POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT:
THE CASE OF A WILDERNESS CHALLENGE INTERVENTION

By

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The purpose of this interpretive case study was to explore how a wilderness challenge experience was experienced for “at-risk” adolescents, to uncover the meanings of those experiences, and to assess the generalization and transfer of their experiences beyond the intervention. Two motivational frameworks involving theory of optimal experience and self-determination were used to guide the study. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviewing as the main source of data collection, 40 participants involved with a therapeutic wilderness program were interviewed. Fifteen youth and 18 parents were individually interviewed, seven staff members participated in a focus group interview, and two staff members were interviewed in follow-up. Three themes encompassing the topics of challenge, community, and key player relationships were constructed from the data using constant comparison as the method of analysis. Data analysis led to the construction of optimal experience, self-determination, social capital, optimism, and youth initiative as a grounded theory of positive youth development.
Adolescents in today’s society face a number of challenges. Inadequate family-support structures, peer pressure, and the disappearance of social norms have contributed to problems such as underachievement, delinquency, and overall poor judgment. Teens who are ill-equipped to deal with the pressures and forces around them frequently suffer from low motivation and low self-esteem, failure to act responsibly, and an inability to satisfy needs appropriately (Pommier & Witt, 1995). At this vulnerable developmental stage, adolescents who face such pressures may be at-risk for social, psychological, and behavioral challenges that manifest into problems such as school dropout, suicide, delinquency, substance abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases (Serna & Lau-Smith, 1995).

At-risk adolescents who are not adequately equipped with skills to generate self-motivated, meaningful activity are often prone to boredom (Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991). Lacking skills to independently seek complex, challenging situations in leisure and discretionary time, teens become vulnerable to peer pressure and activities of immediate gratification. In turn, adolescents are often inclined to alleviate boredom through dysfunctional leisure such as skipping school, substance use (Faulkner, 1991), risky sexual activity, and delinquent behavior.

Alternatively, adolescents equipped to engage in complex, internally rewarding experiences in their leisure (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984) are likely to perceive such experiences as a sense of freedom and self-determination, and they may be more likely to
persist in such behaviors (Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993; McCormick & Dattilo, 1995).

Similarly, individuals who feel autonomy, competence, and social support in daily
activity tend toward self-determined behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Optimal or “flow” experiences have been found to produce feelings of well-being,
freedom, positive affect, and self-affirmation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Voelkl &
Ellis, 1998, 2002; Voelkl, Ellis, & Walker, 2003). The ability of adolescents to engage in
complex flow-like situations is associated with overall growth tendency and potential
(Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

**Statement of the Problem**

Adventure programming is thought to generate flow experiences through the
purposive facilitation of challenging activities that require skills, and through the clarity
of goals and immediacy of feedback (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999;
Freeman, 1993; Haras, 2003). Though documented in nontherapeutic ropes course
programming, the flow experience has not been studied in the context of
wilderness-based adolescent risk-prevention programming. It is unknown to what extent
wilderness challenge experiences for this population are perceived as flow or otherwise,
nor have program factors that produce such experiences been identified. Additionally,
although the literature has documented the need for programs to follow-up with
participants to facilitate learning transfer (Durgin & McEwen, 1993; Gillis & Simpson,
1993; Russell, 2002) research has not examined post-intervention transition in the context
of flow theory. It is unknown whether graduates of these programs are better equipped to
engage in flow experience upon completion of a wilderness experience.

Self-determination (also associated with feelings of well-being) is thought to be an
attribute central to adventure education philosophy (Hill & Sibthorp, 2004; Schoel,
Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988; Sklar & Gibson, 2004). However, program factors that influence self-determined experience have not been clearly identified. Autonomy and competence, both qualities of the self-determined experience (Ryan & Deci, 2000), are similar to qualities described as flow. It is likely that the two global concepts of self-determination and flow overlap (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, relationships within and beyond the wilderness program context remain unclear.

Wilderness program factors that influence self-determination need to be identified (Sklar & Gibson, 2004). Likewise, although the adventure education literature purports to incorporate flow theory into practice (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Freeman, 1993; Haras, 2003), actual participant experiences of flow in wilderness challenge programs have not been documented. Finally, if flow and self-determination are considered to promote psychosocial growth and well-being among adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Kleiber, Larson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 1986; Ryan & Deci, 2000), the nature of how these traits are generalized and transferred must be documented. Such knowledge can inform instructor training, development, and practice, as well as overall program design and structure.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe how a wilderness program for at-risk adolescents is experienced by students, as understood through the theoretical frameworks of flow and self-determination, and how these experiences impact transition back to the home. Specifically, this study aimed to explore program factors and conditions that both promoted and inhibited flow and/or self-determined experiences. Additionally, this study aimed to ascertain the meanings of these experiences to the participants. A final purpose was to assess the generalization and transfer of students’ experiences relative to flow and
self-determination. A specific wilderness challenge intervention for at-risk youth, the “Adventure Challenge Experience” (ACE) was selected as the setting in which to address these research goals.

**Research Questions**

- **Research question 1**: How is a youth wilderness intervention program experienced by youth as understood through flow theory? What program factors promote flow experience? What are the barriers to flow experience?

- **Research question 2**: How is self-determination experienced during a youth wilderness intervention program? What program factors promote self-determination? What are the barriers to self-determination?

- **Research question 3**: What meanings do the students attach to these experiences?

- **Research question 4**: How are flow and self-determination generalized and transferred?

- **Research question 5**: What are the leadership team’s perceptions of program factors that influence students’ experiences of flow and self-determination. What are their self-perceived roles in facilitating these experiences? How do instructors facilitate generalization and transfer of flow and self-determination?

- **Research question 6**: What are the parents’ general perceptions of the impact of the program on the students?

- **Research question 7**: What are the parents’ general perceptions of the impact of the program on the families?

**Limitations and Delimitations**

**Limitations**

Limitations involve restrictions on a study over which a researcher has no control (Glesne, 1999). Limitations in this study included aspects of the sample demographics, data, and research methods. First, the sample lacked substantive racial and socioeconomic diversity as nearly all participants were Caucasian Americans living within several neighboring suburbs of a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. Additionally, as a method of data collection, questionnaires were administered by
program staff and completed by teens during the drive home from the wilderness trip. I was unable to control the administration of these questionnaires and could not verify the method in which all questionnaires were completed. Furthermore, several participants scheduled for interviews failed to keep their appointments and thus were not represented among the data. A final limitation involved the interpretation of data. I am a white, middle-class, male academic who specializes in therapeutic recreation and adventure education, and I guided the data analysis and interpretation.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to limitations a researcher has imposed deliberately and usually restrict the populations to which the results of a study can be generalized. (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). Although results of this study are expected to have theoretical and practical implications in youth-focused therapeutic adventure, the results should not be generalized to the entire population of at-risk youth participating in such programs. Therefore, one delimitation for this study arises from its focus on a specific, racially homogeneous group of participants of a therapeutic wilderness program. A second delimitation arises from the selection of the ACE as a research site. This program is not representative of all wilderness intervention programs for at-risk youth.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Problems Facing Contemporary Youth

The well-being of society depends on the ability of communities to prepare well-adjusted, responsible, well-educated young people to step forward as the older generation passes, yet many of today’s youth are falling by the wayside (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2004). Risky sexual behavior, rising rates of teen pregnancy, youth gang involvement, poverty, crime, drug use, social isolation, physical violence, poor access to healthcare, physical inactivity, obesity, and depression are among the multitude of problems confronting contemporary youth. In a world such as this, young people face numerous obstacles to achieving healthy psychosocial development.

Over the past two decades, the term at-risk youth has been widely used (in the literature on education, psychology, medicine, social work, economics, as well as in state legislation and reports produced by the federal government) to describe a segment of the youth population (McWhirter et al., 2004). While use of this term has been controversial at best, and the literature has lacked consensus on its meaning, one useful definition has been offered:

*At risk* denotes a set of presumed cause-effect dynamics that place an individual child or adolescent in danger of future negative outcomes. *At risk* designates a situation that is not necessarily current but that can be anticipated in the absence of intervention. (McWhirter et al., 2004, p. 6)
Elaborating on this definition, McWhirter et al. (2004) proposed that risk is not a
discrete, unitary diagnostic condition, but rather resides on a continuum as a series of
steps. Beginning with minimal risk, youth who experience favorable demographics;
experience positive family, school, and social interactions; and have limited psychosocial
and environmental stressors fall into the lowest of risk categories. Increasingly
throughout the continuum, risk factors rise as stressors are compounded, environmental
conditions degrade, and interactions with support systems are negative. Following
minimal risk, levels of risk intensify increasingly through the categories of remote risk,
high risk, imminent risk, and “at-risk category activity” (meaning the individual is
already involved with the activity that defines the risk category), respectively.

Among the many problems confronting at-risk youth is the challenge of structuring
time in productive pursuits. Adolescents spend nearly 40% of their waking hours as
discretionary time (Bartko & Eccles, 2003), and the times when youth seem to make the
poorest activity choices is when they are not in school (Pawelko & Magafas, 1997).
Experience sampling studies show that large portions of adolescent daily life are
experienced as boredom (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, &
Freeman, 1992; Larson & Richards, 1991), even among those teens considered to be at
lowest end of the risk continuum (Larson & Richards).

According to Witt and Crompton (1996) developing skills for the constructive
management of discretionary time is paramount to youth development. Yet for all youth,
avoiding boredom by finding constructive and interesting ways to occupy time can be
challenging (Witt & Crompton, 2002). Those who have been exposed to the excitement
of illicit activities and the action and entertainment of video games and popular media,
may require interesting, challenging activities to retain their attention in developmentally positive pursuits (Witt & Crompton, 2002).

The ability of youth to engage in growth-oriented, appropriate, meaningful, self-motivated pursuits is an underlying concern of the current study. The absence of skills for such engagement can lead to boredom; which, when prevalent, may signal a deficiency in positive development (Larson, 2000). A theoretical approach to resolving the problem of boredom is discussed next.

**Flow**

The concept of boredom has been studied extensively from a socio-psychological perspective. Research in this area has been a prevalent theme in the field of leisure studies for nearly two decades. Researchers have been particularly interested in the concept of optimal experience, the state of high psychological involvement or absorption in activities or settings (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) concept of flow is particularly useful for defining optimal experience since it identifies various features of mental activity that can be used to identify perceptions of optimal experiences.

The flow model was originally developed on the basis of extensive interviews with people who engaged deeply and intensely in their leisure and work. The first studies included rock climbers, basketball players, dancers, chess players, and surgeons (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Participants described the most intensely absorbing experiences (in which challenges matched the individuals’ skills, and in which they lost track of time and self-awareness) as the most rewarding of experiences. Later studies led Csikszentmihalyi to suggest that flow-like feelings such as “concentration, absorption, deep involvement, joy, and sense of accomplishment—are what people describe as the best moments in their lives” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 176).
A simple model has been used to summarize the basic features of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 2000). Central to the theory is the concept of balance between challenges and skills. Essentially, the two must be in balance for flow to occur. When challenge outweighs one’s skill level, feelings of anxiety are likely to occur. Conversely, when an individual’s skill level outweighs the challenge presented by an activity, boredom is likely to result. The complexities of flow states are determined by the level of the challenge-skill balance experienced. A low-level challenge-skill balance indicates a less complex flow state than a higher-level challenge-skill balance.

According to flow theory, this optimal balance creates the conditions for a positive psychological experience characterized by seven specific conditions: clear goals, immediate feedback, intense concentration/absorption, a sense of control, a loss of self consciousness, the merging of action and awareness, and the transformation of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Flow experiences have been found to produce feelings of well-being and freedom, positive affect, and self-affirmation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Voelkl & Ellis, 1998, 2002; Voelkl et al., 2003).

Studies of adolescent development use flow framework to research the adolescent experience. Apart from the early qualitative interviews from which the flow model was developed, many of these studies have used the experience sampling method (ESM) (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), in which electronic pagers are employed to monitor how people experience everyday life. Using the ESM, research participants are typically signaled multiple times throughout the day at random intervals over the course of about one week. Each time the participant is signaled, the participant is to take out a booklet of
brief questionnaires and complete a series of open-ended and close-ended items assessing the individual’s psychological state at the moment of signaling.

In a study of adolescent school experiences, Mayer (1978) used the ESM to sample 84 high school students as to their relative experiences of challenges and skills, and compared these reports to the enjoyment of activities throughout the school day. Mayer found that compared to the most enjoyable of activities, school classes were more likely to be enjoyable when skills were perceived to be greater than challenges. An interesting finding was that students were generally not bored while at school. In fact, even when students had classes that were too easy, they tended to enjoy them rather than feel bored. Mayer concluded that most of this enjoyment was derived from the recognition and praise of the teacher, feeling exceptionally competent or superior in the eyes of fellow students, and simply receiving good grades.

Kleiber, Larson, and Csikszentmihalyi (1986) conducted a study of adolescent leisure experiences also using the ESM. They collected data on leisure activities and settings in which the teenagers experienced the most positive moods and became most psychologically involved. One scale addressed mood and affective states. An involvement scale asked participants to rate the levels of concentration, challenge, and skill they experienced in an activity. Additional scales measured intrinsic motivation and perceived freedom associated with the activity. Activities defined as leisure were generally experienced as more positive and free. Kleiber et al. pointed out that these findings are consistent with the view that leisure is relaxing. However, the results suggest that the leisure activities of adolescents rarely demand much in terms of effort and concentration, or what might be called flow.
When different kinds of leisure activities were further examined, Kleiber et al. (1986) found evidence for two categories of leisure experience. One type, “relaxed leisure” (watching television, socializing, listening to music) provided pleasure without high levels of involvement. The second category of activities (sports, games, artwork, and hobbies) was labeled “transitional.” These were experienced as freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and very positive; yet also challenging and demanding of effort and concentration. Kleiber et al. suggested that transitional leisure offers teenagers a bridge between childhood and adulthood by demonstrating that enjoyment found in these activities of their youth can also be found in the demanding activities required of them as they move into adulthood.

Another time sampling study of youth (Larson et al., 1992) investigated alcohol and marijuana use among adolescents. In their study, alcohol use was associated with social contexts and happy, gregarious states. Marijuana use, on the other hand, was reported across a wider range of situations and differed much less than alcohol from ordinary experience. Larson et al. suggested that marijuana tended to be a more private drug, most often used with one or two friends. Unlike alcohol, marijuana was not related to positive affect; and in school, it was frequently used as an antidote to boredom. Findings showed that motivations for alcohol and marijuana use had less to do with seeking positive states than escape from boredom and feelings of oppression in adolescent life. In related research, the concept of mimetic optimal experience (pseudo-optimal experience) has been used to describe the experiences of drug addicts seeking flow through drug use, but failing to experience engagement, control of the situation, and intrinsic motivation (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2003).
Outdoor adventure education and therapeutic adventure programming is thought to equip adolescents with skills that contribute to youth development, reduce risk factors, and improve motivation. Studies of adventure activities have used the flow framework as a lens for gauging participants’ experiences of outdoor-challenge activities. Freeman’s (1993) study of ropes course participation, showed that flow was more common during later portions of the program sequence, during activities perceived as more challenging than earlier ones. Increase in flow for some participants was related to an increase in anxiety for others. More recently, Jones, Hollenhorst, Perna, and Selin (2000) reported similar findings among whitewater kayakers. As rapids became more challenging, reports of flow and anxiety tended to increase concurrently.

Finally, Haras (2003) conducted a study of adolescent ropes course programs in which meaningful involvement was assessed partly using the flow framework. Results showed that purposive manipulation of program delivery could influence participants’ feelings of anxiety, enjoyment, and meaningful involvement in the adventure activity. Challenging activities that were more inclusive of wide-ranging ability levels and personal strengths, and that sought to include all participants at each individual’s optimal level of participation were generally perceived as less anxiety-producing and more likely to produce group efficacy. Additionally, approaches that “invited optimal participation” (p. 158) were perceived as providing more choice, a quality of activity congruent with facilitating flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Although adolescent flow experiences have been documented in adventure education programs such as ropes course programming, the flow experience has not been studied in the context of a wilderness-based youth intervention. Furthermore, little is
known about the generalization and transfer of flow-like experiences from adventure-based settings back to everyday life. It has been suggested that the ability to engage in flow promotes overall psychosocial development of adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Those who are able to engage in complex flow-producing activities are less prone to boredom and anxiety and may have developmental advantages over those who are less inclined to have such experiences. The adolescent who readily engages in prosocial flow-producing activity, and is internally motivated to seek more of the same, may face substantially fewer risk factors than the adolescent prone to anxiety and/or boredom.

**Self-Determination**

The theoretical concept of self-determination has been related to the concept of optimal experience (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Wehmeyer (1992) self-determination refers to “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influences or interference” (p. 17). To the degree that one consistently exhibits self-determined actions, he or she can be considered to be self-determined.

Causal agency is thought to be an innate human need that stems from motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to Wehmeyer, “causal agency implies that an outcome was purposeful and the action is performed to achieve that end” (p. 17). A causal agent is therefore someone who acts purposefully, and makes or causes things to happen in his or her life (Wehmeyer, 1995).

Acting in a psychologically empowered manner is considered an indicator of causal agency and thus self-determination. According to Wehmeyer, self-determined people act on the basis of a belief that (a) they have control over circumstances that are important to
them, (b) they possess the requisite skills to achieve desired outcomes, and (c) if they choose to apply those skills, the identified outcomes will result. The psychological empowerment element of self-determination is theoretically grounded in Bandura’s (1977) theory of self-efficacy.

Another characteristic of self-determination is self-realization. Self-determined people are self-realizing in that they use a comprehensive (and reasonably accurate) knowledge of themselves and their strengths and limitations to act in such a manner as to capitalize on this knowledge (Wehmeyer, 1995). “This self-knowledge and self-understanding forms through experience with and interpretation of one’s environment and is influenced by evaluations of significant others, reinforcements and attributions of one’s own behavior” (p. 21).

Studies on sport and exercise (conducted in a self-determination framework) offer much to the therapeutic adventure literature. Thompson and Wankel (1980) tested the proposition that perceived choice is positively correlated to intrinsic motivation. They examined the perceived choice of activities in relation to participation persistence in an adult women’s fitness program. Registrants in a commercial fitness program were randomly assigned to either an experimental or control condition. Subjects in the control (no-choice) condition were led to believe that a program of exercise had been assigned to them without considering their preferences. Subjects in the experimental (choice) group were told that their exercise program had been designed based on their preferences. In actuality, both exercise programs were designed with an equal degree of activity preferences. Therefore, only their perception of choice actually differed. Attendance records over the next six-week period showed significantly higher attendance among the
perceived choice group. These findings support the proposition that self-determination is basic to persistence in physical activities.

Self-determination is also thought to play a significant role in individual well-being. Iso-Ahola and Park (1996) examined the roles of self-determination disposition and leisure-generated social support as buffers against the negative effects of life stress on mental health and physical health. Self-determination was denoted by indicators of perceived leisure freedom and intrinsic motivation. The study was conducted with adults participating in Taekwondo as a leisure activity. Data provided evidence that social support, an element of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) is a moderator of stress. A separate study (Coleman, 1993) used the same measure with a randomized sample from the general population. Perceived leisure freedom additionally buffered the negative effects of stress. The combined findings of these two studies suggest that those who feel their leisure is constrained or not supported are likewise deprived of a source of coping with stress (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996). This issue warrants further study. In terms of therapeutic adventure programming, perceptions of freedom may be influenced by program structure. How varying perceptions of freedom impact feelings of well-being is unclear.

Other researchers have acknowledged the need to evaluate client motivations for therapy within a self-determination framework. Ryan, Plant and O’Malley (1995) examined (a) the relation of initial treatment motivations to alcoholics’ involvement in outpatient treatment and (b) dropout and the relations among patient characteristics, severity, alcohol experiences, motivation, and treatment retention. A treatment motivation questionnaire (TMQ) was developed, using determination theory (Deci &
Ryan, 1985), to assess both internal and external motivations of alcoholic patients for treatment, as well as confidence in the treatment and orientation toward interpersonal help seeking. Patients who reported internalized motivation showed greater involvement and retention in treatment. Those who were high in both internalized and external motivation demonstrated the best attendance and treatment retention, while patients low in internalized motivation showed the poorest treatment response, regardless of external motivation. Problem severity was also related to a greater degree of internalized motivation, following the presumption that the greater the perception of one’s alcoholism problem, the more motivated the individual would be to follow through with treatment. The data support the proposition that it is helpful for mental health service providers to understand the motivations of their clients for treatment.

Similarly, Pelletier, Tuson and Haddad (1997) also evaluated clients’ motivation for psychotherapy. Within the self-determination framework (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Pelletier et al. developed a scale to assess the specific therapeutic conditions that may hinder or facilitate clients’ motivation toward therapy as well as various consequences that may arise as a result of this motivation. Construct validity of the scale was established, as well as support for a motivation continuum relative to self-determination levels.

As Pelletier et al. (1997) suggested, an understanding of client motivations provides useful information to the therapists planning and structuring therapy to most effectively meet client needs. When motivations are high and more internal, it follows that a more self-determined course of therapy might be appropriate, whereas clients lacking internal
motivation and self-determination for therapy might respond better in treatments that emphasize therapist control.

Knowledge of clients’ self-determination in therapeutic adventure settings would be helpful in the planning of intervention as demonstrated in the treatment of chemical dependency. Pelletier et al. (1997) found that clients who perceived motivation for therapy as more self-determined were more likely to experience less tension, less distraction, and more positive moods during therapy. They also considered therapy to be important, reported higher levels of satisfaction with therapy, and had stronger intentions of continuing therapy. Conversely, clients who perceived their motivations to be less self-determined showed the opposite pattern of associations.

For those who are deficient in self-determined choice-making skills, there are educational approaches to fostering self-determination among students. Field and Hoffman’s (1994) model of self-determination holds that self-determination is promoted or inhibited both by factors within the individual’s control (e.g., knowledge, values, and skills) and by variables that are by nature more external or environmental (e.g., opportunities for choice-making and support of important others). While recognizing the importance of environmental variables, the model focuses mainly on factors that are within the individual’s control—the knowledge and skills that enable one to be self-determined in environments of varying levels of receptivity and support.

