather than a holistic approach." Finally, some participants used the term credibility when discussing frameworks. One participant, a practitioner, described how frameworks were tools developed to provide credibility, similar to the discussion by the other practitioner participant around frameworks as a tool for justifying youth engagement work: "Academics sometimes can't give the organization credibility without some sort of structure behind it."

Instinctively another participant linked the concept of frameworks to funding evaluation tools. The participant, a practitioner, explained, "Unfortunately, due to the funding environment, frameworks are more often than not, a waste of time... the funding recipients are attempting to communicate what happened to the funder... forgive me for being impolite but the process is bullshit and I wish

community groups would have the chutzpa to link arms, refuse to participate and demand better funding programs.”

In contrast, however, one participant did describe the use of a framework in a more positive light. This participant, a practitioner, explained that the values of their work was augmented using a framework: “Values were strengthened as we started to see them through the initiative and because of a way of monitoring from baseline created a place for dialogue and critical conversations that were neutral and co-created, not owned by anyone. When things didn’t go well, how can we change course and setting out to accomplish what we agreed to do?”

Conversely, funders and researchers discussed primarily the importance of frameworks as evaluation tools attached both to research designs and funding outcomes. One participant, a funder, explained, “...funders provide rigid application structures to ensure that the strongest applicants meet the eligibility requirements and receive consideration for funding. It works in that the number of youth programs eligible to apply is contained and this makes it easier for the funder to be accountable for the distribution of dollars.” Yet others acknowledged the limitations of frameworks; as one participant, a researcher, expressed that the process, “...does not promote learning, creates an un-positive culture and lack of communication.” Adhering to a framework for delivering “youth engagement” and reporting on their work also had participants, a practitioner, questioning the motivations around frameworks,

We’ve learned that it’s important to have some pieces
within the parameters or boundaries but I think that

we've gone overboard and now funders are asking too much. Makes you feel like the work isn't being appreciated and not trusted. You start to feel like you're always justifying your time and that they don't have a great deal of trust in the work that you are doing. I don't think that many people take on a funder and ask, "Why do you think this process or question is important?" I don't think most funders are even open to having a discussion like that.

Individuals clearly described frameworks in challenging and conflicting ways, representing the different standpoints or roles that participants played. However, their experiences with frameworks surfaced valuable threads of connectivity between their perspectives. While their perspectives differed all the participants nonetheless admitted that frameworks were part of the current youth engagement landscape and therefore a necessary point of discussion and further exploration.

Differing Perspectives from Participant Groups

The three primary participant groups for this research were youth researchers, practitioners and funders. While none of the participants had exactly the same experience, stories, insights or perspectives to share about youth engagement there were some connections within each of the sub-groups within the data.

First, the researchers were much more inclined to discuss higher level, foundational aspects of youth engagement versus more practical tools, personal

experiences and program specific actions by the practitioners. These two sub-groups discussed details on program specific activities and ideas for gathering young people and adults together in meaningful ways very differently. The researchers tended to discuss youth engagement in terms of the ways it connected to more complex issues within society, such as the economy or the environment. In addition, researchers spoke about youth engagement in more holistic terms, included more jargon, referred to frameworks and “philosophies” in their conversations and provided less personal examples in their conversations.

Alternatively, practitioners tended to discuss specific incidents, highlighting experiences with researchers in particular in terms of them “not understanding” or “wanting information in ways that were really ridiculous” and not related to the impacts of the young people from their perspective. I found this relevant when examining the data as there were many connections in what both the researchers and practitioners were saying, as demonstrated in the discussion on meaning clusters from the data, but the way they were saying it was different – personalized by the practitioners and more contextualized to ‘ideas’ by the researchers.

One of the main areas where there was significant discrepancy between the discussed experiences and perspectives of the participants was related to the funding of youth engagement work and action within communities. Researchers were somewhat mute on this point, but funders were interestingly connected not only on what should be funded but also in what ways. The funders who participated in this research identified that youth engagement remains a challenging field to fund primarily because of the lack of collective and explicit

values, philosophies and principles. One funder was explicit in expressing that youth engagement is not something that should be “funded” but instead a natural reflex within communities and done mainly through voluntary efforts. Another funder expressed that because of the lack of collective definitions, guidelines, frameworks and reporting processes must be in place for youth engagement to be funded. Another funder expressed that funding youth engagement for the sake of youth engagement was ineffective and instead that funding should be based on the issue, not whether or not youth are engaged.

