Youth Experiences in Evaluating the Canadian SNAP® Boys Youth Leadership Program

Karen M. Sewell[1] · Kaitlin Fredericks[2] · Abdi Mohamud[3] · Jonathan Kallis[3] · Leena K. Augimeri[3]

Abstract

For children and their families who have experienced success in middle years mental health interventions, adolescence represents a developmental period when additional challenges can emerge and potentially threaten positive gains. For youth who have a history of disruptive behaviors, addressing risks and balancing interventions with a focus on skill development, leadership, and resiliency can serve to support these youth in reaching their potential. This paper will present the development of the Canadian SNAP-Boys Youth Leadership Services, a continuing-care component for youth who have had previous involvement in children's mental health services, designed to enhance protective factors or developmental assets. This exploratory qualitative study was conducted in 2017 and examined 12 youths' perspectives on what they have gained from participation in the program, and why they consider this program to be of value. We used thematic analysis to analyse interview transcripts. We identified themes of motivation, "second home", and personal growth. What youth value and their investment in the program can be linked to key positive youth development components of a skills focus, explicit leadership and employment opportunities, program structure, supportive relationships and a sense that they matter. Implications for practice, research, and policy are shared.

Keywords Youth · Leadership · Continuing-care · Qualitative · Perspectives · Positive youth development · Stop now and plan (SNAP)

It is in the teenage years that many mental illness concerns emerge (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, Jin, Merikangas, & Walters, 2005; Patel, Flisher, Hetrick, & McGorry, 2007), at a time when youth transition to high school, romantic and peer relationships become more important and intense, sexuality develops, and an exploration of substances often occurs (Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2015; Morris & Wagner, 2007). For some children and their families who have experienced success in middle years (i.e., 6–12 years of age) mental health interventions, adolescence represents a developmental period when additional challenges

can surface and potentially threaten positive gains (Child Development Institute [CDI], 2018). Certain risk factors that lead to childhood disruptive behaviors (e.g., caregiver continuity, abuse/neglect/trauma; Augimeri, Koegl, Webster, & Levene, 2001; Farrington, Gaffney, & Ttofi, 2017) can be static and often continue to exert influence in adolescence, compounding the challenges associated with this 'normally' difficult time (Assink, van der Put, Hoeve, de Vries, Stams, & Oort, 2015). For these youth who have a history of disruptive behaviors, addressing risks and balancing interventions with a focus on positive youth development and resiliency can serve to support these youth in reaching their potential (Sanders, Munford, Thimasarn-Anwar, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015). The SNAP Boys-Youth Leadership Services (SB-YLS) has been developed specifically for male youth aged 12–18 who completed SNAP (Stop Now And Plan) services for boys aged 6–11. This paper will present a description of the SB-YLS and an exploratory qualitative study examining 12 youths' perspectives on what they have gained from participation in the program, and why they consider this program to be of value.

✉ Karen M. Sewell
karen.sewell@mail.utoronto.ca

1 Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V4, Canada

2 Criminology and Social Justice, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ontario Tech University, Oshawa, ON, Canada

3 Child Development Institute, Toronto, ON, Canada

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This paper begins with a review of relevant literature regarding risks, resilience, effective elements of intervention programs, and positive youth development. The review of literature about risks and challenges provides context to the lives of youth under study and the challenges they may be experiencing. Effective intervention components for youth will be then presented as the foundation for the continuing-care component of the SNAP Boys evidence-supported intervention (ESI). Positive youth development perspectives provide a frame preceding an overview of the SNAP middle years clinical programs, and a description of SB-YLS. The methodology used to carry out this qualitative study is explained, followed by the findings and a discussion.

Balancing Risk, Promoting Resilience, and Shifting Toward Positive Youth Development

Within the literature, key research studies have identified common risk factors for "at-risk youth" (see for example Farrington, 2005; Felitti et al., 1998). It is important to recognize the main risk domains experienced by youth to understand their backgrounds and to provide context regarding these challenges for the subsequent discussion on programming for youth at risk. These main domains of risk include: individual characteristics (e.g., low emotional regulation, impulsivity) (Berzin, 2008; Farrington, 2005; Herrenkohl, Lee, & Hawkins, 2012); family conflict (Berzin, 2008; Farrington, 2005); problems at school or little educational attainment (Farrington, 2005; Herrenkohl et al., 2012); peers who engage in delinquent and/or deviant behaviors (Farrington, 2005; Gardner, Dishion, & Connell, 2008); and exposure to violence within communities or neighbourhoods (Chen, Voisin, & Jacobson, 2016; Luthar & Goldstein, 2004; Slattery & Meyers, 2014). As risks and vulnerabilities accumulate, youth are more likely to engage in delinquent or anti-social behaviors (Farrington, 2005) or experience negative outcomes such as mental health issues, substance abuse issues, and/or risky sexual behaviour (Assink et al., 2015; Farrington et al., 2017; Felitti et al., 1998). As a result, community-based intervention programs have been created to service youth at-risk of engaging in disruptive behaviors and justice system contact, which focus on targeting risks, resilience, and protective factors (Loeber & Farrington, 2000). In utilizing a positive youth development approach, building protective factors as they are referred to in the prevention literature (e.g., prosocial involvement, strong attachment and support; Viljoen, Bhanwer, Shaffer, & Douglas, 2018), can be aligned with supports and opportunities for positive growth within these programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). The focus of this paper will be on highlighting strengths-based programing within a positive youth development orientation that incorporates a continuity of care model to support youth considered "at risk", and taking into consideration the skills and capacities of youth, and the contributions they make to the program and their community.