The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992, Pub. L. No. 102-569 (1992) supported the human need for self-determination by clearly stating the rights of all people to self-determination. This legislation is particularly relevant to educators of youth because it requires them to emphasize skills that prepare students for the expectations of
the next environment. The growing recognition of the need for self-determination among youth with special needs took the form of two federal initiatives intended to build a foundation on which self-determination skills could be taught using systematic methods. A self-determination-based curriculum was developed by Field and Hoffman (1994) as part of these initiatives. The curriculum provided an applied methodology to building self-determination skills for students with disabilities. The provision of such a curriculum implies that self-determination can be taught and is an educational outcome necessary for successful transition from school to community integration.

Young people identified as at-risk are thought to be among those who would benefit from self-determination skill-building. Serna and Lau-Smith (1995) explicated the necessity of systematically addressing self-determination skills of at-risk youth by offering a curriculum aimed to help students overcome barriers to successful participation in school, and family and community relationships. Based on literature review and construct validation, a self-determination skills list was generated identifying seven domains relevant to the self-determination of at-risk students: prerequisite social skills, self-evaluation skills, self-direction skills, networking skills, collaboration skills, persistence and risk-taking skills, and dealing with stress. A result of the validation process, Serna and Lau-Smith expanded Deci and Ryan’s (1985) definition to include a philosophy concerning the responsibility one has to oneself or others.

According to Serna and Lau-Smith (1995), self-determination refers to an individual’s awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, the ability to set goals and make choices, to be assertive at appropriate times, and to interact with others in a socially competent manner. A self-determined person is able to make independent decisions based
on his or her ability to use resources, which includes collaborating and networking with others. The outcome for a self-determined person is the ability to realize his or her own potential, to become a productive member of the community, and to obtain his or her goals without infringing on the rights, responsibilities, and goals of others.

Kiewa (2001) synthesized conceptualizations of self-determination from previous literature into one unifying concept. In a qualitative study utilizing journaling and in-depth interviews, self-determination was described through the salient theme of personal control that emerged throughout the course of interviews and analysis. Kiewa’s study was unique in that the sample consisted of a community of rock climbers, and self-determination was studied within an adventure context. Among the climbers, the concept of control was divided into two categories of meaning. First was the importance of control over oneself, or feeling competent, in stressful situations. Second was feeling control over the structure of activity as an important element determining satisfaction with the rock climbing experience.

Other researchers have applied the self-determination construct within an adventure programming setting. Sklar and Gibson (2004) found indications that a multi-day therapeutic wilderness intervention program for adolescent girls positively influenced self-realization (Wehmeyer, 1995), one of several components to Wehmeyer’s self-determination model. In a separate study of outdoor youth programming, Hill and Sibthorp (2004) found that a camp experience, when intentionally delivered to support autonomy and facilitate self-determination skills, had a positive influence on posttest scores of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, three major components to Ryan and Deci’s (2000) conceptualization of self-determination.
Many adolescents lack the competence necessary to act in a self-determined manner (Pommier & Witt, 1995). Among other problems, at-risk adolescents may face peer pressure, isolation, and family stress, complicating efforts to satisfy basic developmental needs. An effective response to the developmental requirements of youth includes an approach that helps teach young people to choose alternative, acceptable behaviors (Eron, 1987), an approach of skill development that advances self-determination (Pawelko & Magafas, 1997).

**Therapeutic Adventure**

Therapeutic adventure programming is thought to provide opportunities for youth to learn and practice developmental skills for successful adaptive behavior. Several key studies have investigated therapeutic adventure programming for at-risk youth. Witman (1993) documented characteristics of adventure programs valued by adolescents in psychiatric treatment. The characteristics rated highest by adolescent participants were: helping/assisting others; taking risks/meeting challenges; realizing the importance of caring about self; and getting support of other participants. In concept, these characteristics are closely related to the self-determination construct. In terms of self-determined events, taking risks/meeting challenges suggests an orientation toward self-initiated, competent action (Ewert, 1989; Ewert & Hollenhurst, 1989). Realizing the importance of caring about self falls within the autonomy domain as well. Helping and assisting others is an issue of interpersonal relationships as is getting the support of other participants. Some level of self-determination would be necessary for any of these characteristics to be acted upon.

Witman’s (1992) research suggested that participants valued the activity process over content. Suggestions for future research included examination of the specific
characteristics (e.g., taking risks/meeting challenges) to discover participants’ perceptions of necessary components and most valued components of each characteristic. Developing an understanding of why certain characteristics are valued was also recommended.

Expanding on this research, Autry (2001), explored the feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of at-risk girls participating in adventure therapy activities. Empowerment was identified as a major experience valued by the participants. Participants referred to adventure experiences as having helped them gain a “sense of accomplishment” (p. 298), motivation and sense of control over themselves. Psychological empowerment, which is characterized by the perception of control in one’s life, is a factor contributing to self-determination (Autry, 2001; Wehmeyer, 1995). Autry’s research, however, identified a disconnect between adventure therapy experiences and the process of transferring valued aspects of these experiences to the greater context of everyday life. One implication of this research centers on the critical element of processing facilitators can use to help clients achieve a deeper level of understand, thus facilitating generalization and transfer (Gass, 1993; Kimball & Bacon, 1993; Luckner & Nadler, 1997). Both Autry’s and Witman’s results warrant further investigation of how adventure programs can help at-risk youth improve feelings of motivation, control and empowerment, and how such outcomes are generalized among the lives of youth participants. The self-determination and flow constructs together provide a theoretical framework for such research.

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), self-determination theory shares a conceptual correspondence with flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) in the common focus on
intrinsic motivation as well as the importance both place on phenomenology. With the strong emphasis on experience, both concepts appear to have significant application in the delivery of therapeutic adventure programs. The foundational concept of challenge by choice (Gillis & Simpson, 1994; Schoel et al., 1988), for example, is widely used in therapeutic adventure. Challenge by choice links the two concepts through a common emphasis on participant autonomy and control. Of specific interest to this research is how the application of these theories may converge among wilderness-based interventions for at-risk youth.

Therapeutic interventions based on wilderness challenge experiences have been widely used to help adolescents who have serious difficulties in a number of psycho-social areas (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1999; Russell, 1999, 2002). Included among these are low self-esteem, poor self-image, poor decision-making skills, repeated failures, refusal to take responsibility for actions, lack of motivation, ambivalence, susceptibility to negative peer pressure, and impulsive behaviors (Hurricane Island Outward Bound School, n.d.). Considering the definitions of self-determination and optimal experience presented earlier in this chapter, it would be expected that such youth might also be poorly self-determined and inadequately equipped to satisfy the need for flow. These adolescents would likely benefit from the facilitation of self-determined, flow-producing experiences. The therapeutic adventure literature, however, lacks substantial research on these concepts. Thus, whether therapeutic adventure programs for at-risk youth are purposefully addressing self-determination and flow, and whether these programs are impacting these adaptive skill areas has not been determined. In summary, there is a paucity of literature describing the conditions that produce self-determination
and flow in therapeutic wilderness programming, as well as the generalization and transfer of such experiences back to everyday life.

Flow experience is arguably a target goal of wilderness challenge programming. Similarly, facilitating self-determination is central to adventure education philosophy. Whether such experiences are being facilitated in therapeutic wilderness programming for adolescents is unclear. How these experiences can be generalized and transferred is also unknown. Researching this knowledge gap will better inform the field of therapeutic adventure and the broad field of youth development as to how youth can engage in and generate intrinsically motivated, self-rewarding, active, growth-oriented experiences. This study addresses this gap in the literature.
CHAPTER 3
METHOD

Research Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm of naturalistic inquiry (Henderson, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) will guide this research. According to Hultzman and Anderson (1991), the study of perceptual phenomena, such as those of interest to leisure researchers, demands methods that investigate phenomena in their natural settings. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state that qualitative researchers study things in their natural environments, attempting to interpret or make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. This approach assumes that there are multiple interpretations of reality and that the goal of research is to understand how individuals construct their own realities within their social contexts.

In this study, the perceptual phenomena of interest were participants’ experiences of flow and self-determination. The contexts in which these experiences were studied were within both the wilderness program setting and the participants’ post-trip lives. I sought to interpret the meanings of these experiences as understood by participants. The purpose of this research was then, in part, to explore how participants’ challenge experiences were perceived within the context of a wilderness program, and how the experiences were generalized and transferred to one’s day-to-day realities.

Within the naturalistic paradigm, a case study method was used to research the specific phenomena of self-determination and flow within the contexts of participants’ lives both during and after the challenge program. According to Lincoln and Guba
(1985), case studies may be used for multiple purposes including the description and chronicling of events and phenomena. They are particularly useful when the focus is some contemporary phenomena within some real life context, over which the researcher has little control.

According to Yin (1989), there are three criteria for a case study design. First, research questions should take the form of “how,” “what,” or “why” questions. The research questions for this study are both descriptive and exploratory in nature and satisfy the “what” and “how” criteria. Second, the research requires no control over the behavioral elements of the study. The topics being investigated in this study call for no control over participants’ behaviors. Rather, the research questions inquire as to psychological processes that occur both during and after a specific intervention. Finally, Yin contends a case study must focus on contemporary events. In this study, the intervention of interest is a current wilderness challenge intervention. The program is offered once annually, and the research will focus on the experiences of one group of participants on a given trip. Therefore, the study of self-determination and flow phenomena will be limited to the experiences of these one-time participants. The context specific nature of this intervention, combined with the exploratory nature of the research questions, calls for a case study approach.

Setting

“Community Family Services” (CFS) is a pseudonym for a not-for-profit community-based counseling agency serving a diverse population in the suburbs of a major city in the American Midwest. The agency mission is to provide counseling “to families and individuals who are facing issues which interfere with their lives,” and to “offer consultation and education in response to community needs.” CFS offers a range
of services including individual and family-oriented counseling, youth crisis and stabilization, an employee assistance program (EAP), prevention and wellness programming, and early intervention programming. Among the early intervention services is the ACE (a pseudonym), the specific therapeutic wilderness intervention under investigation. Before describing the ACE, an overview of the agency is offered.

CFS counseling services address the needs of children, adolescents and their families with problems such as peer/sibling conflicts, disruptive behaviors, substance abuse, physical or sexual abuse, and depression. Individual, couple, or family counseling for adults may address concerns such as depression, marital discord, grief, post-divorce conflict, domestic violence, parenting, stress, sexual abuse, and anxiety.

The youth crisis and stabilization service is intended to help emotionally and/or behaviorally troubled youth remain at home and in the community while avoiding psychiatric hospitalization or other out of home placement. This service involves a 90-day intensive home-based crisis intervention including screening, assessment, counseling, and the coordination of support services from other community agencies.

CFS offers an EAP as a service in which businesses can enroll to provide counseling support for their employees. Included in the EAP is 24-hour crisis intervention, face-to-face counseling appointments for non-emergency situations, assessment services, follow-up care and referrals as needed.

Prevention and wellness programs include counseling and support groups as well as community education workshops available to the public. One counseling group addresses the needs of children of divorce. Another offers educational and supportive opportunities to single mothers. The Family Forum Series offers one-time workshops on
topics such as “How to Raise a Drug-Free Kid,” “Parenting, the Early Years,” and “Marital Communication.”

Among the early intervention programs offered is “Family and Schools Together,” in which students with their families participate in activities to build communication skills, positive habits, and attitudes of respect transferable to the home, school, and community. A postpartum support group offers support and education about postpartum depression and its effect on the family. The “Tobacco Reduction Among Kids” program is for youth abusing tobacco products. It is designed to help youth learn triggers that lead to use, recognize obstacles to quitting, the effects of tobacco on their health, and ways to manage stress and social pressure.

An additional CFS early intervention programs is the ACE, the program of interest to this study. The ACE is a therapeutic wilderness program targeting youth considered at-risk of problematic transition to high school. At the time of data collection, ACE was in its fifteenth year of existence. Operating with financial support from local public and private funding sources, the program has been made available on a partial or full scholarship basis to graduating eighth graders from junior high schools and middle schools within the CFS local service area. Both males and females are recruited for the program. CFS characterized ACE participants as being at high risk of a problematic transition to high school life. According to “Doc” (personal communication, May 11, 2004)—a pseudonym for a CFS staff member—the target group includes youth, ages 13 to 15 years-old, characterized as bored, unmotivated, or under-achieving in class. Some participants may have difficulty with uncooperative/non-compliant behavior at home or school. Many of the participants may be seen as socially isolated and/or ineffective, and
severely lacking in self-esteem. Additionally, teens struggling with family or peer problems are commonly referred to the program. Referrals are made by school guidance counselors. Past profiles of ACE participants have also included youth from lower income, divorced or re-married families with histories of family problems. Many of the youth participants have, at the very least, experimented with drugs and alcohol, and may be at-risk of developing substance abuse problems (Doc, personal communication, May 11, 2004).

Program candidates for the summer of 2004 (many of whom also participated in this study) were initially referred to the ACE prior to the end of the 2003-2004 school year and invited to participate in a screening interview in early May. Once selected, participants began a team building process through orientation and training sessions prior to the trip. About one month prior to departure, candidates participated in a half-day challenge course experience and swim test to initiate the process of group development and provide the senior staff an opportunity for further screening. Candidates were screened-out and referred to other services if they were unable to pass the swim test, or if they were behaviorally inappropriate for the program, based on staff assessment.

Additional orientation occurred two to three days prior to departure when selected students came to the agency site to drop off gear, discuss program expectations, and turn in personal goal statements for the trip. At this meeting, the students read and signed a “Full Value Contract” (Schoel et al., 1988) communicating the program expectations of participants as well as participant rights and responsibilities.

An eight-day canoe trip, occurring in late June, was led by an agency therapist with extensive experience planning and guiding trips of this nature. He was assisted by a
senior CFS staff member, two junior staff members, experienced ACE volunteer leaders and other adult volunteer staff members.

Throughout the trip, an “expeditionary learning” model was applied in which participants were encouraged to continually challenge themselves both physically and mentally in the unfamiliar and often uncomfortable context of a wilderness environment. These experiences are generally thought to improve life coping skills and empower youth for facing future life challenges (Doc, personal communication, May 11, 2004).

The expedition began with a 14-hour van trip to a canoe outfitter in northwestern Ontario, Canada. The group spent the night at a hotel near the outfitter camp, and day-two began a six-day wilderness experience in which participants learned and practiced outdoor living skills in a primitive and remote environment. Prior to launching canoes, or “putting-in,” the large group of 25 students was broken-up into four small groups of six or seven students with at least two staff members to each group. Each group then traveled self-sufficiently over the next six days, over the same routes, though staggered apart. However, the staff members among groups communicated with one another via portable radios as a safety precaution.

During the six-day wilderness expedition, each group traveled 27 miles, mostly by canoe. However, the group was frequently confronted with challenging portages in which canoes and gear were precariously transported over rough terrain.

Portage trails generally vary in condition from compacted and easily-traveled to extremely rocky, overgrown, hilly, and/or muddy trails. Often more of the latter, portages are often characterized as some of the most physically and mentally challenging
aspects of the experience. A successful portage often requires significant cooperation, physical stamina, and determination.

Throughout the 2004 ACE trip, participants encountered numerous physical, mental and social challenges posed within the natural environment and group context. Challenges were further influenced by purposive facilitation of staff, the social living environment, and one’s own self-perception. Staff persons routinely provided feedback to participants regarding counter-productive individual and group attitudes, values, and behaviors. During the final days of the wilderness trip, the staff begins preparing the teens to transfer learning by facilitating personal goal-setting for the transition back to home (Doc, personal communication, July 24, 2004).

On day-seven, each group arrived at a “take-out” location, returned to the outfitter and spent the night at a nearby hotel. Day-eight began with an early van departure to return to the agency office that evening, at which point the students were picked-up by their families.

A follow-up component to the wilderness program began in July, about three weeks after the students’ return home. A bi-weekly social group was facilitated by a CFS counselor who was also an ACE staff member. The group was intended to facilitate transfer of learning from the wilderness experience into real-world contexts, and to provide ongoing opportunities for shared recreation, leadership opportunities, peer support, and further development of friendships between group members. The social group was to meet on an ongoing basis throughout the subsequent school year.

Participants

The primary sample was drawn from one group of adolescents, ages 13-15, participating in the ACE in June 2004. Following a case study method, the case being the
group of individuals involved with a single ACE trip, I sought to recruit all students enrolled in the program. The maximum possible enrollment level was 25 students. Among the 25 teen participants, five had participated in the ACE program in June 2003 and were invited back as peer leaders. One parent or guardian of each student was also asked to participate. The final sample included 15 youth, four of whom were returning as peer leaders. Additionally, 17 parents were recruited, as well as one guardian (who will be grouped with parents from this point forward). Seven staff members were also recruited. Staff members were interviewed as a focus group, and two staff members were interviewed in follow-up. Adolescent, parent, and staff demographics are summarized in Tables 1 through 5.

**Procedure**

**Recruitment**

An ACE staff member who was trained in the recruitment protocol conducted recruitment. Recruitment occurred one to three days prior to the trip’s departure during a meeting in which participants dropped off gear and signed the Full-Value Contract. The recruitment process consisted of the recruiter meeting together with the students and parents to describe the purpose of the study, the methods to be used, and to request their participation. An appreciation gift was offered to adolescent participants in the form of a $15 gift card to a local department store. Compensation was not offered to adult participants. Adolescent research participants were chosen based on their enrollment in the program, assent to participate, and the completion of an informed consent document signed by the parent or legal guardian. Parents were chosen for the study based on their completion of the informed consent document and the child’s willingness to participate.
Both children and parents were given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to help ensure confidentiality. Those who did not choose a pseudonym were assigned one.

Additional data sources were sought through recruitment of ACE staff members. I met with these individuals as a group, prior to the start of the trip, to explain the purpose of the research, the methods to be used, and to request their participation. Informed consent was obtained at the time of the focus group interview. ACE staff members also provided pseudonyms.

**Data Collection**

Data were obtained and triangulated through multiple qualitative methods including open-ended questionnaires, active semi-structured interviews (Henderson, 1991; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), and a staff focus group interview. Additional triangulation occurred by obtaining data from multiple sources, including the students, staff persons, the students’ parents, and my field notes. Individual and focus group interviews were audiotape recorded for later transcription. Data collection was divided into two categories: (1) the wilderness experience, and (2) follow-up.

**Wilderness experience**

**Students’ experiences.** To address students’ experiences of flow and self-determination during the wilderness expedition, written data were sought on the final day of the wilderness trip. An open-ended questionnaire (Appendix A) was administered by the program staff on the final day of the trip. The questionnaire prompted the students to reflect on the trip in terms of their experiences of flow and self-determination and to consider the goals they had set for transition back to home. These questionnaires were administered by the ACE staff. To enhance truth-value and protect students’
confidentiality, students were provided an envelope in which to seal the completed questionnaire. Students were asked to seal their completed questionnaires inside their individual envelopes and return them to the staff members. The directions explained that although staff would be collecting the questionnaires, returning them in a sealed envelope was meant to ensure student responses would not be viewed by staff. Upon return to the agency office, the questionnaire envelopes were consolidated into one package by the ACE coordinator and sent to me by certified mail.

**Staff perspectives on flow and self-determination.** According to Kreuger and Casey (2000) focus group interviews are appropriate when the researcher is looking for a range of ideas, insights or feelings that people have about something. The focus group interview can further facilitate the emergence of ideas from the group. “A group possesses the capacity to become more than the sum of its parts, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone don’t possess” (p. 24).

To gain insights into staff perceptions of students’ experiences with the ACE, a focus group interview was conducted with staff members who agreed to participate in this study. The focus group took place in an office at the CFS facility five weeks after the wilderness trip.

Morgan (1997) argued for the use of audio tape as the principle means of capturing observations within a focus group interview, and that the physical facility be carefully chosen and setup with the tape recording in mind. Morgan further cautioned against the use of videotape for recording focus group interviews. Although a tempting alternative to audiotape, video recordings add an element of intrusiveness and often require complicated setups with multiple assistants and high quality equipment. Given the
greater invasion of privacy, and that actual data analysis is most often based on
transcripts, audio taping is accepted as the most practical method for recording focus
group interviews (Morgan, 1997).

An audiotape setup, therefore, was chosen as the method for recording the focus
group interview. Participants were seated in a circular fashion in the office and I acted as
the moderator. Three tape recorders were used. The primary tape recorder was located
in the center with two backup recorders at opposite ends of the circle. Good recording
quality was obtained from the primary tape recorder.

Developing a question sequence that naturally flows from one question to another,
and following a progression from general questions to specific, is critical to the success
of a good focus group interview (Kreuger & Casey, 2000). Following the questioning
route model (Kreuger & Casey, 2000), I moderated the interview process which began
with opening questions and progressed through introductory, transition, key questions
and ending questions (Appendix B).

Prior to the focus group interview, staff members were mailed a handout orienting
them to the concept of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Voelkl et al.,
2003) (Appendix C). During the interview, just prior to introducing key questions, staff
participants were reoriented to the concept of flow and introduced to the concept of
self-determination. They were then asked to share insights as to how flow and
self-determination were facilitated during the trip, and to identify barriers to such
experiences. Additionally, I asked members to make projections about what skills they
thought were taken from the course related to flow and self-determination. The focus
group interview lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours.
Follow-up

Students’ reflections, generalization, and transfer of flow and self-determination. To further assess experiences of flow and self-determination, and to explore the generalization and transfer of learning, follow-up interviews were scheduled with youth who had participated in the wilderness trip. Fifteen youth interviews were conducted over a two-and-a-half week period. During the adolescent interview, I asked the students to reflect on experiences of flow and self-determination during the wilderness phase, and to discuss the meanings of those experiences. I also explored the issue of whether teens were able to generalize what they had learned, and if so, how.

Eighteen parents were also interviewed during the same timeframe, though separately from the students, to gain parental perspectives on the impact of the course (see “parents’ perceptions of course impact on students and family,” below).

Assessment of generalization and transfer requires a time lapse to occur from the wilderness program conclusion. Therefore, follow-up interviews were scheduled to begin no sooner than three weeks after the wilderness course. All interviews lasted a period of about forty-five minutes to one-and-a-half hours. The previously administered questionnaire was used as a partial basis for the in-person interviews (Appendix B).