The practitioners, both in interviews and focus groups, were very vocal about their distrust, annoyance and at times even expressed anger at both the availability (or lack thereof) of funding and the constraints associated with that funding. Interestingly, only one participant discussed the importance of two-way communication between practitioners and funders as essential for successfully funding youth engagement initiatives.

Finally, there was a distinct thread within the data between the personal experiences of practitioners and those of the researchers and funders in terms of how it influenced their work and perspective about youth engagement as whole. All of the practitioners who participated in this research expressed a personal connection to their work stemming from their own experiences as either a disenfranchised or civically engaged youth. Some practitioners who had struggled in their youth years were actively working with young people in similar situations, others who had been leaders and steered youth-led change in their communities

were also working in similar fields. The tone of their description about their lived experience resonated a strong sense of passion, agency and personal commitment.

Alternatively, the discussions with funders and researchers identified some youth-engagement in their past but relatively low personal experiences which connected them passionately to the issue. One funder, did, however, distinctly link their early volunteer experience as a youth as a fundamental aspect of their personal perspective on how youth should be engaged in communities – however, all the other participants were somewhat vague on their personal connectivity to youth engagement in contrast to the practitioners who participated in this research.

Conclusion

The previous section described the six key meaning clusters that surfaced using traditional phenomenological coding from the interview and focus group data. The following chapter will discuss more complexly the potential inferences from the meaning clusters, applying a critical lens and linking the information to the initial research questions, the literature review and the overarching ontological standpoint, Transformational Learning Theory. The following chapter will also discuss potential future directions for research exploration and challenges and limitations of this research in particular.

Chapter Five: Discussion

This research was focused on exploring how practitioners, researchers, and funders perceive and understand the phenomenon of youth engagement, while discussing their understandings of the key characteristics within youth engagement. The six meaning clusters discussed in this research represent perspectives, practices and interpretations of meaningful youth engagement within the Canadian context. These meaning clusters also bring forward openings for further discussion and potential future research directions. It is my intention for this chapter to discuss more deeply three aspects of the meaning clusters identified in chapter four and also identify some of these potential future research directions.

This chapter is also meant to examine how youth engagement could be positioned at the centre of a comprehensive learning process for our communities; specifically, as a citizenship learning process which supports the realization and ongoing development of adult, youth and *community* capacities. Biesta, Lawy & Kelly (2009) describe citizenship as a learning process, one that needs to move closer to the meaning making embedded in TLT and away from long held traditional view of how one learns. They write,

...the teaching of citizenship needs to be supplemented with a more thoroughgoing understanding of the ways in which young people actually learn democratic citizenship through participation in the communities and the practices that make up their everyday lives. A focus on young people's citizenship learning in everyday life

settings allows for an understanding of the ways in which citizenship learning is situated in the unfolding lives of young people and helps make clear how these lives are themselves implicated in the wider social, cultural, political and economic order. It is, after all, ultimately this wider context that provides opportunities for young people to be democratic citizens and to learn from their actual 'condition of citizenship' (p. 8).

The interconnecting relationship between shared beliefs, values and expectations of others and ourselves as citizens' links to the participant's conceptualizations of 'youth engagement' both in purpose and in practice. It is the ambition of this chapter to identify how *a shared understanding* and *connected practice* of youth engagement can meet the passionate hopes identified by the participants in this study.

This chapter will explore how the opportunity to mobilize the shared values and beliefs around youth engagement could contribute to more cohesion and collaboration within the "field," explore the concept of youth as citizens and youth acts of citizenship, and thirdly, the opportunity for strengthening the field through more innovative approaches and understandings youth-adult partnerships.

Connecting Values & Beliefs: Creating a Shared Understanding

One participant in this research described their ideal realization of youth engagement to include "meaningful opportunities for shared experience, decision-making and shared purpose" by young people. This quote is particularly important

as it summarizes in many ways the multiple and interconnected descriptions by participants about how the very beliefs and values they felt must be present to meet a meaningful youth engagement experience. Throughout this research the exploration for understanding the key characteristics which “made up” youth engagement in the Canadian context never manifested a cohesive definition per say.

However, what did emerge were critical beliefs and values shared between participants. Values and beliefs were embedded in the key characteristics such as valuing the role of young people at the centre, supporting young people to realize their fullest potential through youth engagement activities, sharing power to support young people in new domains and creating essential connections to community. One participant, a practitioner, summarized, “Youth engagement is the development of positive relationships between young people and their community through formal and informal programs that are structured to benefit both the youth and the host organization/institution.” While participants articulated similar understandings of what youth engagement was or should be, a collective understanding was never fully articulated across the participants. I contend that while a “universal” definition may not be applicable, a more collective and cohesive direction for the development, implementation and *understanding* of meaningful youth engagement could be developed.