Parents’ perceptions of program impact on students and family. Interviews of one parent of each student were conducted (Appendix B). The parent was asked to discuss the impact of the course on his or her child and the family. Parents were also asked to indicate any observations of behavior changes demonstrated by the adolescent, and to consider the role of the ACE program in influencing those changes.
Follow-up staff observations. The follow-up group facilitators, as mentioned earlier, had recurring contact with students in the weeks and months following the actual trip. Therefore, those individuals were asked to provide insights as to the generalization and transfer of flow and self-determination among the students, and to discuss course factors they felt influenced this process (Appendix B). These interviews were conducted via telephone, approximately three months after completion of follow-up interviews. Relevant comments from the earlier staff focus group were revisited and used to inform the follow-up interviews.

Researcher field notes. Researcher field notes consisted of notes taken while observing behavior and nonverbal cues during the interviews. Additionally, insights and reflections were recorded immediately after interviews and while transcribing tapes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative approach, “a systematic method for recording, coding and analyzing data” (Henderson, 1991). Using the three major stages of constant comparison, categories of data were first coded and incidents fit within categories. The categories and their properties were then integrated by comparing them to one another and with the data. Finally, the categories were delimited for parsimony and scope and the process of comparison continued until saturation was achieved. The focus of this technique was to compare individuals, groups of individuals, and the data to enhance the overall trustworthiness of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Glaser and Strauss, the constant comparative method causes one to look continually for diversity. Through the ongoing process of comparison, a researcher specifies concepts, provides assurance of accurate evidence, establishes
generality of a fact, verifies theory, or generates theory grounded in the data. The theory that emerges may not be a perfect theory, but rather a theory relevant to the behavior and context in which it is observed (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

The constant comparative method, as a systematic approach to building theory, calls for a high degree of intimacy with the data. As interviews are constantly revisited in the process of coding, recoding, and developing categories, a systematic method of data organization and retrieval is essential. N-6, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) software package designed to relate to the logic of the constant comparative method was used to this end. According to Seal (2002), a major contribution of this and similar software is the automated retrieval of text segments that have been categorized to correspond with some analytical concept. The process can enhance data analysis by encouraging rigor, though it is not capable of enforcing rigor on the researcher. According to Dohan and Sanchez-Jankowski (1998), although the researcher can achieve a high degree of rigor without software, fatigue and memory can impose biases against which software can help protect. Through the program’s ability to scan vast quantities of data for category-related text, a more careful reading of the text is encouraged. Therefore, software can simplify and enhance data analysis for the researcher. Yet it does not replace the process of rigorous human analysis.

Data quality is directly tied to the ability of the researcher to observe significant phenomena in the course of fieldwork and to recognize what he or she has seen. While CAQDA can compensate for small failures of detailed observation or sharp insight, it is no substitute for either (p. 496).

To further enhance the trustworthiness of this research, member checks were carried out throughout the data collection and analysis process. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued, member checks provide evidence of credibility, a criteria analogous to
internal validity in the positivist paradigm. Further trustworthiness was addressed through investigator triangulation in which I, my supervisory committee chair, and a supervisory committee member separately read through the interview transcripts and questionnaires to produce initial coding, categorization, and broad data themes (Henderson, 1991). Throughout the data analysis, I met twice with both committee members as a group, and multiple times separately, to discuss and compare emerging codes, categories, themes, and theoretical concepts.

The constant comparative technique in this study began with review of post-trip questionnaires and continued throughout the interview and transcription process. “Incidents” or units of responses were coded into as many categories of analysis as possible as categories emerged and as data emerged that fit into existing categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). The categories and their properties were continually reevaluated through comparison with one another, with new emerging categories, and with the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, themes were constructed from the categories and their properties which were again reviewed and compared with one another, and with the data, to confirm the data had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the constant comparative process, themes emerged into a system of relationships, or grounded theoretical concepts, that were built on the continuity of participant responses, data categories, and their properties (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Using the constant comparative method “makes probable the achievement of a complex theory that corresponds closely to the data, since the constant comparisons force the analyst to consider much diversity in the data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1999, p. 113-114).
In the present research, the development of theory occurred through the construction of diverse conceptual categories and themes, and these themes were illustrated through interview excerpts. The theory was further studied for similarities and convergences with concepts from the literature review and modified as such. As the theory was delimited, relatively universal concepts and relationships emerged that were informed by and supported with concepts from new literature as well as by concepts that were presented previously in the literature review in Chapter 2.
### Table 1. Adolescent demographics

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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Participation Year</th>
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Table 5. Staff income

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CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

In Chapter 1, research questions were stated inquiring as to the psychological experiences, and the meanings of those experiences, of the adolescents participating in the ACE program. Additional questions were stated to gain the insights and observations of program staff members and the teenagers’ parents, both of whom were key players to the teens’ participation in this intervention program. Adolescent participants completed post-trip questionnaires. Thirty-six interviews were conducted, including individual interviews of 15 adolescents and 18 parents, a group interview of seven staff members, and two individual follow-up interviews of staff members.

Through the constant comparative method of analysis, key concepts, categories, and themes were constructed throughout the process of interviewing, reading, and rereading questionnaire responses, approximately 1500 pages of transcripts, and researcher memos. Examination and saturation of categories and themes facilitated the development of grounded theory, presented in Chapter 5. Data analysis resulted in saturation of three major themes including 1) challenge; 2) community; and 3) key player relationships. Conceptually, the three themes that were constructed from the accounts of the youth participants, the parents, and the staff members, interrelated with one another as an interdependent system of youth development (Figure 1). Representation of these themes and their relationships will be addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

“Writing up” qualitative research cannot be approached as a straightforward task, (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 109). Reconstructing and representing social worlds and
social actors depends on disciplined, principled choices made by the researcher. As no
single analytical approach ought to be adopted without critical reflection, similarly,
principled choices direct how research accounts are written up and represented (Coffey &
Atkinson).

To develop a deep understanding of the emergent themes, I went through a process
of constantly comparing the themes and categories with one another and with the data,
and tested these themes and their relationships as they fit within the two temporal phases
of the ACE program addressed by the research questions. These phases were “wilderness
trip,” and “post-trip.” My in-depth understanding of the interrelationships between and
among the three themes ultimately developed within the contexts of both phases.
Therefore, although all data were collected post-trip, I determined the emergent themes
would be represented within the contexts of either phase of the ACE program.
Participant talk relating more strongly to wilderness trip experience was categorized as
the wilderness trip phase whereas talk relating to post-trip experience was placed within
the post-trip category.

Before proceeding, it should also be emphasized that in the process of interviewing,
data were inadvertently collected that were not specifically addressed by the research
questions. While the research questions addressed the concepts of experience of the
program and transfer of learning, a portrait of the teens prior to the trip also emerged, and
this illustration ultimately enhanced my overall understanding of the emergent themes.
Therefore, a category of “pre-trip adolescent profile” was constructed, not for the purpose
of fitting the system of thematic conceptual relationships, but rather to represent a
broader context for understanding the emergent themes. The pre-trip adolescent profile
will be presented in the following pages as a foundation for representing the wilderness trip and post-trip phases of the program.

Finally, the research process was initially informed by the flow and self-determination theoretical frameworks. While this research was initiated with these frameworks in mind, the stronger themes that emerged extended beyond the original purpose of the study. In the pages that follow, it is the bigger story that is told as illustrated by the three themes derived from the research participants’ own accounts.

**Themes**

Before discussing the temporal phases of the program in which the themes will be illustrated, a brief introduction to each theme will be presented to provide an overall conceptual overview of the emergent system of interrelated themes (Table 6).

The first among the major themes was that of “challenge” which was broken out into the three interrelated sub-themes of “individual growth,” “social growth,” and “helping.” It was no surprise that the concept of challenge would be a major theme of these research results. Indeed, the method of the intervention program under study was to purposefully use a major group challenge experience to facilitate positive development among the youth participants. However, what emerged from the data was a strong contrast between the characteristics of *wilderness trip* challenge versus *post-trip* challenge.

Wilderness trip challenge was largely viewed as physically strenuous and sometimes mentally and/or socially taxing. Overcoming these challenges, both as individuals and as a group, was perceived (with one exception) as both personally and socially rewarding. As sub-themes of challenge, both individual growth and social growth seemed to develop by nature of surmounting challenges as a group and by the
overlapping roles of adolescents necessarily helping one another. The process of taking-on, negotiating, and overcoming challenges as a group further contributed to the solidification of group bonds. The reciprocal helping dynamic that emerged in turn facilitated the formation of community among the peers and staff members.

In contrast to the wilderness trip phase, post-trip challenges—meaning the kinds of challenges teens faced in their everyday lives after the trip had concluded—had a largely different set of characteristics. In terms of pastimes, or how teens were spending their time, a mixture of active and passive activity was reported. Feelings of anxiety and avoidance of emotional challenges were also reported, as was boredom and frustration in the absence of challenging activity. Personal and social growth, while prevalent throughout the wilderness trip, was somewhat weaker among the post-trip accounts. Compared to the wilderness trip, opportunities to act as helpers among peers were substantially less prevalent among most post-trip accounts. The act of helping was instead characterized as teens’ willingness to do chores and help around the home.

Furthermore, after the trip concluded, the primary link to peer community was found in the teens’ participation in the follow-up group. The group meetings served to reinforce social bonds and community established during the wilderness trip. However, the follow-up group lacked activity with the kinds of physical, social, and mental challenges experienced during the trip.

An additional theme of key player relationships also emerged. I observed from the data that bonds between staff and students were strong and supportive of students’ personal development and community building during the trip. Parents, however, who
effectively were non-participants of the program, were absent from wilderness trip support of adolescent development.

Post-trip links between the program and teens were characterized by strong supportive emotional bonds. These relational bonds, however, were combined with program procedures disconnected from extending some of the stronger outcomes of the wilderness trip. Additionally, post-trip communications between the program and parents were characterized by an extreme information gap as displayed by parents’ limited knowledge of what their children had done or accomplished during the wilderness trip. Parent-teen bonds were further characterized by a mixture of supportiveness and lack of supportiveness.

**Pre-Trip Adolescent Profile**

In the process of interviewing and discovering data, much was learned about the families and life conditions of the adolescent program participants. Doc, a long-time social worker and counselor at CFS, and co-founder of the ACE program, described the profile of youth who were likely to participate.

Our buzzword has always been at-risk youth, and I think over time we’ve all found that means a lot of different things. But kids that are at-risk of possible psychiatric kinds of [problems]. Hospitalization is the traditional form of it. Kids who are at-risk of doing poor academically and losing their education. Or dropping out of high school.

Doc explained how initial goals of the program were to target struggling students during their transition out of middle school “to enhance their initial adjustment to high school.”

Suggesting a possible contributor to such struggles, Doc estimated that in over the fifteen years of the ACE program, nearly “seventy percent of the kids in the program have been through a divorce, and are either living in a step family life or a single parent life.” Such a high divorce rate was not reflected among this year’s participating families.
However, of the total group of 25 families involved in this year’s program, 11 (44%) had been through, or were going through a parental divorce. Of the 18 families interviewed, six (33%) had experienced a divorce in the immediate family.

Frank, a first year teen participant described how he “. . . just needed a week out from the house. ‘Cause everyone was like fighting at my house.” He returned home from the wilderness trip to learn his parents were “getting a divorce.” Hydro, another first-year male, reiterated Frank’s sentiment, describing severe home related stress. “It’s really hard to be happy when I’m at home because my parents are fighting or they’re talking bad things about each other. They’re saying mean things or doing mean things.”

A female teen participant, Nicole, also suggested feeling frustration over parental conflict, stating, “My parents are kind of unhappily married. . . . It’s really confusing.”

While parental conflicts caused stress among certain families, some had other life stressors such as a parent being unemployed. Jiggle Billy, a second-year peer leader, related how his mother’s unemployment had created financial pressures. “My family had severe money problems ‘cause no one would hire my mom.” Similarly, Wolf described how his feelings of social isolation seemed related to his father’s unemployment. “I was having family issues ‘cause my dad got unemployed, and we’re starting to lose our house, and I was just more depressed and didn’t feel like doing anything with anyone.” Marge, a single mother who was previously unemployed, described how her lack of a job had been emotionally difficult for her. “It’s hard not to take it personally. (In an exaggerated self-pitying voice) “Why does everybody else have a job and I don’t! Wah wah, ya know?”
Black Jack, a single mother of five children who works as a third shift hotel night auditor, related multiple stressors contributing to family strife and conflict. Her concerns included ongoing harassment caused by her ex-husband and father of her children who was also an active alcoholic.

The rules are if he comes out he can’t be drunk and he can’t have the attitude. And uh, he chooses not to come. I cannot do anything about that but my kids don’t see it that way. So some of [my son’s] yelling is that I’m keeping their father away.

As presented above, family strife and/or family conflict in some form was apparent in all but a few families participating in the study. The stressors faced by the teens participating in the ACE program were best summed up by Doc, who stated, “My overwhelming feeling was that these kids in our group had all been through some really hard times in their young lives already.”

Apart from having to cope with issues of family conflict, most adolescents were described as having social difficulties among their peers. Lacking confidence to be assertive with one’s peers was a common issue illustrated by Taylor, a first-year female adolescent. In a situation at school, Taylor felt scared to “be herself” for fear of losing friends.

I had all these friends and then this one person got mad at me. So she got like all of ‘em to turn against me. ‘Cause they’re scared of her. . . . I’d always sit there quiet ‘cause I didn’t know what to say. And I was always scared. . . . I didn’t want to lose them as friends.

Other teens seemed to have difficulty making or keeping friends. Cari, another female first-time participant, seemed resigned to being socially alone. “Making friends? Well I can make friends, but then I lose them.” Laughter Lady, mother of a male participant, described her son as having problems initiating friendships. “He’s really hard to make friends. He doesn’t really feel like he has any friends.” Similarly, Corcho,
mother of a first-year male participant, described how her son had seemed to give up on making friends. “He doesn’t, um, have friends to go out with. . . . Yeah he has trouble making friends. He always has. And he used to try really hard, but I think he stopped trying.” She further connected her son’s peer troubles to a deficit in social skills.

He always wants to be in charge. And I think that that’s why kids walk away from him. Because he wants to be in control. . . . He always wants to pick what game they’re gonna play or what they’re gonna do next.

Doc elaborated on social-behavioral aspects of the adolescent profile describing them as “. . . kids that are struggling socially and don’t quite know how to fit into their social experience. . . . [They] get ostracized, get kidded, or get teased.”

These teens were lacking friends, as well as skills for making and keeping friends, suggesting a pre-trip deficit as a predominant theme of this research. Prior to the trip, most of the adolescent participants lacked attachment to a community of peers. Wolf, a male returning student/peer leader, described a lack of attachment to peers in his school. “I’ve got a lot of problems with the kids in my school. It’s just, not the kind of people I really want to socialize with. So at school I just tend to like ignore people.” Candace, a fourth-year staff member, who is also a middle school English teacher, and former guidance counselor, provided some insight as to the social barriers these adolescents face:

A lot of these kids come from, at least from our school, they’re coming from experiences where they don’t have friends. And they work and work and work to get into a group, and they’re shut out . . . almost everywhere they turn.

Whether students lacked skills and/or motivation for building friendships, one thing was clear. Social isolation and failure in building social networks typified the social experiences of these adolescents prior to the ACE wilderness trip. Additionally, some of these teens experienced stressful home life situations.
Wilderness Trip

Research questions stated in Chapter 1 sought to evaluate student experiences of the ACE program, as understood through flow theory and self-determination theory. Considering that challenging activity was an intentionally applied major element of the program, experiences of challenge and feelings of control during the trip were thoroughly investigated and probed to gain an understanding of the students’ experiences within context of the proposed theoretical frameworks. Through the constant comparative method of data analysis, three major themes emerged: challenge, community, and key player relationships.

Theme 1: Challenge

Descriptions of challenge

To gain a general understanding of how students thought about challenge, the teens were asked to define challenge in writing and to elaborate on their definitions during an interview. Definitions of challenge varied from highly internal experience, to experiences influenced by environmental and social factors. However all were consistent in relating challenge to expectations toward the future.

Jessica, a first-time participant, described challenge as having rewarding, future-oriented outcomes, “Something that’s really hard. That you really don’t like doing it, but it would be like worth it at the end.” John, also a first year participant, similarly framed challenge in the context of accomplishment, and connected the concept to future goals.

If you face a challenge and you go through with completing whatever challenge is ahead of you, then basically you’ve got that accomplished. [And] if you ever have to go over that bridge again, you’ll have a little more idea of what’s going on. And what you’ll have to accomplish.
Bruce’s definition diverged slightly from John’s. His definition was more problem-focused and it included both physical and social elements, but also suggested a goal-orientation. “Challenge to me is having to overcome a problem that [takes] time to answer.” In a similar fashion, Jiggle Billy defined challenge as having to do with solving a problem, stating, “I think a challenge basically is something you don’t think you can overcome.”

When asked to define the term, Nicole described the perception of challenge as relative to one’s abilities combined with the social resources and supports available. For Nicole, one’s experience of challenge could involve both individual effort and reliance on others for help. “Sometimes if you can’t work through it, then you might need help from someone else.”

Megan also suggested a relationship between challenge and skills by stating, “It’s gonna take time and you need to learn about it in order to get it done. So it’s gonna be above your ability to do, but you can still get it done with a little work.” When asked to elaborate, like Nicole, Megan indicated that using social resources was a way to negotiate challenge. “Maybe there’s somebody else there that’s done it and helping you through it.” Both Nicole and Megan alluded to a challenge-skill relationship, a major element of Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) theory of optimal experience. They also both suggested a goal-orientation to facing a challenge, another aspect of the flow concept.

While comparison of the adolescents’ definitions with one another revealed a range of meanings—from personal, internal experience to social, external experience—one feature of their definitions was consistent. In the eyes of the youth, challenge is a goal-oriented, forward-looking, future-focused concept.
Research participants were also asked to describe what was challenging for the teens during the wilderness trip. What emerged from this line of inquiry were primarily descriptions of camping activities and interactions with the physical environment.

Among these descriptions were activities related to backcountry travel such as paddling, portaging, and camping. When asked to talk about what was challenging during the trip, John described his experience with paddling against the elements.

Constantly in the waves, against the wind, against the current. Like, a few of the days the wind was going one way and the current was going the other way . . . so you had to paddle extremely hard on one side for a few hours. You couldn’t switch off to give one arm a rest.

Paddling was one sort of physical challenge. Portaging canoes and gear packs over rugged trails was another. Jiggle Billy vividly described struggles with mud and rocks while portaging a canoe on his shoulders.

The weight isn’t the problem, it’s just, if you lose balance it becomes the problem. So you’re walking, trying to keep your balance, and then you’re stepping in mud. And one foot might sink deeper than the other, or you might have to slowly pull your foot out without having your shoe fall off. . . . Or then stepping on rocks, make sure you don’t hurt your ankle or you don’t slip off and drop the canoe.

From a staff member’s perspective, Candace portrayed the interaction between activity and environment as especially challenging for some of the teens.

For the first two days, we had some pretty tough paddling because of the wind. And I think right away, kids were forced to figure out what’s going on. You know, [two boys] coming through those narrows. . . . And they were going back and forth and spinning. . . . You could see ’em give up at times. They just both put their paddles down and the wind would just take them.

A final salient aspect of the physical environment was the recurring topic of coping with wet weather and equipment. As depicted by Frank:

We flipped a hundred yards from the starting point. All my stuff was wet, and I wasn’t very happy about it. We get to camp, my tent’s wet. . . . My sleeping bag is soaked, my comforter’s soaked so when I went to bed, I went to bed with a cold, very cold sleeping bag.
As illustrated by these common depictions, the physical nature of the wilderness trip was predominantly characterized by manual travel through rugged terrain and somewhat foul weather. Additionally, all challenges were initially compounded by the fact that the adolescents were mostly undeveloped in their outdoor skills training. As the trip progressed, however, outdoor skills developed and as demonstrated later in this chapter, negotiation of physical challenges was ultimately perceived as personally rewarding.

In addition to the physical nature of challenge, teens and staff members described psychological characteristics of challenge. For example, many students described elements of the physical challenge experience as requiring intense concentration, a characteristic of optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000). This property of challenge was evident in Jeff’s description of portaging.

I had to really think what I was doin’. I wasn’t really thinkin’ of giving up, then. ‘Cause I didn’t really want to hurt myself. . . . I had to really focus on what I was doin’, lookin’ forward instead of behind me. . . . My friend, he had tripped over a log and sprained both of his wrists. I didn’t really wanna end up like him, so I was watching ahead of me, and making sure I won’t trip over anything.

Frank had a similar, though more intense description of concentration while portaging.

I just wanna’ get it over with, so I stay focused on it. So I have the canoe up on my shoulders and it’s one of those mile portages. . . . And there’s mud and rocks all over. . . . I’m hopping from rock to rock. Through trees and stuff. And just going as fast as I can. Get it over with. And just not taking my eyes off the trail. Not talking to anyone. Cause I’d need to stay perfectly focused on what I’m doing. . . . I don’t want to hop to another rock and miss it, and twist my ankle, have the canoe fall and break. . . . So I have to stay focused.

Similarly Nicole demonstrated how she would stay mentally “in the moment” while portaging. “When you’re going through the portage . . . you have to think about what’s
going on at the time. And at that time you can’t worry about what happened earlier in the day, and you’re not really thinking about what you’re going to do next.”

One final salient characteristic of the challenge theme was also noticeably descriptive of the flow framework (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000). As reported by the teens, perceptions of competence were connected to feelings of control and enjoyment of challenges. Some indicated that as their outdoor skills and feelings of competence improved, challenges appeared less frustrating and more enjoyable. For Megan, frustrations with canoeing decreased as her paddling skills improved.

Before I figured it out, I got frustrated because I didn’t know how to do it, and, I just wanted to get it done. And like, just to be able to go. And then afterwards . . . [I] didn’t have to think about it that much. It’s, it’s like a second nature almost.

Likewise for Megan and another female participant, setting up a tent initially produced frustration, but as familiarity and experience increased, it became commonplace.

We did not know how to put our tent up. It was, it was awkwardly shaped, and like, we were missing a pole or something. And so, I got really frustrated, but we finally figured it out and from there on it was like, a snap to put it up. It was really easy.

Jeff also illustrated feeling competent when asked to tell about the difficulty level of portaging, particularly when he was feeling highly focused. He described carrying a canoe as, “Just right. Not too hard, not too easy. Just like, right, for me. Where I can handle it.”

Many also described activities of the trip as “fun,” in which enjoyment was connected to novelty, a concept also related to optimal experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Nicole, for example, described strenuous portaging as enjoyable. “A lot of them were, like, just a lot of fun. Like, it’s fun to go through.” Asked to explain what could
make a portage fun, she described a combination of frustrating activity and welcome novelty:

Well, even though it made it really hard and really annoying at the time, and you just wanted to get over with it. . . . I don’t know, they just kind of like changed things for you, gave you something new to do for the day.

Overall, challenge as experienced during the trip was described as having distinct physical and psychological properties. Physical characteristics related to both activities of backcountry travel and the physical environment. Among the psychological descriptions of challenge were accounts of intense concentration, attitudes of perseverance, perceptions of competence, and feelings of both frustration and enjoyment. With the exception of one teen participant whose account diverged from the stronger theme of challenge, students talked about challenging experiences within positive contexts reflective of the flow framework. Where obstacles or barriers to optimal experience were encountered during the wilderness trip, students reported engaging with, pushing through, and ultimately surmounting these challenges.

As introduced to the reader earlier in this chapter, the pre-trip lives of the ACE adolescents were characterized by multiple struggles and life constraints. By participating in this intervention program, these youth encountered situations apart from and unlike those of their everyday lives. A review of the major theme of challenge revealed trip characteristics covering a range of experience.

As the research participants talked about challenge, an underlying positive tone emerged from the dialogue, indicating a sense of growth among the teens. The topic of growth was therefore explored among the data, and what emerged were two sub-themes: personal growth and social growth.
Sub-theme 1A: Personal growth

Exploration of interviews, questionnaires, and field notes revealed personal growth as both experiences and outcomes of the trip. Several data categories were classified as growth. Among those classified as personal growth were strength, accomplishment, confidence, personal control, calmness, and perseverance.

**Personal growth: strength.** As a category of personal growth, both teens and parents reported feeling physically strong as an important experience and outcome of the program. For Chip, being “one of the three people” in his group who was able to carry a canoe made him “. . . feel good, that you’re physically strong.” Similarly, Iroquois described the “Highway to Hell” portage as “. . . a good test of my hulk-like strength,” a portage where he carried a heavy pack and a canoe at the same time. “It’s like to prove to myself that I’m stronger than I think I am. Because I just think of myself as weak . . . ,” whereas portaging made him feel physically strong.

Nicole described how carrying a canoe on her shoulders was not as difficult as she had imagined and that it actually made her feel stronger. Upon returning home she was more willing to take on physically challenging tasks and chores.

There’s a lot of things now that I didn’t have to do before I went to Canada. Because my dad decided to test my strength a little more . . . give me chores that I’d never do before. . . . I’ll just go out and do it every once in awhile or help him with something that requires a little more strength. . . . Because before I would have been like, “No, I can’t lift that.” . . . And [now], I might actually go do it.

Esther, mother of a female first-time participant, related her daughter’s sense of gratification to the physical definition she had acquired.

She was pretty proud of her muscles when she got back. She really built up some muscles and really defined the ones in the forearm and the biceps. You could tell she was proud of that, because . . . we had gone to Sam’s to get the salt for the water softener, and a forty pound bag, she says, “I’ll get that.” [laughs] No problem!
Hydro also gained a sense of satisfaction from building strength. When asked what he liked most about the trip, he replied, “Rejuvenation and physical strength through the program. I really liked that.”

Teen participants were also asked to explain how they gained satisfaction or reward from challenge experience. Wolf, a peer leader, had initially described portaging as devoid of rewards. However, when probed he identified strength as an unexpected reward. “I didn’t realize that I could do somethin’ like that. [It] made me stronger. Now that I look back, I realize I got stronger. I didn’t really realize that [before].”

As properties of personal growth, both discovery of strength and development of strength were referred to as experiences and outcomes of the trip. Exercising one’s strength was further interrelated with other outcomes of personal growth, such as accomplishment.

**Personal growth: accomplishment.** With the exception of one teen participant interviewed, a strong sense of accomplishment was derived from participating in the ACE wilderness program. As an internal, personal experience, John related the idea of accomplishment to feelings of personal power:

Knowing that you didn’t need an engine to go probably thirty, forty kilometers in the water against current. . . . Just that I had gone all that way under my power. I had done all that. I felt a sense of accomplishment there.

Specific examples of accomplishments during the trip were related on many levels. For Taylor, learning to set up a tent was especially meaningful.

Ever since the first day, I put up the tent. . . . It [meant] a lot because I had never set up a tent and I had never known how and then when I had set it up, I was all proud of myself. Because I had done it right.
Pushing through a long paddle into the waves and wind was recounted by Hydro as being a major accomplishment. Asked to talk about an example of what was challenging about the trip, Hydro recounted paddling through an open-water bay.

The waves were three feet to five feet high and I pushed myself until I actually started to cry from the pain in my arms but after getting through I was so proud of myself and me and my partner. And it felt so good to get through that part of the trip. It was great. ‘Cause you knew you pushed yourself that hard. And you knew that you got through.

In addition to camping and paddling, portaging was described as one of the most challenging activities that created feelings of success. When asked to describe the most satisfying challenges, Nicole declared, “The most satisfying part was being able to complete a long, hard portage and looking back at it and being able to say, ‘Wow! I portaged a canoe over that?’”

As a topic of accomplishment, Jiggle Billy demonstrated tenacity associated with overcoming or defeating the recurring obstacle of potentially spirit-breaking mud. “There was so much of it, . . . and I swear sometimes mud is put there to make you fall. Or, not be able to move. And when you do the opposite of what it’s there for, you’ve truly beaten it.” I wondered aloud if he was “making a game out of it.” Jiggle Billy continued:

[That’s a] good way of saying it. It’s like, okay the mud’s tryin’ to beat me. . . . The whole idea is . . . you’re tryin’ to beat the mud at its own game. It’s tryin’ to make you fall. . . . It’s tryin’ to tip you, it’s tryin’ to get you stuck. Do the opposite. Don’t get stuck, don’t fall over and keep goin’ through it.

Frank was a first year student whose goals for the trip included controlling his anger. While some related the idea of accomplishment in terms of physical experience, for Frank, accomplishment was represented by a combination of overcoming physical obstacles while controlling his emotions. Asked to describe his accomplishments he
stated, “. . . Just getting that closer to your destination and actually accomplishing something. Getting this trip done, without complaining, bursting out in anger, or anything like that.”

Parents additionally related multiple examples of how they felt their children returned with feelings of having accomplished something big. Mae, for example, remarked about the deep meaning of the ACE trip experience to her son.

He had so much more in him than he’d realized. He was astounded, himself, that he could paddle a canoe so long and he had never done it before. I definitely know that that was a big part of this. Just realizing how much he could do. And proud of himself!

Similarly, when asked what his daughter liked most about the trip, Safe One, stated:

I think just the self-fulfillment that she could do what she did, actually. She came out of it. I hear it was tough, it sounds like. And . . . it sounded like she took a leadership role and she’s, came out of, uh, with, m, I think she feels more confident.

It became clear from the many references to accomplishment from students, parents, and staff alike, the vast majority of adolescents emerged from the program with a sense of major achievement.

**Personal growth: confidence.** Intertwined with talk about accomplishment was the related topic of confidence, both aspects of personal growth that were commonly discussed together. Safe One’s statement above, for example, suggested a link between his daughter’s accomplishments and increased sense of confidence. This illustration was a sentiment communicated by others. Marge, a mother of a male peer leader, spoke about how her son had grown and gained confidence through his perseverance and success with the program.

[He] has always had the problem of being scared of doing new things. . . . And, it definitely has, shown him he’s capable of accomplishing a lot. He just needs to set his mind to it. And that type of self-confidence, he did not have before.
Taffy, mother of a first-year male interpreted her son’s change in behavior as self-confidence. “He used to always walk around and say, ‘I’m ugly.’ I don’t hear that no more. He does have confidence in himself, to where it’s better and not, puttin’ himself down.” This kind of observation of her son was similar to what Grimace had noticed in his son, a peer leader.

He walks, he sits differently. . . . He used to be more withdrawn or more insecure out in public. Now he’s got his shoulders back. He’s walking tall and he’s just a lot happier kid than he used to be.

Nicole more directly pointed out how the program had helped her develop self-confidence. When asked how she had been able to use at home what she learned during the trip, Nicole described feeling more confident in her abilities as a result of the wilderness experience.

. . . you do realize that things aren’t exactly that hard. Like, when you’re out in the middle of nowhere and your resources are limited and you have to deal with and be with the same group of people all day for a week. . . . You can just go through a lot more without even thinking about it. When before you might have been, like, “No, I can’t do that.” And this time you might actually go out and try it.

Similar to Nicole, Wolf specifically addressed confidence as a self-perceived outcome of the program. He described how after serving as a peer leader, leadership came more naturally to him. “Seems like I’ve got more confidence in myself now. . . . I was like, ‘I can do this.’”

**Personal growth: personal control.** While strength, accomplishment, and confidence emerged naturally as categories from the sub-theme of personal growth, a fourth category of personal control emerged from a line of questioning related to self-determination. As a theoretical basis for this study, both the experience of self-determination during the wilderness trip, and the generalization of such experience, were addressed through questions to teens, staff, and parents regarding feelings of
personal control (Kiewa, 2001). What emerged from this line of questioning was an underlying meaning of controlling one’s anger in stressful situations.

Megan defined personal control as “Having control over your anger and frustrations over certain things.” Asked to talk more about it, she elaborated, “If you can control your . . . like, if you wanna kick this person’s butt, you can control that, controlling your anger, you will just set it aside and do something else or use your anger in a different way.” She was then asked to describe what made her feel like she had used personal control during the trip, and she stated, “When I did get angry I didn’t yell at people, I didn’t take it out on them. I took it out on either, like if we were paddling or something, I took it out on, just, paddling.”

Using the physical challenge of paddling or portaging seemed to help others control their anger as well. Frank, for example, described how he dealt with his frustration over another group member’s behavior. Canoeing and portaging were key outlets for his anger.

Paddling, we would actually go much faster, because I would be paddling so hard and so fast, I would just paddle as hard as I possibly could. At the portages, I would double pack. And carry the canoe and my backpack at the same time. . . . So that was really hard and it would be over those long portages. That would help get my anger out.

Associated with anger control was the observation by parents of calmness among the teens after returning from the wilderness. Jenn, a parent of one of the male participants, observed a reduction in her son’s typical bouts of anger. “He hasn’t gotten as angry as quickly as he used to. . . . He’s more fun. He’s more part of the family.”

Another parent, Butch, noticed his son seemed more relaxed and thoughtful about problem management after returning from the trip. “He seems a lot calmer. He’s not, um, jittery like he used to be.”
Another aspect of teen calmness observed by multiple parents was a reduced inclination toward conflict. Safe One’s daughter, for example “. . . doesn’t argue. She’ll [say] “Yes I’ll do it,” and she’ll get to it. . . . There’s been a definite change in havin’ to prompt her and push her all the time with doin’ stuff.”

The parents’ observations of teen calmness were supported by the adolescents’ own accounts. During the interviews, teen participants were asked to tell about how they had been able to use what they had learned during the wilderness trip. Giving the question some thought, Jessica responded, “Hmm. I think that not freaking out when [I] really want to. Usually I’m just like, “Oh my god I don’t want to do this!” And just totally freak out and not do nothing.” Similarly, and more specifically, Nicole responded, “I can be a lot more calm about certain situations with arguments . . . and other people.”

**Personal growth: perseverance.** An attitude of perseverance was a prevalent characteristic of the wilderness challenge experience. Jiggle Billy, using alternating voices to represent an internal dialogue, illustrated how portaging required a high degree of determination and perseverance.

“. . . my foot hurts.” “Keep moving.” “Oh my shoe’s about to fall off.” “Keep moving.” Because, every step you take is one step closer to the end of the thing. Sometimes the mud’s terrible, or these rocks are pullin’ me. You just want to put the thing down. “Keep moving.” Your shoulders might start to hurt. “The faster you move, the faster it’ll be off your shoulders” (laughs).

While the adolescents reported perseverance in multiple forms, staff member J Rudy connected this concept to perceptions of competence among the teens. “Well my sense is that typically their life is involved with failures and they’re excused from the experience, or they escape from the experience, or cop-out of the experience.” Yet the ACE program offers youth a different experience:
the chance to stay with a challenge and see themselves succeed on the other side of it, . . . that’s kind of one of the critical elements of the trip. “Well I don’t know how to get from here to there unless you just do it!” And simply sailing by, sitting here, and doing nothing is not an option. And I think they see that. Forced into succeeding, they begin to see themselves as competent.

J Rudy’s assessment develops a link between the necessity of pushing through a challenge, and the outcome of positive self-perception. It is important to note that the wilderness challenge experience is partly characterized by this link. Compared with post-trip pastimes and experiences (detailed later in this chapter) the wilderness trip is unique in this attribute.

From a personal growth perspective, the attitude of “just do it” seemed to also carry over beyond the trip. Connecting this attitude to everyday experience, Nicole described how she would now push through conflict situations with a parent.

Just to get it over with and just do it, ‘cause it’s not like, as much as I might not want to do it, it’s not all about me and I know that. And I’ll just find different ways to just deal with it.

Relating the work of the wilderness trip to his responsibilities at home, Chip reflected this attitude in tackling his more challenging chores. “Just thinkin’ about it, think of how it was so hard, you worked at it, you eventually got it. So just think if you work hard you can get it.”

In a more metaphorical line of thinking, Taylor suggested a parallel between homework and portaging.

If the teacher gives you homework that you don’t want to do, just like think of the portages that you really didn’t want to do. And how you did ‘em anyway. And then you felt, like, good that you had gotten through the mud and stuff.

Finally, in the questionnaire completed at the trip’s conclusion, the student’s were asked to state their goals for returning home. Taylor’s written goal best summed up this
category of personal growth. “When life has a portage that I really don’t want to do, to just do it.”

**Sub-theme 1B: Social growth**

As outlined above, personal growth emerged as a sub-theme from the dominant theme of challenge. While personal growth included categories reflecting internal experience, other categories of challenge suggested external influences. When compared with the sub-theme of personal growth, these categories grew into an overlapping sub-theme of social growth. Among the categories classified in the social domain were social skills and social confidence.

**Social growth: social skills.** As a category of social growth, development of social skills was salient. Parents and teens alike indicated improvements in teen social skills. Madonna, for example, discussed how she felt the trip had helped her son learn how to interact in more appropriate ways with his peers.

> I think going on this helps him learn to interact better, rather than being obnoxious. . . . It’s helped him being with a group of people day and night for a week. It’s helped him to interact and be more comfortable. . . . ’Cause he sees that he doesn’t have to be as pushy to have people like him.

Introspectively, Bruce talked about how he has become a better listener through his participation in the wilderness trip. Asked to described how he had been able to apply the experience, he said, “It’s helped a lot. . . . I used to just talk about myself. . . . That’s changed. . . . I’ve actually listened to my friends more.”

Both Madonna’s and Bruce’s language revealed how the ACE program helped teens improve the quality of their social interactions among peers. As a general outcome category, social skills overlapped with the outcome of social confidence.
Social growth: social confidence. As indicated by the student profile, participants tended to lack socially supportive networks. Candace was a current staff member and former middle school guidance counselor with experience in referring students to the ACE program. She suggested the ACE trip provided teens with avenues for building social confidence whereas previous efforts to make friends had been met with failure.

I think socially, making friends [during the trip] gives them so much confidence. ’Cause a lot of these kids come from . . . experiences where they don’t have friends. And they work and work and work to get into a group, and they’re shut out . . . almost everywhere they turn.

The ACE trip, however, gave these teens opportunities to establish new friendships. Candace continued, “They’d make friends. They’re a part of the group, and I think that confidence carries over into just how they approach school. It doesn’t have to be the socially scary place.”

As Candace illustrated, an overlap emerged between social confidence and self-confidence among the data. Candace’s observations were additionally reflected by the statements of several students. Iroquois, a returning student and peer leader, related his feelings of self-confidence in the current year to his experience as an ACE participant in the prior year.

It seemed like no pressure, really. . . . ’Cause I know I’m funny enough and I’ll end up being liked. . . . So I guess, from the last year it helped me realize it shouldn’t matter how I act, because everybody’s gonna like me no matter what.

Taylor more specifically disclosed her view of how the wilderness trip had helped her become a more socially confident individual.

I am less shy. I’m more talkative. . . . I’m more confident to be me. I don’t have to be there and act like everybody else is, or dress however everybody else does. I’ll do what I want to do.
Sub-theme 1C: Helping

The topic of helping was a third salient sub-theme of challenge. The importance of this topic emerged from the exploration of data related to personal growth and social growth. As students learned to see themselves as competent and capable of accomplishing major physical, emotional, and social hurdles, they likewise viewed themselves as capable of making contributions to one another and to the group. This sub-theme, termed helping because of the assistive nature of teen behaviors, overlapped with the two earlier sub-themes of personal growth and social growth, which in turn overlapped with one another.

Asked to describe how challenge had been satisfying to the students, the topic of helping was brought up repeatedly. Megan, for example, told about how her group had encountered a set of rapids. She had suggested that paddling up the rapids would be dangerous, and that someone would need to physically get into the water and pull the canoes up against the current. Megan took the leadership and sacrificed staying dry for the benefit of the group. She described how pulling her group up the rapids had been personally rewarding for her. “I know I did a big thing for the group. . . . So, I just got in. It was freezing. . . . The [satisfaction] came from keeping them dry, . . . knowing that I kept people dry and knowing I saved them from tipping.”

Parents were also asked to relate what they thought had been most meaningful about the trip to their children. Jenn suggested being helpful was the greatest source of her son’s enjoyment.

I think he liked most the fact that he was so helpful and that everybody looked up to him. ‘Cause he’s, so big and tall and strong. . . . [In a meek voice] “Oh, I can’t carry this, can you carry it?” So yeah, he’d carry everybody’s stuff, because it
made him feel really important. I really think that his helpfulness is what he liked the best. Feeling needed by everybody.

From a staff member’s perspective, Doc commented on how intense challenge, combined with helping behavior, promoted the kind of deep concentration that characterizes optimal experience. This example was given in the story of one boy who seemed totally focused on the chance to be of service to the group.

I’ll never forget the, the big guy in our group who pulled all the canoes up [the rapids]. And I think the act of giving and seeing that he could give so well to the group in that context. He was just totally focused. I mean he went up and down that rocky waste-deep water current a whole mess of times. And he was just totally determined and totally focused on what he wanted to do for the group at that moment. . . . I don’t think his life had many experiences where he felt that he could go to that zone where he could really see himself doing something that really was valued by others. . . . The group was very supportive and rewarding to him of his desire and his willingness to do that.

While self-sacrifice and helping others was one aspect of the helping sub-theme, asking for and receiving help was another. Jiggle Billy, for example, proposed:

Don’t think you have to do it yourself. ‘Cause if you’re trying, then you can ask for help and someone will help you. ‘Cause sometimes when you have a pack on your back, once you fall down you can’t get back up. . . . And so you gotta ask someone else, “Can you help me?” and they push it up.

Among the many topics within the data, students acting as helpers to one another was communicated as a powerfully rewarding experience. Compared with other emergent categories and themes, it became clear that helping was a key link among the challenge sub-themes. Furthermore, when factored into the overall theme of challenge, it was evident that helping, combined with personal growth and social growth, facilitated a norm of reciprocity that, in turn, contributed to the development of community.

**Theme 2: Community**

The combination of personal and social growth, having developed through challenge, fostered an environment of interdependence and reciprocity in which teens felt
satisfaction in contributing to the their group. These ingredients, combined with a staff intent on supporting student growth, developed into a community of teens and staff that seemed to represent deep meaning for the program participants. Among the meanings of community experienced during the trip were characteristics of trust, friendship, and social support.

**Trust**

Multiple teens showed a development of emotional trust among the group members that contributed to a sense of community. Trust as an important aspect of the community experience was most articulated by Hydro.

> Well, the people that you’re with on the trip kind of be, sorta become your family on the trip and you learn to share what you can’t really share at home with them. Because you know it’s going to be confidential. And at home or specifically at my house, you know it’s probably not gonna be confidential and it’s just gonna get around. And usually come back and bites you in the butt.

Halo also referred to the sense of group trust communicated by her son, a first year participant.

> I asked [him] about what they talked about and he said, “Mom, we had a code of confidence and silence.” And I said, “Okay, okay. Say no more.” And he said, “Let me just tell ya.” He said, “That we had some really good talks.”

Development of trust was additionally mentioned by Brett, a staff member and agency counselor. He described a sense of openness that had developed among the teens involved in the program. When asked to explain how the adolescents had come by that openness, he replied:

> I think they’ve learned to trust each other as a result of the trip. We went through some rough times and none of us gave up. We supported each other.
Group support

Group support, as a category of community, was discussed in several perspectives, including assistance, encouragement and collaboration through a variety of challenges. Within the context of physical challenge, Bruce talked about how supporting one another in the group was central to getting the group over a beaver dam.

The communication skills. Trying to have one person at the top of the beaver dam. Guiding the canoe while the other person at the bottom pushed it up in order to get it to the top. . . . Some people were strong enough to do it, some people weren’t. . . . If you couldn’t do it, then you had somebody else help you.

Asked if strength was a factor in negotiating the dam, Bruce replied, “Strength for the group was a big key. . . . Everything branched off of that. You have to have a strong group in order to have communication, focus, patience and all.”

Hydro also described the value of group support during challenging aspects of the trip.

There was always someone to help. Even if they were doing something, they would always come and help you if it was hard. . . . [If] you were carrying a canoe and couldn’t really do it, someone would come up. Or two people sometimes . . . would help you carry the canoe to the end. And it was just really nice to have those people help. It makes it easier on you because you know there’s always someone to help even in a rough situation.

Doc explained how one boy in the group had been struggling emotionally during the first days of the trip. But as the week went on:

. . . you could just see his enthusiasm grow. . . . I think this boy really found some safety in the little community spirit that got created with this group. I think he felt cared for. And I think maybe for the first time in a long time, he didn’t feel so alone.

Friendship

Friendship development during the wilderness experience was an additional indicator of community development. The significance of building friendships was
strong. As mentioned earlier, most participants were unlikely to have strong peer attachments or social networks. Various indications were relayed suggesting friendship development was an important aspect of the trip. Jeff related how a major goal for his trip was to make a friend. “I met a couple a new people . . . and they became my friends. Someone we could talk to on the trip, about our private, personal stuff without people knowin’.”