This new direction would require attention, time, dialogue, coordination and more importantly – genuine collaboration. As one participant, a researcher, explained, “Without having the necessary discussions around youth engagement

and it's impacts on our government and our society and then taking meaningful and coordinated action, we will never move forward." Perkins, Borden & Franscisco (2001) identify the importance of collaboration as an essential element of youth engagement, "collaboration and teamwork define the relationships between adults and youth on behalf of their communities" (p. 48). Collaboration *between* practitioners, researchers and funders, however, is not discussed in the current literature.

The responses from participants reflected that while there may be connections between the beliefs and values, the youth engagement landscape lacks a genuine space and opportunity for collaboration. While the literature supports collaborative spaces for youth and adults, the spaces for adults to connect across sectors and silos remains unexplored.

A collective opportunity to collaborate may provide the very space for genuine and honest discussions across the key adults and institutions currently shaping the youth engagement landscape. A starting point could be the examination of youth engagement as a field or whether different language needs to be developed. As one participant, a funder, explained, "I don't understand why, but my gut tells me that naming this "youth engagement" is wrong." Perhaps connecting with other practitioners to further explore this "gut" intuition could raise real explanations and alternatives.

One way to explore these shared values and beliefs from participants is actually gathering together to explore shared experiences. Block (2008) describes

this type of collective and intentional gathering through the creation of a network and links intentional collaboration to the potential of collective change,

Collective change occurs when individuals and small diverse groups engage one another in the presence of many doing the same. It comes from the knowledge that what is occurring in one space is similarly happening in other spaces, especially ones where I do not know what they are doing. This is the value of a network, or even a network of networks, which is today's version of a social movement (p. 75).

With today's vast and ever growing technological communication options gathering a network, or networks of networks as Block (2008) described, is possible and feasible. This type of initial step could be very appropriate within the Canadian landscape in particular with vast geography and large spaces between initiatives and practitioners, researchers and funders.

The data linked together with a strong passion, dedication and personal attachment to youth engagement by practitioners, funders and researchers. The majority of participants who were practitioners in particular felt deeply passionate and connected to their work beyond a professional level and all discussed personal stories of either marginalization or leadership in their own youths. This reflects another important reason for the opportunity for genuine collaboration; understanding the underlying intentions for engaging young people is imperative. Lansdown (2001) explained that it is the very reflexive and evolving nature of

youth engagement that requires constant reassessment of the intentions, practices and motivations for youth engagement,

There are no predefined strategies, no ideal or universal models. The method used will depend on the issue, the project, or activity – whether the process is local, regional, national or international. It will also depend on the aim of the process (p.9).

Developing the space, process and a coordinated approach to identifying, and revisiting, the fundamental beliefs and values guiding youth engagement could provide more stability within the field by creating more cohesive and collective understandings.

Youth as Civic Change Agents

All the participants who contributed to this research project identified their perspective that youth are citizens and should therefore have specific rights and responsibilities – and opportunities – associated with that label; this is reflected in the meaning cluster discussion in Chapter Four. The literature review also recognized youth as citizens and also discussed how this status pervades the current philosophies and frameworks supporting an asset-based/strength-based engagement approaches (Balsano, 2005; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Lansdown, 2001; Lerner, 2005; Lerner, Dowling & Anderson, 2003; Pittman, 2000; Perkins & al, 2001, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). As Lerner, Dowling & Anderson (2003) suggest, “All concepts are predicated on the ideas that every young person has the potential

for successful, healthy development and that all youth the capacity for positive development” (p.172).

The assumptions embedded in both the literature and the participants perspectives asserts that youth engagement therefore is part or defined by the civic engagement of young people in society. This connection to civic engagement yields many new connections, questions and opportunities for both understanding youth engagement as a whole and also for supporting young people’s engagement as civic change agents. However, what I found to be interesting was that both the participants and the literature define civic youth engagement in relation to an adult contextualization of citizenship, civic duties and civic involvement. For example, one participant, a practitioner, discussing youth as engaged citizens explained, “Youth engagement inherently is of value as it does engage young people in their own development for themselves and how they contribute to their life, their community and their world.” Another participant, a researcher, expressed, “...Think about it as citizens and participating in their own lives and making decisions that affect them.” Other participants, a researcher, described citizenship in terms of higher arching goals, “Youth engagement inherently is of value,” and another described the assertion of youth as citizens as part of, “Loftier goals for the future.” Camino & Zeldin (2002) describe citizenship as the pillar that society must support for continued existence, opening their work on civic youth engagement with the statement, “Inclusive participation is a primary component of civic society” (p. 213). Camino & Zeldin (2002) describe the spaces for youth to be citizens with the metaphor of pathways, identifying five specific pathways. The

participants in this research echoed this call for multiple pathways for citizenship as discussed by Camino & Zeldin (2002), including decision-making tables and community development processes.