Jenn, also talked about how establishing friendships was important to her son. “He made new friends. Which he doesn’t do all the time. And he likes that.”

The social bonds that developed among teens were evident when Taffy talked about her son’s excitement for the follow-up group. “He can’t wait to go Friday. See everybody again. And, that’s givin’ him somethin’ to look forward to and, kinda like reminiscin’, and stuff like that.”

Laughter Lady also indicated that while her son would generally have difficulty making friends, the wilderness group “. . . seemed very nice. He felt real comfortable with them.” The level of comfort level was reiterated by Megan who described a sense of family developing among the teens on the trip. “My group became, like a family and I liked it. I like that bonding and everything.”

Two major themes have been presented as they pertain to the wilderness trip. From the challenge theme emerged the sub-themes personal growth, social growth and helping. The combined influences of these sub-themes gave rise to an additional theme of community, a group environment of friendship, trust, and support that grew out of group challenge experiences. A final theme, key player relationships will now be introduced and discussed in terms of its relationship to the previous two themes.
Theme 3: Key Player Relationships

The third major theme identified in this research was “key player relationships.” Key players were identified as three categories of research participants: staff members, parents, and teens, and these relationships pertain specifically to links and bonds existing between each type of research participant. As these relationships were explored, it became clear that wilderness trip bonds between staff members and students were strong. However, a disconnection emerged between both staff-parent relationships and student-parent relationships, as they pertained to the program. These links and disconnects are illustrated below.

Program (staff)-teen relationships

Supporting the teens’ growth and development throughout the ACE trip was clearly a goal and priority of the staff program leaders. The effort to help the teens develop and discover their inner strengths was clearly communicated by Doc.

You want them to think, that it was a really hard experience. And from that came some strength that you wouldn’t have had otherwise. . . . And it seemed like the more we kind of told them how good they were doing, and how well they were dealing with the struggle, the better they did.

As Hydro suggested, staff support was critical to his feeling a sense of safety with sharing emotional material with the group.

I learned basically to be able to show my feelings a lot easier because before this I didn’t like to show my feelings. I kinda suppressed ‘em and it’s just easier to live now that I’m able to show those, because thanks to like [my staff leader] . . . they just helped me to be able to get those out in the open.

For Hydro, a boy who suffered from depression, learning to open up to others was a powerful experience that encouraged his enjoyment of the trip and further helped him to enjoy life beyond the wilderness trip. Grimace related a similar observation of his son’s bonds with the staff members. “I think the encouragement and support he got from the
group leaders went a long way towards making him maybe reevaluate how he saw himself.”

In the process of staff supporting teen self-discovery, an overall emphasis in supporting autonomous action became evident in statements made by students and staff members. Nicole, for example, described a group situation in which she appreciated how the students were allowed to work out a group problem without adult intervention.

The whole canoe switching was a really big, like, complete group effort. And I really like the idea that instead of [our staff leader] being like, “Okay, why don’t you two go together, you two go together,” . . . he really let us decide. And he kinda just, like started the topic and the conversation and sorta let us take it from there. And it really helped our communication skills with each other.

During the staff focus group interview, Brett described his leadership philosophy in terms of flow theory, one topic of the discussion. In his description, staff leadership was geared toward helping the adolescents feel in-control.

Because I find that [we are] intervening a lot if they’re really bored or if they’re really anxious. But once they get to the point where they’re almost, ah, on automatic pilot with what they need to do, regardless of the challenge, that’s when I feel like we’re really bringing out the best in them.

Candace’s observations supported Brett’s comments and suggested a staff leadership style that supported student autonomy and encouraged self-determination.

I think [Brett] is right in that the more we can step back and allow the kids to figure out what works for them and what doesn’t, the more likely that is to happen. I mean obviously the first day or two, they need a little bit more guidance. . . . But then, really stepping back and letting them [go].

Facilitating students’ sense of autonomy was one leadership style staff used to support their personal and social growth throughout the trip. Another characteristic of student-staff relationships was evident in how the staff supported development of community among the groups of students.
As described by Brett, the staff members were intentional about encouraging selflessness among the teens.

For part of the journey, our group was in front of people and we were getting later in the afternoon and we were passing campsites, and the kids were like, “Why don’t we camp there?” We were like, “You know what? [Another group] is behind us.” . . . In a way, that’s us showing them the altruism of “We’re gonna do this [to] not be selfish.”

Candace supported Brett’s comments by indicating the collective nature of individual canoe groups among the larger group of adolescents and staff.

Really we think of our group as our small canoe group, but it’s really that whole group of you know, all four of the groups. And we still make decisions so that all four groups can be safe.

As a staff, the leaders made multiple references to, and directly acknowledged the process of building community among the peers. They further illustrated leadership styles that encouraged collective thought, action, and social bonding.

In addition to encouraging community, overall bonds between staff members and teenage participants appeared to be strong. Staff-teen relationships were generally illustrated as beneficial to students’ personal and social development, supportive of their autonomy, and encouraging of community building among the group. Various research participants related teens’ positive regard for the staff members. As told by Madonna, her son “. . . loves the directors that go. . . . Oh yeah, he’s crazy about all of them. He talks very highly of them all the time.”

As described by adolescents, parents, and the staff members, the counselors leading the wilderness group were clearly committed to facilitating personal and social growth among the teenagers. They additionally developed supportive relational bonds with the teens throughout the trip. Finally, they recognized the meaning of community as
a powerful uniting force among the group, and the staff made efforts to encourage and help build the community environment.

**Program (staff)-parent relationships**

While the teens’ interaction with staff members and the program facilitated individual and social growth, as well as the building of community, the parents, in contrast, sat largely outside of the wilderness trip support equation. The absence of parents was evident, and a program-parent disconnect was manifest in the parents’ non-participation and lack of knowledge about what occurred during their children’s week in the wilderness.

What became clear was that parents were largely outsiders from the community that developed among the teens and staff members. Many of the parents wanted to learn about the trip from their children while the teens had not shared much information with them. As Mae put it, “Gee. I’d liked to have known a little bit more about it. A little more details.”

A common exchange during the parent interviews involved the parent speaking in generalities about his or her child’s experience due to a lack of detailed information. Safe One, for example, was asked to describe what was challenging for his daughter during the trip. He answered, “I don’t know enough about the specifics. . . . I have a general idea of what they did, but it, it just seems like it was a good solid program.”

Laughter Lady, on the other hand, responded to the question with a tone of frustration.

Well you know, it’s hard because I really don’t know what they’ve done! Ya know, if they had sessions out there in the canoes, if they had sessions around the campfire, he won’t talk; tell us about it. And so, whatever he absorbed, other than little tidbits of things, we don’t know.
As the lines of communication between staff and parents were further explored, there seemed to be little evidence of a working relationship. This observation was made in stark contrast to the open and flowing relationship that existed between the staff members and teens. Most of the parents simply lacked information about the trip. This problem was compounded by the fact that teens were generally not apt to share detailed information about the trip with parents. Summer pointed out:

I was hoping one of the adult leaders in [my daughter’s] group would have contacted me after they got back from the trip just to let me know any thoughts or things that they observed, or any instances they had with [my daughter]. . . . Because when she came home it was really hard to get a lot of stuff out of her. . . . As a parent I would like to have feedback as to what they observed [her] to be like on the trip.

Summer’s comments illustrated a central disconnect between program and parents. There appeared to be no formal mechanism for facilitating parental involvement with the program or communication with the staff. Rather, the parents’ involvement was largely limited to an initial recruitment meeting, helping the students prepare for the trip (gathering gear and packing), and transporting them to and from the agency. Beyond this involvement, parents were mostly cut off from the teens’ experiences and accomplishments in the wilderness.

Parent-teen relationships

While the parents had no functional role in the program, they did relate overall expectations of certain outcomes from the trip. Some parents were pleased with the outcomes while others were disappointed. However very few of the parents seemed to view themselves as connected to supporting or extending the outcomes of the trip.

Of the parents who talked about supporting what their children had gained from the trip, Halo expressed deep interest in helping to extend the experience of her son, a first
year student who had been suffering from depression. Halo told of how she had written her son a letter to take with and read during the trip.

So I wrote in his letter, “You’re going to have to make a decision on how you’re going to act or respond to each thing that comes up. You’re going to have to think before you act.” When he came home he had my note all crumpled up on his desk. And I said, “Oh you read it.” And he says, “Yeah.” And he gave me a big hug and he said, “Mom, it meant a lot. It really helped. It really helped.” Because I addressed the things in his personality that I knew that he might have difficulty or challenge with on the trip.

Like Halo, Grimace appeared to share a close, supportive relationship with his son, a second year student/peer leader. His language additionally suggested an awareness of his role in helping his son apply what had been learned. Grimace was an uncommon example of a parent who seemed to adjust his parenting style to support what his son had gained from participating in the program.

I think it’s improved the dynamic between the members of the family. Things are [on] a much more mature level than they were before. It’s gone from pretty much myself, my wife, and my older son telling him step by step what [to] do, to consulting [him] more. I mean, we value his opinions on stuff because he’s a smart kid. And he has insights sometimes that we don’t have. So I think we’re more of a team than we ever were before.

Compared to all but a few parents, Grimace’s valuing of his son’s opinion, and his encouragement of the team-like dynamic among the family was an exceptional account. His descriptions of the parent-child relationship were unlike the prevailing attitudes indicated by other parents who did not appear to see themselves as having a major role in supporting outcomes of the program.

Of the parents who expressed somewhat disconnected attitudes regarding the program, Jenn described how her son had been less argumentative with his brother upon returning home from the wilderness trip. Her interest in relating that behavior to the trip, however, was negligible. “I’ve thought about it, the fact that . . . I did see the difference
in him. But I didn’t . . . think where it came from. I didn’t care where it came from, quite frankly.”

Other parents expressed a sense of disappointment in the lack of change resulting from the trip. Corcho, for example, expected more change in her son than she actually observed.

Maybe I was expecting too much. . . . I guess because of what the counselors [said] that [he] would be a changed man when he got back. . . . I was expecting him to have made some friends. . . . I think he pushes people away because he’s so impulsive. So I was hoping that he would be a little more calm.

Like Corcho, Laughter Lady had higher hopes for program outcomes.

It was so nice when he came home. He was just happy, he was excited to see everybody. . . . And then about after a week he just turned like his own routine again. . . . And I wish it, I guess it’s like “Okay we’re goin’ right back there buddy!” . . . Just crabby. Just mean, swearing at us and just not being a pleasant person.

Though Corcho and Laughter Lady provided unusual examples of parents who were disappointed with the lack of change, these conversations, combined with Jenn’s, demonstrate an observation discovered among multiple parent interviews. Many parents failed to see themselves as having a major role in supporting or extending outcomes of the ACE program.

Insights shared by Karlita, a first-time ACE staff member added to the portrait of parents disconnected from the program. “I hope we can communicate more to the parents what they did. . . . That the parents could be more involved in helping that transfer happen.” She further described how the dominant post-trip interaction between staff members and parents involved about five minute conversations in the parking lot upon their return from the wilderness. Karlita suggested that parents could be key to extending the outcomes of the wilderness experience. “There’s so much the parents don’t
know about that these kids did. That I hope that there’s a time when they do know, because the parents could really be so instrumental in helping that transfer happen.”

As illustrated by Karlita, the parents were never truly part of the ACE program. Nor were they ever included in the community that developed throughout the program. Likewise, as outsiders of the ACE program community, many were apparently unattached from seeing themselves in the roles of outcome supporters.

**Wilderness Trip Summary**

As the data have thus far demonstrated, challenges during the trip were characterized by active physical, social, and psychological experiences. Wilderness trip encounters fostered individual development illustrated by feelings of strength, accomplishment, self-confidence, self-control, calmness, and perseverance. Social development among the teens was typified by socializing, improved social-skills, and feelings of social confidence. Challenging activity that encouraged both personal and social growth also facilitated teens adopting roles as helpers to one another within their groups. The overall challenge experience, as characterized by these attributes, encouraged the development of community among the youth and staff participants. As relationships between the key players in this narrative (students, program/staff, and parents) were examined, strong bonds were revealed between the teenagers and staff members. While these bonds represented a strong sense of community growing out of the program, parents were primarily excluded from this group identity.

**Post-Trip**

Given the remarkable growth in personal and social domains as well as the community attachment that developed from the wilderness program, I was prompted to consider these themes and categories as they pertained to post-trip experience. An
underlying purpose of this study was to assess the transition and transfer of learning from the wilderness program to the everyday home environment. While questions related to that purpose were partly answered regarding experiences and outcomes of the wilderness trip, to what extent those outcomes were sustained or supported beyond the trip have not been detailed.

Comparison of post-trip life with wilderness experiences suggested major differences in the nature of activities and also showed a range of support for adolescent growth. An additional question, therefore, arose as to the nature of post-trip experiences. Specifically, I was compelled to ask: Was there anything about the teens’ post-trip lives that helped them sustain or extend what they had gained during the trip (e.g., growth through challenge and sense of community)? The data were therefore examined for characteristics of challenge in post-trip experience and to what extent the teens’ post-trip experiences fostered the outcomes of personal growth, social growth, helping behavior, and community.

**Theme 1: Challenge**

**Descriptions of challenge**

Through the exploration of the challenge theme within the post-trip phase, three major categories emerged describing this theme: activeness, passiveness, and emotional challenge. While activeness did emerge under challenge, this relates more strongly to the sub-theme of post-trip personal growth and will be discussed later in the chapter. Passiveness and emotional challenge, however, tended to describe the overall theme of challenge post-trip and will be described in this section.
Descriptions of post-trip activity mostly developed from a line of questioning and probes asking both teens and parents to describe how they had been spending their time after returning from the trip. Many described what I classified as passive activity.

Wolf, for example, described his post-trip daily experience as generally unchallenging. “Wilderness trip is like where you have to bust yourself. When I’m at home, I don’t really do much because there’s nothin’ really much I have to do.”

Likewise, Jessica related her post-trip activities as non-challenging and boring. Asked how she had been spending her time, she summarized, “I have just been sitting at my sister’s softball tournaments all summer long. And if I’m not there, sitting inside because I’m not allowed to leave the house because I’m home alone.” Asked what she would do at home, Jessica replied, “I call all my friends. Just talk to every single one. . . . I listen to music really loud and just lay around with my dog and wrestle her.”

Though seemingly a bit more active than Jessica, John described everyday activities that were largely undemanding. “My normal stuff. Playing X-Box, going over to my friend’s house, taking bike rides. Um, just hanging around.”

In their interviews, teens were asked to consider how being mentally focused in the wilderness was like or unlike being mentally focused at home. Megan compared the two concepts, stating:

Well, what helped me [stay] focused then was knowing there was nobody there to do it, but [now] there is somebody at my house to help me, so that’s why I’m not as focused. There’s somebody there that can do it for me.

Probing the idea of intense concentration, a property that emerged from the psychological domain of wilderness challenge, post-trip activity was largely discussed as mentally passive. Bruce, for example, said that since he had been home from the program, he hadn’t been involved in any activity that required much mental focus.
Like I said, I’ve been on the couch a lot. Hanging out with a few friends, but on the couch mostly. So no mental focus there, except for grab remote, change channel. That’s about the only mental focus I’ve had to use (laughs).

Also pointing out the prevalence of passive experience, Hydro provided an example of the how the home environment during summer encouraged boredom. Lack of responsibility and expectations seemed to play a role. “There’s nothing really important to do at home. . . . Summer is basically like a slack off time for me and it’s basically like the entire summer to me is boredom.”

Parent data supported the teens’ descriptions of torpid pastimes. Jenn provided a typical example:

[He] spends his time either in front of the computer, video games, TV, and then sometimes he’ll go and do things with his friends, but usually they come over and that’s what they do. And he’s, his new thing now is, staying up all night on the computer and then going to bed in the morning.

Asked whether she had noticed any differences in activity engagement after the trip versus prior, Jenn reflected, “Activity? I think when he came back he did—for a little while—he did go and do more things. But, he’s pretty much back to his normal routine now.”

An attempt was made to identify the characteristics of post-trip experience as related to the theoretical frameworks of this study. It was learned that many teenager pastimes were commonly perceived as non-challenging, boring, and generally inactive.

Some post-trip challenges seemed to have been anxiety-producing experiences and led to avoidant or diversionary behavior. The more significant challenges discovered post-trip were in fact emotional struggles involving family relationships.
Nicole related how her time at home following the trip had been characterized by family conflict. Her attempts to deal with the conflict were described as a mental challenge. Nicole admitted:

I haven’t really had to go through a lot that’s been too challenging for me, no. Other than—my whole family situation is kinda’, really sorta’ messed up. And that’s more of a mental challenge that we were talking about earlier. Where I have to get along with my mom. And that can, at times, get really hard for me. . . . That’s where I tend to get out of the house. So, I avoid that when I can.

Hydro described similar attempts to avoid ever-present family conflict in his home. “I try to be out of the house whenever I can ‘cause I really don’t want to be in the house. There’s a lot of bad memories there. So I’m not really there that much.” Asked to elaborate on his frustrations, Hydro replied, “Just the family. They haven’t been very cooperative about much. For anyone. Mom and dad getting a divorce, . . . sisters and brother being annoying.”

Both Hydro and Nicole offered examples of stress related to family conflict. Other students such as Frank, Jessica, and Chip, and parents including Laughter Lady, Black Jack, Esther, and Jenn alluded to family-related stress as well. For Hydro and Nicole especially, pastimes were typified by conflict avoidance.

Sub-theme 1A: Personal growth

Personal growth: active pursuits. While post-trip activities did not rise to levels of challenge and intensity as described in the wilderness, not all accounts of post-trip pursuits were reported as entirely passive. As an exception, Jiggle Billy, reported being normally energetic.

I’m pretty active, actually. I like to bike a lot. So if I can get to a place on a bike, or with a car, I’d probably take the bike. So the last couple days I’ve been biking down to [nearby town].
In terms of activity that appeared to contain properties of personal growth, such as confidence or accomplishment, Jeff suggested he was more interested in challenging himself after the trip. Describing his adventures with a swimming pool high-dive, Jeff related his enjoyment with:

...pushing myself until I do somethin’ very high. Which would be scary for me, but I do it anyway...twenty feet high. I flip and dive off of it. At first it’s scary because you’re lookin’ down like, “Oh God!” But then after you do it once, you’re like, “Um, that’s not bad. That’s like fun.”

Another exception to passivity was Esther’s daughter who had been traveling with a friend and attending various camps throughout the summer. Esther explained how her teenager had spent little time at home since the end of the trip, and that she was currently preparing to depart for another camp experience. “The girl’s been busy. She goes from camp to trip, to—this is the first time I’ve seen her since the wilderness trip for probably four days. She’s just been the little adventurous one this summer.”

Since activities that challenged teens physically and mentally contributed to personal and social growth during the wilderness trip, data representing post-trip active pursuits were searched for similar properties. Limited representations of these characteristics were found and described.

**Personal growth: strength.** In the course of interviewing, teens were asked about what activities they had perceived as satisfying during the wilderness experience. As noted earlier in the chapter, Chip and others suggested that portaging had been satisfying as it made them feel strong. Asked to describe post-trip activities that made him feel that way, Chip said, “I’m rolling hay everyday. I’ll do it like a lot. Rolling hay really helps. ‘Cause I, I could do it. Ya know it’s really tiring but, yeah.” Another reference to post-trip feelings of strength was related by Nicole.
We have a pool in our backyard and sometimes at night we need to put the cover on. I’d have to ask someone else to help me do it. And oftentimes, it’d be my sister. . . . She’d be like, “Aw, I don’t want to do that.” And I’d be like, “Alright, fine!” And I’d have to go do it myself. And now it’s not that big of a deal to me anymore.

Building and discovery of physical strength was a significant contributor to personal growth during the wilderness trip. Limited examples of activities that contribute to one’s sense of strength were discovered in the post-trip data.

While there were several indications of active post-trip pastimes, the predominant descriptions of post-trip activity contrasted sharply with activities of the ACE wilderness program. Evidence of activity that fostered feelings of accomplishment, self-confidence, personal control, calmness, and perseverance—as discovered in the wilderness trip data—was sought among post-trip data. While only sparse indications of these kinds of activities or outcomes were found, post-trip activity was more strongly described as inactive or passive behavior. The theme of challenge was more clearly characterized by emotional material related to family conflict.

**Sub-theme 1B: Social growth**

The sub-theme of social growth, as described during the trip, was also compared to post-trip descriptions of experience. Like personal growth, indications of post-trip experiences contributing to social growth ranged from nearly nonexistent to clearly evident.

As a category of social growth, socializing was most apparent among post-trip talk. Marge, for example, suggested her son was more social as a result of having made friends during the challenge trip. “I think he’s, he’s more socially interactive now than he was. I think now he’s more reliant on his peer group. Instead of isolating, he’s more likely just to be, social.”
Jiggle Billy further described his inclination toward increased peer activity. Asked to talk about how he had been spending his time, he referred to, “Hanging out with people. . . . I have a lot more friends now. And, biking. . . . 'cause I’ve been biking to hang out with people.”

Jiggle Billy also indicated that his social involvement was connected to the friends he had made during the wilderness trip. Other teens like Taylor, Iroquois, and Wolf suggested the self-confidence they gained during the trip helped them become more socially confident and more likely to be socially involved with others. However, a number of teens did not seem to make substantial changes in the social realm.

Both Corcho and Taffy, for example, described how their sons had made friends with others during the trip, but had not been in contact with them. Similarly, Laughter Lady suggested that her son had not brought home any phone numbers or contact information from the friends he had made. My conversation with John indicated that most of his post-trip activities had been spent either on vacation with family or entertaining himself around the home. Bruce’s social interactions were limited to phone conversations, which he said he had to limit as he would get in trouble for “running up the phone bill.” And when asked what her daughter had been doing with her free time post-trip, Summer replied, “She’s by herself. She entertains herself by watching TV, playing games on the computer, and those little hand held video games. She really doesn’t have any friends.”

While social growth as facilitated by everyday post-trip activities varied from absent to prevalent among individual teens, the major post-trip social influence was the follow-up group. Staff members described the follow-up group as being a central factor
to extending the outcomes of the program. This topic will be discussed later in this chapter as the follow-up group relates more strongly to the concept of community.