Assumptions Of Civic Life

Interestingly, the conceptualization both in the literature and by the participants in this study draw upon a particular conception of citizenship, one that maintains the status quo construction of becoming the adult 'engaged citizen.' As highlighted in Chapter One, the current understandings of youth civic roles and responsibilities have maintained a strong connection to assumed adult participation; Balsano (2005) noted these attributes to include specific spheres where youth involvement would be considered a "civic" contribution, including schools, volunteering, community-based organizations and political institutions (p. 188). The literature and the participants seem to assume and connect the concept of civic engagement with meaningful youth engagement experiences (Balsano, 2005; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Lansdown, 2001; Lerner, 2005). This connection could represent an important 'meaning making' value within the youth engagement field, and could require further exploration to fully understand how these ontological underpinnings are currently shaping the, program activities and funding directions within the Canadian youth engagement landscape.

Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin & Sibereisen (2002) have suggested that defining civic engagement needs to be examined not only in terms of what it entails, but how it is shifting across the globe: "...the issue of defining civic competence, and the finding that an expansive definition is needed to

match the real-world circumstances that affect its development for youth internationally” (p. 122). Youniss & al (2002) discuss youth engagement as *multi-generational task* that is not only about addressing the present but creating reciprocal learning opportunities between young people and adults/elders:

As always, it is youth’s task to make history in the future and society’s obligation to provide youth with sufficient resources and an honest basis for hope in carrying out this task... founded on reciprocal relations that bind the youth generation with its elders in the common task of preserving, while transforming, society for the good of humanity (p. 122).

New directions for youth engagement may be tasked with examining completely new spaces and territory – one that is without map or compass. Instead, perhaps the civic life of young people will unfold in completely new and innovative spaces, instead of adapting to existing contexts and structures.

New Spaces for Youth Agency

There are however, other implications that emerge from this more comprehensive contextualization of citizenship and civic engagement: the role of youth agency. By this I mean youth engagement practitioners could support new ways of understanding not only how young people should participate but also how young people want to participate. The literature and the participants identified young people as citizens but the critical mechanisms which the literature and participants suggested as ‘civic involvement’ for youth all maintained traditional

adult-centered civic roles and experiences (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, Lansdown, 2001, Perkins & al, 2001).

Neither the literature nor the participants discussed a re-visioning of young people as civic agents in their own right and in multiple civic and/or social locations – instead relying on traditional organizational settings and governance strategies, such as policy decisions, volunteerism and community based organization involvement. Youniss & al (2002) assert, “At a minimum, new generations must learn what democratic citizenship entails and figure out how to satisfy their needs within the demands of a capitalist system” (p. 122).

Both the literature (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Hart, 1994, 2008; Lansdown, 2001; Lerner, 2005) and the participants placed youth engagement as a process of learning about citizenship and being a citizen. Biesta, Lawy & Kelly’s (2009) description of a shift in the way learning is perceived and in what settings in regards to this citizenship could empower youth engagement to explore new mechanisms and strategies in the future. In addition, Biesta, Lawy & Kelly’s (2009), along with Youniss & al (2002) focus on process based, youth-centered strategies link to the more holistic and comprehensive approaches suggested within TLT.

With this discussion in mind, I also wonder if some of the challenges surrounding defining youth engagement and capturing a more collective embracing of youth as citizens now in Canada stems from the very re-articulation of youth engagement in terms of how adults engage as citizens. Could a re-conceptualization, a re-visioning or a re-invention by young people themselves of what is citizenship be a space for a new layer of meaningful youth engagement?

Perhaps a new orientation towards youth defined civic engagement could support the vision of one participant, a practitioner, who saw youth as, “Young people wanting to participate in something positive, enjoying that process and feeling like they contributed in a meaningful way... they feel like they are giving back and changing the world.”

The Complexity of Youth-Adult Partnerships

The most consistently emphasized characteristic of meaningful youth engagement by participants in this research project was that of genuine youth-adult partnerships. It is important to critically examine the actual language that the participants used to describe positive or ideal conceptualizations of youth-adult partnerships. The participants used language such as, “positive relationships between young people and their community,” “where young people and adults work together collaboratively”, “youth-adult collaborations and partnerships,” and “youth engagement is working together with youth to have them be leaders.” All of the authors in the literature review discussed for this research also emphasized the importance of youth-adult or youth-system/community partnerships and used varying language to discuss this (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Hart, 1994, 2008; Lansdown, 2001; Lerner, 2005; Lerner, Dowling & Anderson, 2003; Perkins, Borden & Villaruel, 2001, Pittman, 2000; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). While both the participants and the literature suggest that youth-adult partnerships are critical foundations to any youth engagement activity/initiative, there is a gap in the frameworks/philosophies and participant descriptions in terms of what youth-adult partnerships actually entail. The following section will examine two areas of

youth-adult partnerships: first, what are the conditions and strategies highlighted in the field that could support achieving the goals of youth-adult partnerships and second, how the role of adult education and development has been critically ignored in the application and development of youth-adult partnerships.

Camino (2000) provides an excellent examination of not only the complexity of creating meaningful youth-adult partnerships but also the critical element of adult development/engagement that are necessary for youth-adult partnerships to be successful. Camino (2000) defines meaningful youth-adult partnerships as a “...multidimensional construct. They contain (a) principals and values, which actors use to orient the relationship and guide behaviour; (b) a set of skills and competencies through which the behaviours are focused; (c) a method to implement and achieve collective action” (p. 14). This concise definition provides three structural considerations for youth-adult partnerships and also surfaces the need for researchers, practitioners and funders to move beyond identifying the need for youth-adult partnerships and to focus more fully on the competencies, methods and collective collaboration required for adults to achieve a meaningful relationship.

Adults As Co-Learners in Youth Engagement

Camino (2000) highlights some specific attributes within each of these categories that support a meaningful youth-adult partnership. First, in terms of values and principals, Camino (2000) argues that while these are important foundations the issue of assumptions about power must always be at the forefront, particularly how youth conceptualize power and the gap between how one defines

values and principals versus acting on them (p. 14). The participants in the research discussed power in a variety of ways, not only between youth and adults but between systems that work within the field. For example, one participant, a practitioner, discussed their inability to understand how frameworks were supposed to support youth engagement and instead saw it as a power-over from funders as a way to control and “count” their work. Another participant, a practitioner, identified that researchers were powerful in recording the assumptions associated with youth engagement but often lacked the ability to ‘capture’ the actual practice of empowering young people.

Second, Camino (2000) discusses that the “how to” of youth-adult partnerships did require specific skills and competencies and these skills and competencies were not inherently transparent to either the youth or the adults involved in the partnership (p. 14-15). The critical competencies for youth-adult partnerships identified by Camino (2000) included: communication, teamwork and coaching (p. 15). Camino (2000) highlighted that communication remained the first step in a meaningful partnership but that it also required navigating the building of a genuine relationship between young people and adults,

Cultivating the art of forthright and open communication required focused time and attention, typically on the part of the adults. Adults had more difficulty letting their guard down in communicating with youth than the youth did with adults. When effective communication was

achieved, the result was mutual insight and a deepening of respect (p. 15).

This concept of mutual of respect was extended to the respect between adult *partners* within youth engagement contexts by participants in the research. One participant discussed how they felt they constantly had to validate their work through reports and gave the example of having to explain why it was important to offer food and beverages at youth meetings. Another participant discussed their experience writing reports for funders and then having to re-state the experiences of young people in more “adult” terms. Both participants explained that their relationships with peers in their field – funders, practitioners, researchers – was limited and fragmented and therefore lacked a communal respect. This need for mutual of respect also relates to the call for a more collective approach through collaboration, discussed earlier in this chapter.

Mentorship was identified by Camino (2000) as a pivotal and mutual experience for meaningful youth-adult partnerships. However, with the focus of her research on how young people worked in partnership with adults towards systems change, it was highlighting that adult, more so than youth, needed to be competent coaches:

One of the most strenuous skills for adults to take on and actualize was coaching – providing legitimate opportunities for youth to take on meaningful roles in the partnership while also holding them accountable... the difficulties related to ambiguity and equivocation

over positioning youth and adult roles as equal or equitable. (p. 15)

Being a true mentor also requires time and the resources to invest this time. One of the challenges identified in the literature (Biesta, Lawry & Kelly, 2009; Camino, 2005; Perkins & al, 2001) was the necessity of long term, sustained relationships as a critical aspect of youth-adult partnerships. The ability to create mentorship opportunities that are also within the scope of specific timeframes adds another layer of complexity to the youth-adult partnership dynamic. Yet, as all the participants noted during their discussions for this research, the *relationships* established within youth engagement processes between youth-adult could span beyond the project timeline. It is having the resources and necessary skills to navigate more long-term relationships that are of critical issue.