**Sub-theme 1C: Helping**

As a sub-theme of challenge, helping overlapped with the sub-themes of social growth and personal growth among the wilderness trip data. Teens, parents, and staff indicated substantive adolescent interests in helping or being of service to others. However, compared to acts of helping in the wilderness, post-trip helping was substantially less challenging, less social, and generally characterized by teens helping with chores around the home.

There were strong indications of adolescent interest in helping. Bruce, for example, told about a recent conversation he had with a friend from the trip. Over the phone, the two discussed how they could help group members if they were to return the following year.

*We talked about canoeing. How we could actually help people gain the arm strength to keep going and not give up if they get tired and how on the portages we can actually help by doing what the other person can’t really necessarily do.*

Bruce’s description of his phone conversation illustrated an enthusiasm for assisting or leading others in a supportive way. While this kind of dialogue was uniquely self-reflective among the helping sub-theme, more frequent descriptions of post-trip helping related to teens’ acceptance of household chores.

Nearly all the teens were more cooperative and willing to help around the house, as suggested by both adolescents and parents. Frank, for example showed an interest in helping around the home, and he connected helping in the home to anger control strategies he had learned during the trip. When asked how he was able to apply what he learned in the wilderness, Frank reflected:
Well it’s like keeping my anger down and um, being helpful. We have a trampoline in my back yard. And like if my mom wants to mow the lawn, or my little brother, or if I want to, I have to pick up the trampoline and totally move it out of their way. I have to bring it on the driveway. . . . And I do it by myself. No one really helps me because I can do it.

A number of parents suggested greater willingness on the part of their teens to provide assistance with household tasks. For some, this willingness was associated with an overall improved sense of calmness. Safe One, for example, observed, “She responds to asking to do some chores a little bit quicker. And she’s not as short-tempered as she used to be.” Taffy similarly remarked that prior to the trip, “If, if I, ask him to take out garbage, (mimicking her son) ‘Later!’ But [now] he’ll up and just take it out. Little things like that.”

Dark Eyes shared that her grandson had been eager to help her around the house after the trip. “‘I’ll do that, Grandma.’ Or ‘Let me have that, I’ll put it up.’ Or ‘I’ll walk the dog now.’ . . . You know, he didn’t do this before.” In a similar sentiment, Marge communicated her welcome amazement with the helpfulness demonstrated by her son.

It’s like, “Who is this child in my house now?” . . . [He is] more helpful around the house. . . . “If there’s anything I can do to help.” Ya know that kind of stuff. He may forget it, but at least the spirit’s willing.

She further described a story in which they both had worked together to fix a mechanical problem in their garage.

He and I had to replace one of the rotors in the pulley of the garage door opener. And, it was hot, it was dirty and it took us a couple of hours to get it done. But, he didn’t give up. He was a great helper. And I mean, the both of us, we both had a great sense of accomplishment when we got it finished. But he’s really a good helper when it comes to things like that.

Parents who talked about their teens becoming more helpful were appreciative of the positive change in behavior. Post-trip helping was discussed by both parents and teens in relation to reduced parent-child conflict.
However, while parents valued adolescent help, talk about adolescents acting in helpful roles was largely limited to tasks and projects around the household. The kind of post-trip helping that occurred was weak in peer interaction and broadness of social impact compared with how teens necessarily acted as helpers to their peer groups during the wilderness trip. Whereas wilderness-based challenges facilitated a helping role in which teens were instrumental in reaching fundamental group goals, post-trip helping was described by parents as a welcome resource and relief from prior conflicts. Willingness and eagerness of teens to act as helpers was, however, clearly depicted.

**Theme 2: Community**

As discussed earlier, helping developed as a normative behavior among the community of members of the wilderness group. The sub-theme of helping further overlapped and linked personal and social growth during the trip. As an element of the challenge theme, the group norm of helping became a unifying force that facilitated the solidification of group bonds and strength of community. These characteristics and properties were, however, lacking among post-trip accounts described as a mixture of attachment to, and detachment from, community.

For some of the youth, the community that had been clearly present during the wilderness trip was lacking from their post-trip lives. What certain teens wanted most and had the least was community.

Chip, for example, set a goal for himself to “Get more friends and a girlfriend” upon returning home. However, friendship was an area in which he seemed to be most lacking since returning from the trip. In addition, his mother indicated the family had not had time for him to attend the follow-up group, nor did she suggest parental
encouragement to help Chip stay connected with the friends he had made during the trip. Corcho seemed to acknowledge that making a friend was important for her son, and she suggested that a friendship established during the trip had been meaningful to him.

He made a friend at the camp, but he gave him his number. But we don’t know if he wrote down the wrong number or what happened. But he’s tried calling him and it’s not a working number. But he did tell us that he had a good time with this one friend at the camp.

However, Corcho failed to indicate an effort to help her son acquire the correct phone number for contacting his new friend. Laughter Lady mentioned a similar problem. “He didn’t give anybody his number, which I was hoping he would so we could have some camaraderie. . . . He does not have any really good friends.” As suggested by the language of Corcho, Laughter Lady, and others, parents of children who lacked friends seemed resigned to their children being socially isolated. Furthermore, there was little parental encouragement or support for their children to maintain social connections with others met on the trip.

Whereas trust, group support, and friendship were predominant characteristics of community as observed among the wilderness trip data, post-trip data were largely devoid of these properties. One major link to community, however, stood out among the post-trip data.

The follow-up group implemented by the ACE program and CFS was described as supporting and extending adolescents’ attachment to the established peer community through a year-round program. As suggested by Brett, the follow-up group was instrumental to reducing the adolescents’ risk of social isolation.

I think they just, as a group of kids, they just love to be together. If we could be doing any activity, they just love it, because they’re together, they trust each other. Um, a lot of these kids don’t have a lot of friends. So the group that we’re doing
now is essentially their peer contact outside of school. So, they have a sense of belonging and identity.

According to both Karlita and Brett, the follow-up program had been well attended in the months following the trip, and social interaction among the teens had continued to expand. However, while this program appeared to have a major influence on continuation and extension of bonds established during the wilderness trip, the program also had its limitations. Strengths and shortfalls of the follow-up program will be detailed in the following section.

**Theme 3: Key Player Relationships**

The working relationships between key players in this study were examined earlier in the context of pre-trip and wilderness trip relationships. During the trip, relationships between the teens and the program staff were deep and meaningful to both parties. Parents, however, were not participants of the trip. In practice, parents were disconnected from the wilderness experiences of their children.

Post-trip data was therefore analyzed to discover the nature of key player post-trip relationships. Talk representing connections between teens, staff, and parents was examined in terms of how their interactions supported or failed to support program outcomes, including personal growth, social growth, and community attachment.

**Program (staff)-teen relationships**

Post-trip connections between staff members and teens were most strongly suggested by teen and staff participation in the ACE follow-up group, a bi-weekly post-trip social gathering to which all ACE participants were invited. As indicated by staff interviews, the bi-weekly meetings were a key factor in encouraging attachment to and further development of the previously established community. Doc, for example,
pointed out that both teens and parents had named the follow-up group as a major factor in keeping the kids attached to peers socially.

The community there is really important. . . . I think the kids have told you (addressing Brett, the follow-up group leader) about if it weren’t for this group they’d have nothing else going. It gives them the sense of community. . . . And we know for a lot of these kids, they’ve not encountered that yet in their life. The parents are telling us . . . before this program, they weren’t seeing too many other people.”

As told by Karlita, the follow-up group was a central force in the strengthening of community among peers, and was instrumental in the extension of personal and social outcomes. When asked to describe how she felt the staff had best facilitated the transfer of learning from the trip, she stated:

The best thing that brought the transfer is definitely the [follow-up] group that we do. . . . It’s just so instrumental in their lives. . . . Every two weeks they’re guaranteed an hour and a half of being with one another. . . . These are the people that they learned to trust [and] worked on their goals with—these are people that they know they can be themselves with. . . . And this is the safe place they can talk.

While social bonds had been initiated through shared experiences in the wilderness, they had been extended and solidified through the follow-up group—a reliable social support mechanism for the adolescent participants.

In terms of outcomes related to the personal and social growth domains, Karlita further suggested the follow-up group as playing a role in facilitating both. Specifically, she was asked to describe how participants transferred what they learned about personal control. Her response illustrated an overlap between feeling personally in-control and socially connected. Karlita reflected, “I think that’s the reason that so many of them come.” She pointed out how, in her view, the follow-up group facilitated an opportunity for the teens to feel normal among their peers and thereby feel a greater sense of control in their typically out-of-control lives.
They all know that they all are dealing with a bunch of crap in their lives. They’re all dealing with struggles in their lives, and so they come to this place where they’re not alone. . . . They come back, I think, because they’ve realized that they need that support, and that they need to know that there is someone else who’s lives are messy like theirs. And they have that bond.

Emotional safety and trust among peers was further facilitated by the combination of the wilderness challenge experience and the follow-up group. Brett, the lead staff facilitator of the follow-up group, described how the teen participants seemed to display a sense of security among one another when they would gather.

I think they’re authentic in the group context. . . . I don’t see a lot of the more superficial stuff that I see with other teenagers who aren’t as connected emotionally and haven’t been through a real challenge together like these kids have. . . . I think they’re genuine with each other. . . . I think just that openness is a result of their experience.

While the reinforcement of community seemed to be a powerful positive force in the lives of the teen participants, the follow-up program also had its limitations. For instance, during the follow-up interviews, staff members were asked what the program could have done better to facilitate the generalization and transfer learning from the wilderness trip to the teens post-trip lives. As described above, the unifying nature of the biweekly group ensured regular, reliable reunions of the established community. However, the extent to which these events fostered the kind of personal and social growth as developed during the wilderness trip was limited. As Karlita stated, the follow-up gatherings were largely social and passive in nature. “We went out for pizza. . . . But I just thought . . . I really want to find other ways where we can have . . . more activity-oriented things where they can have a challenge.” Karlita thought more challenging pursuits could have multiple benefits to the group.

We could find ways to say, “Right now, what’s going on in your life? How can you transfer this?” . . . So I think something we could do better is to be having more activities . . . that do have the high challenge and moderate skills. Or us learning
the skills so we can all accomplish the challenge together. I think that would
definitely reinforce the community. And it could really help them find flow.

Although staff members cited the follow-up group as a primary ingredient to
continuing and extending community, there appeared to be a disconnect regarding the
generalization of outcomes of the wilderness trip. As the research results have thus far
demonstrated, challenge experience facilitated personal growth, social growth, and
helping behaviors, and these combined facilitated community development among the
group. While the community continued to exist and stay connected post-trip, it seemed to
be lacking the additional outcomes facilitated by challenging, goal-oriented group
activity.

**Program (staff)-parent relationship**

Earlier it was presented that there was an apparent disconnect between the program
and the parents in communicating what actually occurred during the wilderness trip and
how their sons and daughters progressed and performed throughout the experience.
Karlita emphasized the existence of this gap when asked how the program could do a
better job of extending the adolescents’ learning from the wilderness experience.

A lot of them learned a lot of responsibility. A lot of them had to learn how to take
care of themselves without mom for seven days. And it would be good if the
parents had realized that so the parents could really put the fan to the flame and say,
“Well, I know you did this without me for seven days.” . . . I wish there was a
place where the parents could realize how much credit they could give their kid so
that they could maybe step back and really let their kids own it.

During their interviews, parents were asked about what suggestions they had for the
ACE program. Adding to Karlita’s observation, Laughter Lady expressed
disappointment at the lack of communication and follow-up.

I think a little bit more information from the service. What are they planning on
doing? . . . What did they actually do? . . . I don’t really know what they did. And
he sure isn’t gonna tell us. . . . I mean, they were with my kid for eight days. And I don’t know anything that happened.

An overall program-parent disconnect seemed related to communication patterns established early on in the relationship. As suggested by Mae, early communications between the program and parents were limited to recruitment and providing information about preparing for the trip. Post-trip, scant evidence was found showing an effort by the program to include parents in the process of transitioning or extending the learning from wilderness to home. Mae recalled the initial recruitment meeting and suggested how it could have been better utilized to help prepare for post-trip transition.

I just felt like I wasn’t really getting as much helpful information as I could have. I think maybe they could have stressed more of what maybe your kids can get out of it. Or how we can best support them before and after. As opposed to just, ‘Here’s a kind of water bottle. And here’s another kind.’

Mae further indicated that she would have welcomed guidance on how to help facilitate the learning transfer. She speculated on how the program might have helped her learn how to support her son’s growth.

Talking about, “How did you get through those fourteen hours of canoeing? And how can you use that . . . when you get stuck?” Or, “How did you ask for help when you needed it?” I might not know those kinds of things on my own.

The CFS agency program has gone to great lengths to provide much needed services to the teens and their parents through the ACE wilderness program and follow-up group. Teens and parents alike demonstrated extensive gratitude for the commitment, efforts and generosity of the staff and agency, and there is no question as to the positive impact of the intervention. Upon examination of key player relationships, however, the data also revealed gaps in communication and collaboration between the program and parents. It cannot be ignored that this disconnect contributed to the parents’
isolation from the overall community established through the program. In doing so, the 
support parents could provide to adolescent outcomes was diminished.

**Parent-teen relationship**

Parent-teen relationships were also explored in terms of how they were supportive 
of wilderness program outcomes post-trip. Evidence of parents supporting the 
adolescents’ personal and social growth, as well as attachment to the peer community 
was mixed. Indications of parents supporting outcomes were found, as were suggestions 
of unsupportive relationships.

Among the supportive parent-teen relationships, parents talked about encouraging 
autonomy, self-confidence, and feelings of accomplishment. For instance, during the 
interviews, parents were asked about their roles in helping the teens feel control over 
their lives. Parents who communicated supportive tones talked about their children in 
language demonstrating trust and confidence in their teenager’s abilities to make 
appropriate choices.

Marge, for example talked about her trust for her son. “I think he’s very honest.” 
She further described how her son had been enjoying the freedom she was providing. “I 
think right now he’s just enjoying the fact it’s summer. And I give him as much freedom 
as he can handle. He knows the rules.”

Grimace likewise expressed a sense of faith in his son to make his own choices. 
He further defined himself as a resource to his son, available as needed.

I tend to let [him] have a pretty loose rein. Ya know, as, as long as he’s not doin’ 
something that’s physically dangerous, I pretty much let him do what he wants. 
I’ve tried to make him feel that I’m there as a, as a resource. . . . If he needs 
information or if he needs help doing something.
Esther, on the other hand, described herself in the role of “administrator” when it comes to helping her daughter feel a sense of control over her life. “Just making sure, kinda overseeing the plans…it gives her a sense of control that I would put my approval on it. . . . I think giving her the sense of delegation that she can work it out or think it through.”

In a similar style, Safe One talked about giving his daughter the freedom to explore. However he also emphasized striking a balance between providing autonomy and imposing structure.

Giving her . . . time to go out and do things. And trust her . . . but still check up and show her that you are gonna check up on, at certain times. . . . And don’t micro-manage her all the time. . . . I try and give her as much leeway as I can. I think that that’s important to her. They grow more when they can try and experiment with things on their own.

Finally, Dark Eyes, a male participant’s grandmother and guardian, talked about her style of guiding her grandson to find his own solutions to problems.

I just stand back and I guide him, let him make the mistakes. . . . But then, again, we talk through it. “What did you do wrong there?” Or, “How come I won’t let you do that?” And let him give me the answer instead of me giving him the answer. . . . I would guide him along.

Parents who talked in supportive tones tended to provide adolescent autonomy combined with some degree of structure, and they used language communicating trust. As presented in earlier excerpts, they were likewise found to speak supportively of adolescent outcomes such as self-confidence and accomplishments, social involvements with friends and peers, helping behaviors, and community attachment.

Parents also talked in non-supportive tones that suggested conflict with their teenage children. These conversations were generally characterized by tones of distrust and/or condescension.
Summer, for example, expressed frustration over not being able to learn much about the wilderness trip from her daughter. Her tone however came across as condescending and controlling.

Well, of course some of my first questions to her were—which put her off—were “Did you remember to wait your turn?” Or “not be so bossy?” Or “not get angry with others?” And of course those are the questions that she hates to hear from me, because they’re constant questions from me.

Taffy, a mom who was struggling financially and “... trying to keep [her] family together,” reflected annoyance at dealing with her son’s boredom in the home. (In a mimicking whining voice) “Ma, can I have this? Ma, I need that. Please? Aw, come on.’ Oh brother! He’s like a mosquito on the arm that you flick away and it just lands right back there again!”

Ellie, mother of a female trip participant, expressed distrust of her daughter and control of her free time. The problem is compounded by the fact that Ellie is often busy with other responsibilities away from the home.

We’ll argue a lot about it. ... If we do allow her to stay home ... we don’t allow her to play outside or allow anybody inside when we’re not home. ... And she thinks we’re punishing her. That it’s boring. It’s that she can’t do what she wants when she wants. And we told her it’s because she hasn’t earned the trust yet to, to be able to run around up and down the street by herself.

Finally, Black Jack, whose son had previously served time in juvenile detention for bringing a BB gun to school, seemed to put heavy emphasis on rewards and consequences as a behavior management tool. For example:

Ya know like if there was a treat in the works ya know like, if we were supposed to go out to McDonalds or something and they don’t do what they’ve been instructed to do, we don’t go. ... Ya know or I’ll take ya know their little sister and—You guys didn’t do what you were supposed to, she did. She gets the treat.
She also described an ongoing power struggle in which her son had brought home a music compact disc with “explicit lyrics,” an item she had banned from the home. The consequence was destructive in nature.

They insist on bringing them in the house. And I will take them and I grind it on, concrete, like this. I used to break ‘em. But . . . I could get cut. So I, I learned to just, rack it around on concrete and that does a real good job.

The language of parents talking in unsupportive tones was characterized by lacking trust and/or confidence in their children’s abilities to be appropriately autonomous. Their interviews lacked encouragements for post-trip activity promoting outcomes similar to those of the wilderness trip. It should be noted, these same parents were also struggling with matters of either family conflict, financial stress, or both.

**Summary**

In Chapter 1, I stated there is little known about the psychological experiences of youth therapeutic wilderness programming as understood through flow theory and self-determination theory. Because activities promoting the experience of flow and self-determination are thought to contribute to psychosocial well-being, the need to identify program factors facilitating these experiences was pointed out. Furthermore, a dearth in the literature regarding the generalization and transfer of such experiences was identified, and it was suggested the professional field and the literature would benefit from an understanding of how this process occurs. Research questions addressing adolescent experiences of flow and self-determination and the impact of those experiences were stated.

In the process of answering the initial research questions, additional questions were generated, and a bigger story developed around the three themes of challenge, community and key player relationships. While attending to the concepts of flow and
self-determination, challenge was identified as a major theme, and adolescent personal
growth and social growth were discovered as outcomes. Helping behaviors were
identified as contributors to these outcomes. Teens helping one another also contributed
to the development of community throughout the program, fulfilling a significant need of
the teen participants. Extension of these outcomes beyond the wilderness trip was,
however, mixed, as reported in interviews. Post-trip life was reported as a mixture of
experiences in terms of their support for these outcomes. Whereas some accounts
supported personal growth, social growth, and helping activity, many others failed to
promote these outcomes. Community attachment was also portrayed as a mixture of
strong and weak among everyday experience, however in the context of follow-up
activities, community was strongest.

Finally, key player relationships, and their roles in supporting and extending
outcomes, were identified as major components to the overall portrait of this study.
Analyzing the nature of these relationships revealed both strengths and limitations with
respect to supporting adolescent outcomes.
Table 6. Data themes summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>wilderness Trip Phase</th>
<th>Sub-theme 1A: Personal Growth</th>
<th>Sub-theme 1B: Social Growth</th>
<th>Sub-theme 1C: Helping</th>
<th>Theme 2: Community</th>
<th>Theme 3: Key Player Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Future/goal oriented</td>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Overlaps with personal growth &amp; social growth</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Program-teen: strong supportive bonds</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
<td>Social confidence</td>
<td>Solidifies social bonds</td>
<td>Group support</td>
<td>Program-parent: weak attachments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Parent-teen: supportive to unsupportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Personal control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Trip Phase</td>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Active pursuits (limited) v. passive (predominant)</td>
<td>Having friends v. social isolation</td>
<td>Eagerness to help others</td>
<td>Weak outside of follow-up group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Actual helping is limited to household work</td>
<td>Stronger within follow-up group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Helping is unconnected to community</td>
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Wilderness Trip Phase and Post-Trip Phase indicate the physical and psychological aspects of the wilderness trip.
Figure 1. Thematic relationships in youth development

Parent-Teen Relationship:
- Supportive Bonds

Program-Parent Relationship:
- Weak Attachments

Program-Teen Relationship:
- Supportive Bonds

Social Growth
Helping
Personal Growth

COMMUNITY

TEENS

PARENTS

Program (Staff)
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This study included 36 interviews of individuals who had a direct connection to the ACE program during the summer of 2004. Using methods informed by the flow and self-determination frameworks, teenage participants, their parents, and staff members were interviewed. The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the students’ experiences during the ACE wilderness trip, the meanings of their experiences, how the learning transferred beyond the trip, and the overall impact of the program.

In the process of exploring the participants’ stories, interview transcripts were analyzed from which three themes were constructed, coded, compared, recoded, re-compared, reconstructed, and organized, as initially guided by the flow and self-determination frameworks. The three themes were identified as challenge, community, and key player relationships. Within these three themes the characteristics of structured youth challenge experiences were described, resulting growth and community bonds were articulated, and the influences of relationships between teens, the program, and parents were examined. A contrast was further developed between the wilderness trip and post-trip reports of the research participants. Behaviors, attitudes, and feelings in the absence of structured challenge were identified, as were gaps and disconnects occurring in relationships between teens, parents and the program.

While there was both similarity and diversity among the accounts of the youth, parents, and staff members interviewed, what was articulated amounted to a “story” of
the ACE program. The story is one of growth, courage, optimism, and community building, tempered by stagnation, cynicism, disappointment, and isolation.

The contrast that was drawn between wilderness and post-trip reports identified a disparity between the two phases, in which wilderness accounts were full of enthusiasm, whereas post-trip reports were mixed with both positive and negative language. Keeping the problems associated with negative accounts in mind, it is the potentialities of youth that will be the emphasis of this chapter. As positive development was most strongly communicated in wilderness trip contexts, and weaker in post-trip contexts, the question arises: Why does the disparity exist and how could it be reconciled in a positive fashion? Additional review of literature pertaining to youth development informs these issues.