Finally, Camino (2000) discusses that a clear method for engaging with young people needs to be set out for the adults involved (p. 16). The author highlighted that there are three main conditions that effect the ability of youth-adult partnerships: the power of established social relationships and traditions, daily rhythm and community history (Camino, 2000, p. 16-18). This is an important attribute to consider, particularly in reflection to the participants experiences in this research. All the participants represented setting with their own established social relationships and traditions, daily rhythms and community history. While the actual adults involved are important, the contexts and dispositions surrounding them provide the scaffolding for their ability to create and maintain genuine youth-adult relationships. The very infrastructure that

enables the to take on these roles can also undermine their ability to do so with meaning, depending on the resources, supports, beliefs and values associated with youth engagement both short and long term.

Camino's (2000) insights are critical to unpacking the emphasis both in the literature and from the research data espousing the importance of youth-adult partnerships. It was surprising within the data that while adults were centered as pivotal to youth engagement being meaningful, either through partnerships, collaborations or the systems in which adults work, the emphasis on capacity building maintained connected to youth only. Block (2008) situated the need for adults to examine their role,

If we care about youth instead of trying to control and inculcate them, then we have to deal with our adultism. This means we have to change the nature of our listening. Create places and people that welcome youth, where youth see themselves reflected in those who have chosen to work with them (p. 166).

There was no discussion in any of the frameworks and research data focused on the developmental requirements and capacities necessary for adults to support a meaningful youth engagement experience.

Mutuality of Valid Knowledge / Ways of Knowing

The role of adult development in youth-adult partnerships and youth engagement is not at the forefront of the literature or within the data of this research's participants. For the following section my reference to adults are those

adults engaged in youth-adult partnerships. Camino (2005) asserts that this absence is predicated on the fact that adults themselves have little or no understanding of how to engage as a citizens in the partnership (p. 78). Camino (2005) explains thusly:

The value orientation [of adults] is clear and positive: to transform asymmetrical relationships between youth and adults into more symmetrical ones that are characterized by an atmosphere of equality. The intention is to assist youth in exercising their full range of agency that they are developmentally capable of, and to assist youth in assuming roles as active decision makers and problem solvers. The fallacy of this perspective is that it conceives of “power” as part of a zero-sum equation. That is, the only way youth can gain power is for adults to give up power. (p. 75).

Camino (2005) explains that this assumption pushes adults to close off their ability to collaborate fully and instead focus on the institutional connection to the young person’s project or initiative, instead of allowing their own “experience and wisdom” to surface (p. 75).

Camino (2000) provides a well structured starting point for youth-adult partners to begin developing more structured thinking about how and why young people should connect with the adults and adult-systems in their communities. Therefore, the adults within these systems are playing critical roles in the success

or undermining of a young person's capacity to exert agency as a citizen. Ignoring the importance of adult readiness or developmental capacity to genuinely support young people in civic engagement roles and responsibilities is a gap within both the literature and the perspectives of the participants of this research. Camino (2000) notes, "Although it is generally accepted that community work represents new spheres for youth, it is less obvious that it is also new for many adults" (p. 19).

While exploring more comprehensively the ideas and potential for youth-adult partnerships as discussed by the literature and the participants I have come to ask the question of how adult development needs to play a role in youth engagement and what this means for the field as a whole. While exploring youth-adult partnerships specifically I was unable to find any discussion on how developmental models of adults or tenants of adult education were being incorporated into youth engagement structures and designs. Instead, the literature maintained that youth-adult partnerships were important, period. In addition, I began to wonder again about the actual language that the participants used – collaboration, partnership, working together. I started to question how the relationships within adult-adult partnerships reflected, mirrored or differed from those of youth-adult partnership and more specifically how citizen-adult partnerships were being exercised within communities.

The majority of the literature discussed in this research and the examples provided by the participants demonstrated young people's involvement in the very issues that adult citizens/community members are currently engaging with – such as the economy, the environment, homelessness etc. It is interesting that while the

youth engagement field is attempting to innovate new designs to create meaningful partnerships between young people so they might participate in these decision making systems, there has been little examination of how adults engage with systems and whether or not these structures or mechanisms could provide blueprints for what may or may not support greater and meaningful youth involvement in similar decision making and community development activities.