Therefore, in the tradition of grounded theory, major topics that have been identified will be discussed, previously cited literature will be revisited, and new concepts will be identified to inform the proposed relationships. Specifically, theoretical concepts of social capital and optimism will be introduced into these relationships and synthesized within the concept of positive youth development. The integration of these new concepts with those previously constructed will be provided as the basis for a proposed grounded theory model (Figure 2).

Social Capital Theory

The theoretical frameworks used for this study, flow and self-determination, were adopted to identify the psychological experiences of youth participants during the wilderness trip, and how their experiences during the trip were generalized beyond the wilderness experience. The emergence of the salient theme “community” suggested that social interactions exerted a major influence on the adolescent experiences during the wilderness trip, and the role of that community was not nearly as strong in their post-trip
accounts. In examining the influence of community on the adolescents, social capital theory informs one’s understanding of this theme. Therefore, social capital theory will be the topic of this section. The discussion will then propose links to both the flow and self-determination frameworks as a basis for the grounded theory model generated. Additionally, social capital as a feature of youth development will also be discussed.

**Background**

The central premise behind social capital theory is that social networks have value (Putnam, 2000). Social capital theory integrates two longstanding themes in social history. First is sociability, the idea that human beings manage better when bonded together. Also included is the idea of exchange, that human interaction involves the sharing and transfer of resources (Bowling & Hemingway, 2004). Specifically, the concept refers to social connections among groups of individuals in which norms of trust and reciprocity arise (Putnam, 2000). With such norms in place, human action tends to provide for common benefit of group members, and sometimes for non-members as well.

Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital is embedded within a community context suggesting that social transactions are more efficient and communal problems are more easily resolved when community members interact regularly and trust one another. However, this conceptualization further suggests that individuals within such communities additionally benefit from these transactions (Jarret, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2004). For example, those with trusting and dynamic connections to community tend to develop positive character traits such as “civic-ness” (p.43), participation in matters of civic importance. Furthermore, individuals involved in communities with greater social
capital can get things accomplished more easily, including things that are personally beneficial (Jarret et al.).

As it pertains to this study, the idea that social capital facilitates social support and the transfer of resources relates to both the self-determination and flow frameworks adopted for this study. The connections to these two concepts will hereafter be explained.

**Self-Determination and Social Capital**

As described by Ryan and Deci (2000), self-determination is not solely an individualistic construct. Rather, across the lifespan, self-determination is more likely to flourish in contexts characterized by a secure sense of relatedness (Ryan & LaGuardia, 2000). Research has shown that meaningful talk and feeling understood and appreciated through social interaction both facilitates feelings of emotional well-being and contributes to feeling self-determined in daily life (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Relatedness has also been found to be associated with several forms of social activity such as hanging out with others, doing fun or pleasant things, and avoiding self-consciousness, and these social activities have in turn facilitated feelings of intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Reis et al.).

Especially for youth and adolescents, acting in a self-determined manner is dependent upon one’s ability to engage in social networks and collaborate with others (Serna & Lau-Smith, 1995). Seeking information, joining activities, and enlisting the help of others to achieve goals are examples of networking skills (Serna & Lau-Smith) that support “one’s capacity to choose and have those choices be the determinants of one’s own actions” (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 38). Social skills and collaboration skills
such as conversation, problem solving, and teaming to develop and pursue goals additionally support overall youth self-determination.

Therefore, as sociability, relatedness and social networking are indicators of social capital, the presence of social capital arguably facilitates the expression of self-determination. Among the youth in this study, being part of a group, making contributions to that group, and being supported by the group (including staff members) facilitated feelings of competence, control, and confidence both during and after the wilderness trip.

Flow and Social Capital

As a context for understanding the experience of internally rewarding activity, enjoyment, or happiness, the flow framework also provides a lens through which social capital can be viewed. Simply stated, when individuals face complex, challenging activities in which they feel adequately skilled to perform such challenges, and during which goals are clear and feedback is immediate, optimal experiences occur (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Voelkl & Ellis, 2002). Flow moments are characterized by intense concentration, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, merging of action and awareness, and the transformations of time. Researchers have suggested outcomes of the flow experience include positive affect and self-affirmation (Csikszentmihalyi; Voelkl & Ellis).

While flow is commonly understood as individual experience, the concept also has social implications. Mitchell (1988) for example, proposed perceived competence, “the process of recognizing one’s abilities and applying them meaningfully and completely,” (p. 44), is a prerequisite of flow and resides within a social context. The
perception of competence is socially influenced in so much as it depends on the
perception that one’s abilities are roughly equal to one’s responsibilities, which are
socially constructed. According to Mitchell, competence emerges when a person’s skills,
talents, and resources are usefully applied in meeting a commensurate challenge, or
problem. Yet the perception of competence can be the ability to completely satisfy
socially defined role expectations. Social environments can therefore have an influence
on one’s perception of competence.

As previously stated, norms that develop when social capital is present include the
tendency of people to do things for one another. An environment that fosters social
capital is one that supports networks of individuals to act together more effectively to
pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 2000). In goal-directed activity, expectations are set,
and the expression of competence enacted. Flow is therefore more likely to occur when
individuals have opportunities to demonstrate competence in such environments.

Understood as a state of happiness, flow is additionally threatened by lack of
social support and connectedness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). For example, research has
demonstrated that social connections inhibit depression. Low levels of social support
tend to predict depression whereas high levels of social support decrease symptom
severity and speed recovery (Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, people who have close
friends and confidants, supportive coworkers and friendly neighbors are less likely to
experience sadness, loneliness, and poor self-esteem (Putnam). Simply put, being
connected to supportive community facilitates happiness and greater well-being.
Social Capital and Youth Development

As the relationships of social capital to the development of self-determination and the experience of flow have been pointed out, the further significance of social capital to youth development cannot be ignored. Research has shown where the presence of social capital among families has positively influenced youth outcomes. For example, in a longitudinal study of low-income and poverty-stricken families in Baltimore, youth were followed into early adulthood, and their levels of socioeconomic success in adulthood were compared with measures of social capital among families during the subjects’ youthful years. The extent to which their families were embedded in a protective social network, and were themselves a closely bonded unit with mutual expectations, trust, and loyalty consistently related to indicators of socioeconomic success in young adulthood (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995).

As a boon to youth development, social capital is particularly effective when youth become actively involved in matters that directly impact their lives. Youth engagement in decision-making processes, whether in school, community groups, or youth organizations, has been recognized as an essential component to youth development (Zeldin, 2004). Involving youth in decision-making processes has the potential to maximize youths’ sense of community with those around them. Such involvement concurrently ensures that young people have the opportunity to be active agents in their own development while improving the communities in which they live (Zeldin, 2004). When a sense of community membership and belonging is intentionally facilitated through programming, research has shown youth are less likely to engage in antisocial
and other risky behaviors (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998; Gambone & Arbreton, 1997).

Community engagement occurs in many settings. For youth, however, social capital has particular relevance to educational environments. Research, for example, has demonstrated that social capital within schools has multiple benefits to students. As summarized by Putnam (2000), multiple studies going back more than thirty years have shown that smaller schools typically outperform larger schools mainly because smaller schools provide more opportunities and encouragement for students to engage with one another in face-to-face extracurricular activities and to take responsibility for school clubs and student activities.

The Role of Adults

While building community attachment is a key aspect of developing social capital among youth, parents and non-familial adults are key to supporting its growth. As Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) reported, in low-income families where high levels of emotional support existed between a mother and child, and where the mother had a strong support network, the child was substantially more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, and obtain a steady job. “In other words, ‘at-risk’ children can succeed in life if their mothers have enough social capital” (Putnam, 2000, p. 306). This outcome points out the importance of parents having social capital and community attachment to support child development.

While parents need social capital to help their children succeed, such strengths are gained through active engagement in the developmental interests of their children. As research has shown, when parents take active involvements with their children’s
education, children tend to perform better in school and the schools they attend show better performance overall. According to Henderson and Berla (1994):

The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life. . . . When parents are involved in their children’s education at home, their children do better in school. When parents are involved at school, their children go further in school, and the schools they go to are better. (p. 1)

Additional research indicates that youth with stronger attachments to school (staff and students) and family show significantly lower rates of emotional distress, violent behavior, substance use, and higher rates of altruism and respect toward others (Zeldin, 2004).

As suggested earlier, engaging youth to take active roles in community decision making reduces the likelihood of young people feeling isolated and engaging in risky behavior (Zeldin, 2004). While adults are clearly key facilitators of this process, adults tend to place minor importance on such activities. A national sample of adults was asked to rate the relative importance of activities that communities could take on behalf of youth. Among the higher priorities were: teaching shared values; guiding decision making; and reporting misbehaviors. However, the two actions that most reflect community involvement—“asking young people’s opinions when making decisions that reflect them,” and “giving young people lots of opportunities to make their communities better places”—received the lowest ratings among adults (Scales et al., 2001). However, as Jarrett et al. (2004) demonstrated, such involvements are critical to youth development, particularly when youth develop trusting and meaningful relationships with supportive, non-family adults. Such relationships have provided youth with access to adult resources, such as information, assistance, support and encouragement. The
importance of youth community engagement is clear. However, adults’ recognition of this need is particularly lacking (Jarret et al.).

While it is important for adults to support youth development of social capital external to the family, social capital within families likewise has a powerful influence on developmental growth of young people (Coleman, 1988). Families that enjoy close social bonds and parents who instill the value of reciprocity in their children are more likely to achieve a greater degree of compliance and adherence to their common values (Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, youth whose parents are closely involved with their children and their schools are much less likely to drop out of high school than children who lack such forms of social capital in the family. As Putnam additionally summarized, children of parents who attend their school programs, help with homework, and monitor their children’s behavior outside of school are more likely to have higher grades, are more engaged in the classroom, and tend to avoid drugs and delinquent activity.

Implications for Youth Development

As the participants in this study clearly communicated, the community that developed during the wilderness trip arose from, and contributed to, the individual and social development of the students. The seeds of social capital were sewn during the wilderness trip. Norms of reciprocity emerged through the commonplace helping behaviors that students demonstrated. Trust was developed among group members through both informal socializing, the sharing of emotional content, and through goal-directed challenging activity in which group members necessarily relied on one another. Opportunities for leadership were seized, and resources of both physical effort and emotional support were further shared among group members throughout the trip, to the
point where group members were willing to sacrifice physical comfort (e.g., jumping into cold water to pull canoes up rapids) for the greater benefit of the group.

The wilderness experience provided the teens with opportunities to build social capital within their community of peers and adult staff. Students gained access to friendships, social support, and social resources they previously did not have, and they had continual opportunities to draw on the social resources of their team members. Furthermore, they were supported in their efforts by the encouragement of staff members, adults perceived as both caring and supportive of teen autonomy. Parents however, considered primary agents in youth development and community development (Autry, 2003; Coleman, 1988; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Jarret et al., 2004; Putnam, 2000; Zeldin, 2004), were left out of the community. The building and employment of social capital during the wilderness trip was limited to the youth participants and staff members.

While social capital seemed to make gains among the youth during the wilderness trip, there was an apparent break in social capital after the trip concluded. Parent and teen accounts showed that social capital was limited in transfer to post-trip life. The major link to community was the follow-up group that met regularly post-trip. This group provided features of social capital in that it offered the teens invaluable opportunities to maintain friendship and provided an environment of communal support and social networking. However, the follow-up group was very different in nature from the wilderness trip as it lacked substantial opportunities for participants to challenge themselves, enact roles of leadership, and take initiative of intensity similar to that of the wilderness trip. Like the teen/staff expedition, parents’ roles in fostering community
attachment among teens were limited post-trip. Furthermore, parental attitudes toward teens reflected a range of support—minimal to substantial—for and beliefs about their children’s potentialities.

Based on the data and additional review of literature, therapeutic wilderness programs clearly have substantial potential to build social capital in tandem with facilitating flow-like experience and self-determination development among youth. Extending this kind of positive development beyond the wilderness program requires structured efforts on the part of a program and parents to consciously work toward that end. Programs such as those offered by CFS must offer continual opportunities for youth to voluntarily challenge themselves in goal-directed activity and to reap the developmental benefits of solving self-chosen problems.

Additionally, parents must be given significant roles in supporting youth participation. A therapeutic wilderness program, for example, could invite parents’ involvement at the beginning of interactions with the family through more intensive pre-trip participation and post-trip parent participation. In such a dynamic, a program could help to build social capital among youth and parents by inviting parents to co-participate on some level, and additionally instruct parents as to how to best support youth prior to and following the wilderness trip. Additionally, efforts could be made to educate parents on the effects of positive versus negative parenting attitudes on child development.

**Optimism Theory**

As the flow and self-determination frameworks guided this study toward the construction of the community theme, so too did these constructs guide the development of the major themes challenge and key player relationships. Challenge was particularly
characterized by personal growth, and one striking aspect of growth was found in the
recounted stories of remarkable perseverance in the face of tremendous physical
obstacles. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that youth participants gained
strong feelings of personal competence through their accomplishments during challenges
in the backcountry. This competence seemed to propel them through subsequent
wilderness obstacles. And for some it seemed to carry over into generalized talk about
newfound self-confidence, social confidence, physical strength, skill development, and
the ability to cope with negative events. As Taylor illustrated when she related doing
unpleasant homework to overcoming a difficult portage, challenging experiences were
transformed into positive accomplishments, which in turn influenced youth’s attitudes
toward future challenges.

An additional future-oriented concept found among the themes of community and
key player relationships was trust. As Halo and Brett pointed out, a strong sense of group
trust and emotional support developed among the group members and staff. In addition
to trust among the wilderness group members, some of the parents, such as Grimace,
Marge, Halo, and Dark Eyes used language indicating trust and emotional
supportiveness, whereas other parents spoke in language that was condescending,
unsupportive, and suggested a sense of distrust of their children. Research has shown
that a child’s mistrust grows when intimate others repeatedly fail to safeguard his or her
emotional, contractual and/or physical welfare (Eisner, 1995), and a child’s future
expectations for such interactions tend to be negative. Conversely, trust is fostered by
significant others who safeguard a child’s welfare, and these children tend to expect
fewer aversive events than do mistrustful individuals, and are more likely to have positive orientations toward the future (Abramson, Garber, Edwards, & Seligman, 1978; Eisner).

A positive future orientation has been referred to as optimism (Tiger, 1979), a theoretical concept that informs interpretation of the major themes. A discussion of optimism will therefore follow. Additionally, linkages will be proposed to the original theoretical frameworks as additional basis for the grounded theory model generated from this research.

**Background**

While optimism and hope are valued as strengths by most cultures, in American society there has been a dramatic rise in psychological difficulties that signal hopelessness, and this increase has been particularly steep among young people (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). For example, by the time youth graduate high school, as many as 20% of youth may experience clinical depression (Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, & Seeley, 1993). Similar rises in youth anxiety and suicide rates have likewise been reported (Centers for Disease Control, 2004; Twenge, 2000). Such statistics suggest the importance of fostering optimism and hope among youth.

Optimism as a protective factor against such harms is largely an attitudinal strength. Tiger (1979) proposed a useful definition for optimism: “a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future—one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his [or her] advantage, or for his [or her] pleasure.” By this definition, there can be no objective or single optimism because what is regarded as optimism depends on what the individual considers desirable (Peterson, 2000).
In his review of optimism research, Peterson suggested optimistic dispositions have been linked to “…positive mood and good morale; to perseverance and effective problem solving; to academic, athletic, military, occupational, and political success; to popularity; to good health; and even to long life and freedom from trauma” (p. 44). Pessimism, in contrast, tends to indicate passivity, failure, social estrangement, morbidity and mortality (Peterson).

An inherent trait of optimism is that it is future oriented. As outlined by Sheier and Carver (1992), dispositional optimism is the global expectation that good things will be plentiful in the future and bad things, scarce. This conceptualization adopts a perspective of how people pursue goals, defined as desirable values (Peterson, 2000). To Sheier and Carver, nearly all realms of human activity can be cast in goal-oriented terms, and people’s behavior entails the identification and adoption of goals and the regulation of action in relation to these goals.

As Peterson (2000) explained, optimism becomes a self-regulatory construct when people ask themselves about impediments to achieving the goals they have adopted. “In the face of difficulties, do people nonetheless believe their goals can be achieved? If so, they are optimistic; if not they are pessimistic” (p. 47). Pessimism leads to giving up whereas optimism leads to continued efforts to attain one’s goal. In this way, optimism is an expectation oriented construct.

In a separate but overlapping conceptualization, Seligman and colleagues have approached the concept of optimism in terms of an individual’s characteristic explanatory style: how one explains the causes of bad events (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995). Viewed as explanatory style, optimistic individuals explain bad events as circumscribed, with
external, unstable, and specific causes. Those who attribute negative events to internal, stable, and global causes are likewise described as pessimistic.

Optimism described as explanatory style arose from the attributional reformulation of the learned helplessness model (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). The original helplessness model held that after experiencing repeated uncontrollable aversive events, animals and humans become passive and unresponsive—effectively helpless—presumably because they have learned, after repeated failure, that there is no contingency between actions and outcomes (Abramson, Seligman et al., 1978; Peterson, 2000). This learning is further generalized to expectations about future events. In short, the learning is represented as the generalized expectation of response-outcome independence that later produces helplessness. With the inclusion of explanatory style in the learned helplessness model, research was directed to explore how people explain bad events (Abramson, Seligman et al., 1978; Peterson & Seligman, 1984).

Yet explanatory style was eventually reframed by Seligman (1991; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), who described how his lifelong interest in what can go wrong changed into an interest in what can go right. Transforming helplessness research into what Seligman termed optimism, studies turned to examine antidotes to helplessness such as mastery, effectance, and control (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Peterson, 2000). Human potential and agency therefore became a focus of optimism research. Compared with the Sheier and Carver (1992) approach, optimistic explanatory style is more infused with agency than is dispositional optimism.

An additional conceptualization of optimism, proposed by Snyder (2000c), integrates both of the above visions of optimism: expectation and agency in the unifying
theme of hope. In Snyder’s view, goal-directed expectations are composed of two separate components. First is agency, which reflects an individual’s determination that goals can be achieved. The second piece is identified as pathways, or the individual’s beliefs that goals can be reached by generating successful plans for attainment.

**Self-Determination and Optimism**

The optimism and self-determination constructs have much theoretical relevance to one another. For example, Wehmeyer (1992) proposed that self-determination partly refers to “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life” (p. 17). An indicator of this agency is what Wehmeyer referred to as psychological empowerment. In this view, self-determined people believe they have control over circumstances that are important to them; they are confident that they have skills to achieve desired outcomes; and if they choose to apply those skills, the identified outcomes will result. This conceptualization of self-determination most resembles Snyder’s (2000c) approach to optimism which entails both agency and goal-directed planning.

The perception of competence in self-selected, goal-directed behavior is a strong factor in feeling self-determined, (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reis et al., 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and thus motivated. Optimism theory likewise suggests that people who feel control over events will positively influence outcomes (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). Additionally, the optimistic individual is motivated to set goals and perceives oneself as capable of meeting goals (Snyder, 2000c).

Overall, Gillham and Reivich (2004) suggest, optimistic people are hopeful, generally expect good things to happen, and see themselves as capable of controlling events in their lives. These individuals also have goals and the motivation and plans to
meet goals. Finally, skills and abilities to think flexibly about alternate routes to goals are important to building optimism. Similarly, self-determination involves feelings of competence, goal-setting behavior, and belief in one’s abilities to achieve desired outcomes.

**Flow and Optimism**

As with self-determination, unifying themes between optimism and flow include competence and goal-directed action. Csikszentmihalyi (2000), for example, suggested having clear goals helps facilitate flow experience. Additionally, the balance of challenge and skills is paramount to the flow model. As a facilitation of hope (Snyder, 2000c) and optimism (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995), feeling flow is the experience of activity in which individuals feel competent and in control of challenging pursuits, goals are clear and progress toward those goals clearly understood, and individuals are self-affirmed in the pursuit of such activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Voelkl et al., 2003). Self-affirmation arguably facilitates the attribution of positive flow-like events to one’s own efforts. In other words, experiencing flow is likely to foster the optimistic attitude that one is capable of challenging oneself and competent enough to handle the challenge.

**Optimism and Youth Development**

Optimism is associated with numerous positive outcomes and should be nourished for this reason (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). Individuals who are optimistic have greater success in school, on the job, and on the playing field (Rettew & Reivich, 1995; Schulman, 1995). Optimistic people report less anger and depression (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Furthermore they report enjoying better physical health, live longer than
pessimists, and enjoy greater life satisfaction (Buchanan & Seligman, 1995; Gillham & Reivich, 2004; Scheier & Carver, 1992; Seligman, 1991). Conversely, pessimism is thought to be a risk factor related to negative life events. For example, Abramson et al. (2000) found young adults with pessimistic explanatory styles were more likely to develop clinical depression and anxiety than their optimistic peers.

Empirical research on optimism suggests that environmental factors play a major role in its development among youth. Among the influential agents in fostering optimism are parents, teachers, and other adult community members. Parents play a particularly important role in the development of optimism and hope. “Adolescents and adults who report their parents were caring and affectionate report higher levels of hope” (Gillham & Reivich, 2004, p. 150). Parental modeling of hope is also thought to play a role in the development of optimism (Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox, & Gillham, 1995; Snyder, 2000b).

Additionally, parents can influence their children’s optimism through the expectations and explanations they voice about events occurring in their children’s lives. Children who are continually criticized for being difficult or lazy, or who repeatedly hear “that won’t work,” may be especially prone to pessimism (Gillham & Reivich, 2004; Snyder, 2000a). Overall, children’s explanatory styles appear to be more closely related to parents’ explanations for child events than parents’ explanation for parent events (Gillham & Reivich).

People other than parents can have an influence on child optimism as well. For example, youth may learn optimistic or pessimistic thinking styles from teachers, peers, and other community members. Children may internalize attributions made by their teachers regarding failures and successes (Gillham & Reivich, 2004). Close friendships,
feelings of belonging, and attachment to peer groups can be both motivational and healing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; McDermott & Hastings, 2000).