Overall, the questions surrounding youth-adult partnerships rising from this research has enabled me to consider more carefully how to incorporate greater adult development into the youth engagement field and what opportunities for learning may present themselves from current citizen / community member engagement models.

Collective Transformational Learning

After taking some time to review the themes emerging from the meaning clusters, I began to reflect on my own experiences where this concept of a collective transformational learning process had taken place. My participation in a collective transformational learning process has occurred, specifically as an assistant researcher for a youth co-researcher project around legal literacy. I was one of two adults involved in supporting the project, which engaged eight youth in an effort to address a “gap” in the literacy of young people within the City of Victoria around their rights and responsibilities. The young people decided – after extensive consultation with their peers – to focus their efforts on developing a tangible resource which would reflect basic police and justice system rights and also the

responsibilities and rights of young people under the age of 18. The project took place over eight months where myself and my colleague immersed ourselves with the young people, encouraging their innovative approaches while also walking the slippery tight rope of when to support more and when to support and provide guidance less. I will never forget sitting in a hotel room with eight young civic agents watching Barrack Obama get elected President of the United States as we prepared to present at a conference in Downtown Vancouver. We were all glued to the television and the feelings of partnership and real, genuine, working collaborations were present. I remember thinking that there was no one else I would have wanted to share that historical moment with. The project was challenging, there were many learning processes for not only myself as an adult in the project but also for the young people to be seen as legitimate civic actors taking a stand to increase legal literacy among their peers. Supporting them to navigate the very systems that are intended to support their healthy development was a pushed my learning edges and required me to think strategically and critically *with* the young people to address barriers and act on opportunities. The collective engagement between ourselves involved in the project and those the project worked with was significant; I feel that the process reflected a deep and meaningful, collective transformational learning experience. This is the type of learning experience I feel should be at the center of youth adult partnership work. Making this consistently happen in other youth-adult projects and promoting the conditions necessary to support collaborative, transformational learning is something I hope to continue to pursue in my future.

Conclusion

The opportunities to expand and creatively develop strong, vibrant and impactful youth engagement processes are an exciting and growing landscape. I began this research with questions around youth engagement, not only in terms of what is youth engagement but how leaders and powerful agents in the field were shaping the current conversations, conceptions and applications of “youth engagement.” I was curious to know, what were the guiding principals for youth engagement? How did personal experience shape the perspectives of these leaders? How were frameworks and specific philosophical assumptions folding into the realities of youth engagement? How were people funding youth engagement? How were people doing youth engagement? What is youth engagement? The questions were many, and they linked closely to my own perceptions and interpretations, including my own assumption that youth are citizens and should be change agents in the world they live in.

The youth engagement landscape that surfaced from the data was complex, multifaceted and essentially very fragmented with sparks of connectivity and commonality. This research has emphasized that there is a real need for a more collective and cohesive understanding of what is youth engagement, and perhaps what it is not. In addition, the research illuminated specific values and beliefs that informed the key characteristics that the participants identified as important traits of meaningful youth engagement. Underpinning all of the conversations around youth engagement was the concept of citizenship, and youth as citizens now – not in the some far off future. This conceptualization of citizenship requires that new

questions about what it means to be a citizen and how that manifests in the actions and involvement of people within communities to be examined in new and innovative ways. The defining characteristics that society traditionally associates with citizenship may not be those of those of next generations of adults.

Finally, the research was very insightful in emphasizing the importance of youth-adult partnerships as a cornerstone value and characteristic of meaningful youth engagement. The role of youth-adult partnerships was emphasized both by the literature and the participant's perspectives. An area of potential next exploration is how the adult developmental processes needs to be acknowledged, nurtured and supported in youth-adult partnerships to create mutual learning opportunities and also expand on the existing capacity of adult and institutional allies. A more comprehensive and holistic understanding of youth engagement is required for the field to connect – genuinely - and potentially transform the way communities support young people to be change agents and ultimately, citizens.

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Appendix A: Interview & Focus Group Schedules

Interview Schedule

(A) Personal Background & Definition of the Phenomena

1. To begin, I would like to hear about how you became involved with the field of youth engagement and your current work in the area. Can you describe this for me?
2. What is our professional background – i.e. certification, degree's etc.
3. How has your work with young people affected you personally?
4. In your experience and opinion, how do you define youth engagement?

(B) About Youth Engagement

5. Youth engagement has many different definitions. Overall, what do you think the motivations are for engaging young people from the perspective of an institution, government, community centre, etc.? (i.e. not a personal motivation but a systems motivation)
6. The literature and research currently available regarding frameworks for youth engagement each identify some key elements or mechanisms that need to be in place for a youth engagement strategy to work. Could you tell me if this is the case and if so what those key aspects or mechanisms may be? If not, what, in your opinion, are some cornerstone characteristics of a youth engagement initiative/program?
 - a. If they do not mention them in their responses here are some key aspects that I could ask them to reflect on stemming from the youth engagement models surveyed in the initial literature review:
 - i. Youth-adult relationships
 - ii. Youth as staff / directors of the work they are doing
 - iii. Paid and unpaid youth leaders
 - iv. Youth at decision making tables (i.e. boards and advisory groups)
 - v. Multi-sectoral collaboration
 - vi. Community economic development
7. I am interested in exploring how a frameworks could and do play a role in providing organizations, community centres, businesses etc. a first start to engaging young people. Can you walk me through, from start to finish how you would create and initiate a youth engagement effort?

8. Some of the literature reflects on youth engagement as youth leadership training or development. Do you think that these two concepts (youth engagement and youth leadership development/training) are interchangeable or do they stand alone, have different definitions for you – please explain.

(C) The Canadian Context

9. The majority of the research and literature surrounding youth engagement in terms of frameworks has come out of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. Do you have any insight as to why this might be?
10. In relation to the last question, what characteristics about Canadian culture do you think play a significant role in the ways young people are currently engaged?
11. How do you think that Canadians could come to a shared understanding about the importance of youth engagement? What would it take, in your opinion, to shift our current understanding?

(D) Resourcing Youth Engagement

12. The majority of youth programs and youth engagement work is funded in the following process:
- Youth capacity building / engagement is a priority set by a funding body or institutions
 - Money is allocated to funding youth engagement within a specific context (for example: civic leadership, mental health and addictions, sex education)
 - An intermediate body or person (administrator) is put in charge to put together a call for proposals and this is circulated to the “community”
 - Call for proposals is received and community organizations respond with program options
 - Proposals are received and then processed according to the funders policies and procedures; i.e. a board, a selection committee, two or three “experts” – most applications are not transparent with funding decision making policies
 - Proposals are accepted / declined – no feedback is received to community agencies
 - Those funded are granted and provide with an evaluation template or process associated with the funding agency
 - Program is implemented by a coordinator/manager – front line person

- In your experience where have you been in a leader or participant in the resourcing process for youth programs? (for example were you a grantor or a grant writer)
- What do you think about this framework for resourcing youth programs
- In what ways does it work?
- In what ways could it work differently or better?
- From your experience what could resourcing youth programs look and be like?

(D) Measuring Success and Impacts

13. In the literature that I have read, I have recognized some dispute over the ways in which a youth engagement program/initiative is considered successful. From your work and experience, how is it
- a. *Is* determined to be successful
 - b. *Could* determine to be successful
 - c. *Should* determine to be successful
14. Evaluation and reflection are important aspects to any endeavor. What has your experience highlighted for you in terms of being important for the evaluation and measuring impacts specifically within the practice of youth engagement?
15. Do you think youth engagement is important? Why and how?

Focus Group Schedule

- Specific intentions from the research point of view is to work with the focus group to explore and discuss the following questions:
 - What are the key elements and characteristics associated with youth engagement within the Victoria context
 - How do these elements or do not align with current youth engagement frameworks (identified through the literature review)
 - What new elements were identified from the research
 - Upon review of these key elements how do members of the focus group feel about the opportunity to create a shared movement in youth engagement; is it possible to collaborate across sectors engaging young people within similar frameworks? Why? Why not?
 - What opportunities presented or emerged from the focus group that could impact and build capacity for more shared youth engagement strategies in the Victoria setting specifically
 - What works right now for Victoria youth engagement? What is not? What could work better and how?

- How did or didn't the sharing and analysis process within the focus group create an space for collaboration building? How could it for other communities?
- Key themes to explore: mutual / shared engagement strategies (i.e. is there youth engagement movement? Or is it siloed efforts?), supporting and oppressing structure, systems and processes, applications of specific philosophical or theoretical frameworks for engagement, collaboration, shared sense of purpose for youth engagement (big picture) within a specific context (i.e. Victoria for the sake of this research)