Whether influenced by parents, non-family adults, or peers, youth optimism is further susceptible to support or blockage in terms of the challenges youth face. As Gillham and Reivich point out, the development of coping skills is important for hope. While repeated negative events and failures may instill pessimism, a life without difficulty, in which one is shielded from adversity and failure, is unlikely to promote optimism (Snyder, 2000b). As in the original flow model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), when challenges are too great, youth may become overwhelmed and helpless. Conversely, when challenges are too little, children may feel bored and fail to develop skills or a sense of mastery. To foster hope and optimism, parents, teachers, and adult leaders should thus pay careful attention to the child’s individual level of competence and keep challenges near or just above this level. Knowledge of the relationship between challenge and skills helps caregivers to decide when to best jump in and solve things for a child, when to facilitate, or when to let the child struggle on his or her own (Gillham & Reivich, 2004).

Implications for Youth Development

As illustrated by the data, youth adopted attitudes of courage and perseverance in the face of major physical and mental challenges during the wilderness trip. Multiple research participants, youth and staff alike, used derivatives of the phrase “just do it” in reference to overcoming obstacles such as portaging through waist-deep mud and paddling for hours on end. Teens and staff told a collective story of youth courage, accomplishment, and self-demonstrated competence. Moreover, the adolescents
generally left the wilderness feeling a greater confidence in themselves and their capabilities, including physical, mental, and social competencies.

As a group, teens reflected the development of optimistic attitudes in facing challenges during the trip and left the wilderness trip with optimistic thoughts about themselves. However, like social capital, expression of optimism following the trip was mixed. Activities that fostered further development of optimism were limited in number and strength. Furthermore, parental supportiveness for optimism was also mixed. Most parents had little information about what their children had accomplished during the trip. Additionally, while some parents used language that seemed “tuned-in” to their children’s development and were actively supportive of such, others spoke in ways in which they were annoyed by and distrustful of their children.

This data demonstrated how youth optimism could be supported through structured, meaningful, engaging recreational activity. Offering adolescents continual opportunities to challenge themselves, build competence and confidence, experience flow, enact self-determined choices, and take active roles in decision-making processes, encourages expectations for engagement and success in the future.

Additionally, hope for the future is facilitated by strong attachments to community (Autry, 2003). The data has demonstrated how the follow-up group transformed what would have otherwise been a short-lived community into a lasting social network. Parents, however, were not included in this community, as shown by their lack of knowledge about teens’ experiences during the wilderness trip. Parents need to be involved in the community-building process from the point at which families enter the program. In this way, information channels could better flow between program, parents,
and teens, and parents could be better equipped to be supportive and encouraging of their children’s efforts, thus supporting child hope and optimism (Eisner, 1995).

Proposing a Theory of Positive Youth Development

As guided by the flow and self-determination frameworks, and as constructed from the data through the constant comparative process, three major themes emerged in this study. Challenge, community, and key player relationships were found to be among the most salient topics among the data. Further understanding of these themes was developed through the introduction of two additional concepts: social capital and optimism. Having analyzed and summarized the data and explored relevant literature, this research is ready to emerge into a proposal of new theory grounded in data on which it is built.

At the heart of the problem proposed as the basis for this study was the issue of risks to youth development, and the young people in question were addressed as at-risk youth. Youth have indeed remained the focus of the investigation. However in the spirit of optimism, youth risk shall henceforth be reframed in terms of positive youth development (Peterson, 2004), an underlying common thread to the data themes and relevant concepts. This next section will discuss positive youth development as an emerging field of scholarship and propose a theory of structured youth programming as a means for positive youth development.

Positive Youth Development

The term “positive youth development” has emerged from more than a decade of research concerned with the promise of youth potential. In defining positive youth development, Damon (2004) outlines the concept as an approach to research focusing on children’s unique talents, strengths, interests, and future potential. Partly in reaction to
media and social distortions of youth, this new approach to youth development introduces a more affirmative and welcome vision of young people. In the view of positive youth development, young people are envisioned as resources rather than as problems for society. “The positive youth development perspective emphasizes the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people—including those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and those with the most troubled histories” (p. 15).

The positive youth development approach, according to Damon (2004), recognizes the existence of adversities and developmental challenges that affect children in various ways. However, this perspective resists conceptualizing the developmental process as an effort to overcome risk and deficits. Rather, it begins with “a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world (p.15). This positive youth development perspective aims to understand, educate, and engage children in productive activities rather than correcting, curing, or treating them for maladaptive tendencies.

While Damon’s definition provides a basis for understanding the meaning of positive youth development, Peterson (2004) pointed out the lack of a unified definition in research literature. As wide-ranging research has identified itself under this umbrella term, the label has been used to describe “any and all programs that involve young people” (Peterson, 2004, p. 8). However, as Peterson stated, while the coherence of the youth development field may not be in agreement as to what qualifies as positive youth development programming, the overall conclusions of research concur.

The vision of the good youth that emerges is a young person who experiences more positive affect than negative affect, who is satisfied with his or her life as it has
been lived, who has identified what he or she does well and uses these talents and strengths in a variety of fulfilling pursuits, and who is a contributing member of a social community. . . . A positive youth development program is one that effectively targets one or more of these facets. (p. 9)

In summarizing research on positive youth development, Peterson identified several characteristics of intervention approaches that encourage successful youth outcomes. First, sustained programs in which youth spend many hours over extended periods of time should be favored over one-shot lectures and short duration workshops. In general, more contact is better whereas short-term programs tend to be ineffective in producing outcomes. Secondly, Peterson suggested that structured programs with clear planning and ongoing monitoring have more favorable outcomes than those that are unstructured. Additionally, Peterson added, the broader the scope of the program, the better the outcomes. Effective programs target several systems simultaneously, such as home and school. They additionally provide multiple ways for youth to not only think differently but also act differently. Finally, the more sophisticated the program the better the outcomes. Peterson indicated interventions that work best address both internal factors and external (e.g., character strength and physical activity). Ultimately, youth programs need to impart skills and competencies to contribute to positive development of youth.

**Initiative Development**

Larson (2000) proposed a refocusing of youth programming and research on initiative development—empowering young people to engage in self-motivated, goal-directed, complex activity—as a core quality of positive youth development. This focus on initiative was proposed in response to research findings from a study of how adolescents experience daily life (Larson & Richards, 1991). In that study, a
representative sample of white, working-class and middle-class young adolescents—“a group that seemingly has everything going for them” (Larson, 2000, p. 170)—reported feeling bored 27% of the time. While individuals differed in these rates, the most surprising finding was that honors students were just as likely to report boredom as those involved in delinquent activities.

In most cases, Larson (2000) argued, high rates of boredom, alienation, and disconnection from meaningful challenge are not signs of psychopathology. Rather, these are signs of deficiency in positive development. Additionally, he contended, rather than attributing problem behaviors (e.g., drug use, premature sexual involvement, and delinquency) to responses to family stress, emotional disturbance, or maladaptive conditions, such behaviors, in this view, may be more adequately described as resulting from the absence of engagement in a positive life trajectory.

Larson (2000) suggested a central question of youth development is “how to get adolescents’ fires lit, how to have them develop the complex dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives” (p. 170). Initiative development is proposed as the solution, and is further suggested as a core requirement for other components of positive youth development such as creativity, leadership, altruism, and civic engagement.

Initiative is described by Larson (2000) as involving three critical elements: intrinsic motivation, concerted engagement in the environment, and a temporal arc of effort directed toward a goal. Beginning with *intrinsic motivation*, initiative involves the experience of wanting to be doing an activity and being invested in it. This notion includes the concepts of agency and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 1995), or experiencing that one’s thoughts and actions originate
voluntarily from within oneself. Yet intrinsically motivated activity in a vacuum does not entail initiative.

Drawing upon the flow construct (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984), Larson proposed a second requirement of initiative—that intrinsic motivation be experienced in-tandem with concerted engagement in the environment, “with exertion of constructive attention in a field of action involving the types of constraints, rules, challenge, and complexity that characterize external reality” (p. 172). Devotion of thought and effort indicates constructive attention. Constructive attention means directing this thought and effort not randomly, but toward creating order or synergy.

The third and final requirement is that motivation and concerted engagement occur over sustained periods of time. Initiative involves what Larson (2000) termed a “temporal arc” (p. 172) of effort directed toward a goal. The temporal arc might include setbacks, re-evaluations, and adjustment strategies. In this way, initiative is not just starting things, but also involves sticking with them. Larson argued that to develop agency, “…one must be able to mobilize one’s attention, one’s mental powers on a deliberate course of action, without being deterred by the first obstacle one encounters. Initiative is the devotion of cumulative effort over time to achieve a goal” (p. 172).

In Larson’s conceptualization, these three elements must come together for initiative to develop. Initiative is fostered when individuals experience all three in consort and learn to regulate them. The developmental stage of adolescence may be a particularly valuable time for developing initiative as the acquisition of deductive or formal reasoning facilitates growth of cognitive strategies for self-regulation (Larson, 2000).
As a context for facilitating initiative development, Larson (2000) asserted that structured voluntary activities are particularly suited for this cause. The ACE program in part exemplifies this assertion. Indications of intrinsic motivation, concerted engagement, and a temporal arc of effort toward a goal—during the wilderness phase—suggests that teen participants were having the experience of directing and regulating their actions toward the pursuit of clear goals. In short, during the wilderness trip, youth participants were developing and exercising initiative. Yet post-trip reports of everyday teen experience included strong indications of passive activity interspersed with suggestions of active pursuits. In addition, follow-up activities provided by the ACE were weak in relation to the full range of principles of initiative proposed by Larson. As described by Karlita, activities were largely social in nature and lacked challenge, complexity, and sustained goal-directed behavior. Therefore, to foster youth initiative, youth programs such as ACE need to implement procedures that motivate and engage youth in sustained goal-directed activity.

The initiative concept has been introduced as the precursor to the final proposal of grounded theory. In Chapter 1 it was stated that a knowledge gap exists as to how flow and self-determination are experienced in wilderness programming, and to what extent characteristics of those experiences are carried on beyond the program. Those questions have been answered as pertains to this case study. Having come full circle, the addition of Larson’s initiative model unites the flow and self-determination frameworks under the concept of initiative. Furthermore, adding the initiative model to this study globalizes the relevance of these issues to include positive youth development programming in general.
Grounded Theory of Structured Youth Programming and Positive Youth Development

Discussion now turns to the synthesis of literature and data previously explained. What follows is a culminating synthesis of theoretical framework, constructed data themes, and added concepts emerging in a grounded theory model of positive youth development (Figure 2).

As Larson articulated and the data suggested, youth gain substantial growth benefit from structured challenge experiences that foster development and expression of initiative. When engaged in challenging activities together with supportive, non-family adults such as program staff persons, bonds develop and community emerges. Programs have the opportunity to include parents in this community by opening lines of communication and inviting parental involvement. By engaging parents in program goals and activities, parent-staff-youth relationships are likely to develop that potentially support the youth in their endeavors, and quite probably benefit parents and the overall program as well.

By broadening the system of activity and communication to better involve parents, a program builds social capital among participants. In addition to building social capital, this kind of program fosters flow, self-determination, and optimism among youth through structured and purposive application of goal-oriented challenging activities. These activities afford opportunities to express agency, feel intrinsically motivated, gain feelings of competence and control, develop self-confidence and hope for the future, and persist through and adapt to adversarial situations. Youth initiative development, a target goal of positive youth development (Larson, 2000), is proposed as an outcome of such
experiences. In this way, structured youth programming becomes a means of fostering positive youth development.

**Future Research**

Future research in relation to this study would explore the theoretical concepts of social capital and optimism among therapeutic adventure programming and youth recreation programming in general. Features of youth programs that either foster or hinder social capital and youth optimism ought to be identified. A quantitative approach could be applied to measure these outcomes, programs could be compared, and a combined quantitative-qualitative approach could be used to identify programmatic influences on social capital and optimism. Additionally, measures of flow, self-determination, social capital, and optimism could be used to determine quantitative relationships among each domain.

Attitudes of both youth and adults also ought to be explored in relation to youth community involvement and adult support for such activity. This may help to better understand distinguishing characteristics of families that support youth engagement versus those that do not. Finally, the process of engaging both young people and parents in youth development programs should be further explored. Developing a greater understanding of this process would further inform the field of contributing factors to positive youth development.
Figure 2. Structured youth programming as a means for positive youth development
APPENDIX A
ADVENTURE CHALLENGE EXPERIENCE REFLECTION QUESTIONNAIRE
Adventure Challenge Experience Reflection Questionnaire

Congratulations on having made it to the conclusion of the wilderness trip!

A lot has happened since your trip began and we would like to know how you feel about your experiences with the ACE program. So for the next 20 minutes or so, we’d like you to think about your experiences and respond to a few questions.

Before you start, please remember, you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. This is not a test, and there are no right or wrong answers.

When you are done, please seal this packet in the envelope provided. A staff person will collect the sealed envelopes, but they will not open or read your responses. Have fun thinking about the trip, and if you have any questions, you may ask a staff person for help.

1. Now that the trip is almost over, what does the word *challenge* mean to you?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Now, please turn to page 2.
2. Looking back on the trip, what have been the *most* satisfying challenges? Please tell what was satisfying about it.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. Throughout the trip, what have been the *least* satisfying challenges? Please explain.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Please turn to page 3.
4. What aspects of the trip have helped you feel like you can mentally focus on challenges?

5. What has kept you from feeling mentally focused on challenges?
6. Thinking about your wilderness experience, what does the idea of personal control mean to you?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

7. Thinking about the wilderness trip, do you feel like you’ve had personal control? Please explain.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Just one more page! Please turn to page 5.
8. What goals, if any, have you set for yourself as you return home?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

9. Please put a star (*) next to the goal in question #8 that is most important to you.

10. What reasons do you have for setting this goal?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

11. Is there anything you would like to add?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

That’s it! Thank you for your help with this project.
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDES

Youth

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

2. How did you come to sign up for the Adventure Challenge Experience?

3. Now that you’ve had time to reflect, what were your most and least favorite aspects of the course, and why?

4. Is there anything about the course you would like to do again?

5. Tell me a little about how you’ve been spending your time since you’ve been home?

6. Since you’ve been home, how have you been able to use what you learned during the wilderness trip?

7. In the questionnaire you completed, you wrote this about __________[read quote]. What did you mean by that? [Repeat this with other items to be clarified.]

8. One thing I am studying is the idea of challenge. Here is how you defined challenge [read response from questionnaire]. Can you expand on that?

9. Can you give me some examples of what was challenging for you during the wilderness trip?

   Probe at least 3 challenges:
   o How it felt at the time.
   o What else was going on around you?
   o How does it make you feel to think about it now?
   o Negative/positive aspects?
   o Skills used?
   o Skills not used?
   o Skills needed to do better?
   o Skills learned? How do they help you?

10. So far we’ve talked about __________(physical, mental, or social) challenges. Have there been any other kinds of challenges? Tell me about that.

   o Probe physical, mental, social challenges

11. Just before the course ended, here’s what you wrote about getting into challenges mentally: ___________[read quote]. Since you’ve been home, have you had any similar experiences?
Probe:
  o  How was it like what you did during the wilderness trip?

12. Another thing I am studying is the idea of boredom. What do you think boredom means?

Probe:
  o  Were there any times you felt that way during the course?

13. Since you’ve been home, have you felt like anything has been too easy or boring for you?

Probe:
  o  Is there anything you learned from the course that could help you make things more interesting?

14. Has anything been especially challenging for you since you’ve been home?

Probes:
  o  Did you have any skills you didn’t use?
  o  What skills did you need in order to do better with those challenges?
  o  Was there anything you learned in the Adventure Challenge Experience that could help to improve those situations in the future?

15. Here is something you wrote about personal control [read response from questionnaire]. Can you expand on that?

Probes:
  o  What made you feel that way during the wilderness trip?
  o  Tell me about when you felt you had choices.
  o  When did you not have choices?

16. Do you feel you have been able to use what you learned about personal control since you’ve been home? If so, how?

17. Has anything kept you from feeling a sense of control since you’ve been home?

Probe:
  o  What did you learn during the trip that could help you feel a better sense of control?

18. Here are the goals you wrote for returning home: ____________________[read goals from questionnaire]. How do you feel you are doing with that?

Probes:
  o  Is there anything that helps you work on your goals? If so, what?
  o  Does anything keep you from working on your goals? Tell me about that.

19. Is there anything different about you now that you have been through the Adventure Challenge Experience? If so, how are you different?

20. How are you the same as before you left?
21. Overall, how do you feel about the Adventure Challenge Experience?

22. Is there anything you would like to add?

**Parents**

1. Tell me a little about yourself (age, education, and anything else you would like to tell me).

2. How has [participant] been spending his/her time since returning home?
   
   Probe:
   - How is that similar to before the wilderness trip?
   - How is it different?

3. Do you feel the Adventure Challenge Experience has influenced the way he/she spends his/her time? If so, how?

4. In your opinion, what did [participant] like most about this course?

5. What did he/she like the least?

6. Do you feel the course has had an impact on [participant]?
   
   Probe:
   - Tell me about that.
   - What changes in behavior have you noticed?
   - What has stayed the same?

7. What do you feel are the most important things he/she has learned from the course?

8. Have you noticed any changes in your relationship with [participant]?
   
   Probe:
   - What kinds of changes have you noticed?

9. One of the concepts I am studying is the idea of personal control. How would you define personal control?

10. What do you think personal control means to [participant]?

   Probe:
   - Have you seen it?
   - How do you think it relates to the Adventure Challenge Experience?
   - How is his/her sense of control different than before he/she left?
   - How is it the same?
   - What role do you feel you play in [participant] feeling a sense of personal control?

11. In general, what impact do you feel this program has had on your family?
12. What suggestions do you have for the program?

13. Is there anything you would like to add?

**Staff Focus Group**

1. Each person please introduce yourself, and tell a little bit about your background (name, age, education, professional background, or anything else you would like).

2. How did this group of participants compare to the “typical” group of teens participating in the Adventure Challenge Experience?

3. In general, what did the teen participants like most about the course? What did they like the least?

4. What were the group’s most challenging experiences?
   Probe:
   - Were these rewarding experiences? If so, how do you think they felt rewarded?

5. [Hand out Flow Model graphic depiction with written description (Appendix C), one copy to each participant.]

   As you may know, one of the concepts I am studying is how participants feel about the challenges they face during the wilderness course. A concept called “flow theory” is used to describe the optimal experience, and has been widely used to understand how people experience adventure-based activities. Here is a description of the model. Please take a minute to look it over and let me know if I can answer any questions. When you are done, I’d like to ask you a few questions about how this model applies to your participants. [Pause to allow time to read.]

   *Ask:* Thinking about this specific group, how did these kinds of flow experiences happen for the teen participants?

   Probe:
   - How would it come about?
   - Tell me about the barriers to flow during the wilderness trip.
   - Is this typical of most ACE trips?

6. What connections do you see between participants having flow experiences during the wilderness trip and having the same kinds of experiences back home?

   Probe:
   - What roles do you play as staff in regard to the participants feeling flow?

7. Another concept I am studying is the idea of personal control. How would you define personal control? What do you think it means to the participants?

   Probe:
   - When do you think the teens felt a sense of personal control during the wilderness course?
   - What were the barriers to participants feeling a sense of personal control?
8. How did teens on this trip connect personal control in the wilderness to having personal control in their lives overall?

Probe:
- As staff, what roles did you play in this process?

9. The participants set goals to work toward during the trip. What do you feel were their motivations for working toward goals?

Probes:
- Did motivations seem to change throughout the trip? If so, how?
- Describe the main motivational tools used by the staff to help participants work on goals.

10. What do you think this group of staff has done best to facilitate transfer of learning in general?

11. If given the chance to lead this trip over again, what might you do differently?

12. Is there anything you want to add or wanted to say that you didn’t get a chance to say?

Staff Follow-Up Interviews

1. Do you remember the flow model we discussed during the focus group interview? [Provide a copy of the Flow Model handout that was previously reviewed during the focus group. Briefly review the concept.] Do you have any questions about the flow concept?

2. Based on your knowledge of the participants, what is your assessment of how they transferred what they learned from flow-like experiences?

Probe:
- What were the barriers to transfer of flow during the wilderness program?
- What were the barriers during follow-up?

3. Here are some of the thoughts you and your colleagues shared about the idea of personal control during the focus group. [Briefly summarize focus group definitions of personal control]. How do you think participants transferred what they learned about personal control?

Probe:
- What were the barriers to transfer of personal control during the wilderness phase?
- What were the barriers during follow-up?

4. What did the staff do best to facilitate the overall process of generalization and transfer of learning?

5. What do you think the team could have done better?

6. Is there anything you’d like to add?
A Model for the Flow Experience

Adapted from Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

Here are a couple of quotations that describe a certain kind of positive feeling called *flow experience*. Please take a minute to read them.

“My mind isn’t wandering. I am not thinking of something else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don’t seem to hear anything. The world seems to be cut off from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems.”

“I am so involved in what I am doing, I don’t see myself as separate from what I am doing.”

This concept has been named “flow” because of its seamless nature. In theory, flow occurs when we feel a challenge is well-balanced with the skills we have for meeting that challenge. Take a look at the diagram above and picture where a hypothetical Adventure Challenge Experience participant, Suzie, (S=Suzie) may fall on the chart. At position S₁, Suzie’s skills are low. Yet challenge is equally matched, setting the stage for a positive experience. Position S₂ shows Suzie where her skills have increased, but the challenge has not. At this point she is most likely bored. To get back into flow, Suzie needs more of a challenge (S₄). At position S₃, on the other hand, Suzie feels somewhat anxious because the activity is too challenging for her to be successful with her limited skills. In this case, by improving her skills, Suzie can begin to feel flow again (S₄).

When we are “in flow,” we tend to feel a sense that we know what we have to do to be successful (clear goals) and we know how we’re doing in meeting those goals (immediate feedback). We also tend to experience intense concentration and a sense of control in what we are doing. During the flow experience, time seems to pass differently than normal (faster or slower). Ultimately, flow tends to generate positive feelings, and the experience often feels self-affirming.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sydney L. Sklar received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English/communications in 1993 from Albright College (Reading, Pennsylvania). In 1997, he received his Master of Science degree in recreation administration, with a specialization in outdoor therapeutic recreation, from Aurora University (Aurora, Illinois). He received his Doctor of Philosophy degree in health and human performance, with a specialization in therapeutic recreation and a minor in rehabilitation counseling, in May 2005 from the University of Florida (Gainesville, Florida). His research interests include youth development, adventure education, community-based therapeutic recreation, and the social psychology of leisure.