Components of Effective Interventions and Positive Youth Development

Effective intervention programs for youth at risk of involvement with the youth justice system employ therapeutic approaches in addressing and mitigating risks for future problematic behaviors. These components include: developing social skills, enhancing family relationships, restructuring cognitions and antisocial attitudes while enhancing prosocial orientations, advocating on the behalf of youth, and providing solid case management (Baglivio, Jackowski, Greenwald, & Howell, 2014; Baglivio, Wolff, Piquero, Howell, & Greenwald, 2016; Borum & Verhaagen, 2006; Carter, Blood, & Campbell, 2001; Howell & Lipsey, 2012; Baglivio et al., 2014,2016). While the risks associated with youth can be mitigated by involvement in treatment interventions, not all treatments are equally effective, with research demonstrating that meaningful youth engagement is paramount to the success of any intervention targeting youth (Zinck et al., 2013). Acknowledging various definitions of youth engagement in the literature, we have utilized that of Dunne et al. (2017), which specifies enrolment, attendance, and a positive attitude towards the intervention; a focus which can support positive youth development and positive mental health outcomes.

While the noted components of effective interventions for reducing risk and preventing problematic behaviors have been incorporated into the development of SB-YLS, staff have initiated a positive youth development approach to underpin the program. This is an approach that stipulates youth are assets and should be given opportunities and support rather than being "problems" to manage (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). This involves encouraging personal agency, employing respectful approaches in working with youth, focusing on strengths in addition to risks and challenges which contributes to increased resilience and overall wellbeing (Sanders et al., 2015). The approach aligns with youth leadership literature recommending the provision of opportunities and learning experiences for leadership, high expectations of youth, development of goals, encouragement of teamwork and collaborative opportunities with peers, and establishment of relationships with mentors (Hindes, Thorne, Schwean, & McKeough, 2008).

In an effort to achieve positive youth development, creating a supportive environment where relationships can be developed and fostered is key (Almqvist & Lassinantti,

2018; Deutsch, Blyth, Kelley, Tolan, & Lerner, 2017; Jones & Deutsch, 2013; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Both adult–youth and youth–youth relationships are significant factors in positive youth development. Adult mentors and role models can act as a protective factor for youth who are facing challenges and adversity (Aronowitz, 2005; Jones & Perkins, 2006). Positive and supportive adult role models can contribute to increasing and promoting pro-social behavior, social, psychological, emotional, and positive development (e.g., positive self-esteem), as well as academic and career development (de Anda, 2001; Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2018). Mentor relationships developed within programing for youth can provide a safe context for exploring and addressing personal difficulties including mental health concerns (Garroway & Pistrang, 2010; Sanders et al., 2015). Thus, creating supportive environments through positive adult–youth relationships allows youth to be afforded a safe space and empowerment to improve their overall wellbeing (Deutsch, 2005; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2018). The sustainment of these relationships has been identified as fundamental (Deutsch et al., 2017; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016), and can also be connected to a continuity of care providing linkages and smooth transitions between different programs (Gonzales, Ang, Marinelli-Casey, Glik, Iguchi, & Rawson, 2009; Polgar, Cabassa, & Morrissey, 2016; Tait, Hulse, & Robertson, 2004). In their study, Ungar, Hadfield, and Ikeda (2018) found that for youth considered at "high risk", trust was enhanced through an experience of genuineness and humanity by workers who maintained continuity in their relationships. Additionally, positive youth–youth relationships can also add to positive youth development through attending community-based programs, as positive peer relationships allow youth to gain teamwork skills, social connectedness, and a sense of belonging they may not get in other environments (Dawes & Larson, 2011; Drolet, Arcand, Ducharme, & Leblanc, 2013; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2018; Salusky, Larson, Griffith, Wu, Raffaelli, Sugimura & Guzman, 2014). While concern has been raised regarding the potential for negative contagion (e.g., peer reinforcement, endorsing anti-social attitudes) as a result of providing group interventions to youth who have exhibited disruptive behaviors (Cecile & Born, 2009; Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Lee & Thompson, 2009), these effects can be moderated through adequate monitoring, effective leadership, and structure (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011).

It can be argued that there is a need to connect the importance of relationships between adult–youth and youth–youth to continuity of care in programming, as these relationships take time to develop (Fredricks, Naftzger, Smith, & Riley, 2017), and need to be sustained over a longer term for a more impactful effect on youth. Additionally, earlier literature has alluded to the need for continuity of care for high-risk adolescents, and state that programming should be continuous across development, or sustained once begun to ensure the continuity of improved behavior (Bogenschneider, 1996; Peterson, 1995). With this idea in mind, SB-YLS attempts to provide continuity of care for youth who have graduated from the SNAP Boys middle years clinical program and still need support navigating developmental tasks and challenges through adolescence.

SNAP Youth Leadership Services

SB-YLS is a youth-responsive intervention that was developed in response to requests for ongoing involvement with programming from youth and their families initially involved with the SNAP Boys program in Toronto, Canada. As such, an orientation to this middle years (6–11 years) clinical program will be beneficial in situating the youth participants in SB-YLS along with the family-focused intervention services they received prior to commencing their involvement with SB-YLS. As will be discussed, graduates of the SNAP middle years clinical program are able to participate in SB-YLS through a continued care model.

SNAP Middle Years Clinical Programs

The SNAP model was developed in response to a children's mental health and crime prevention service gap resulting from legislative changes in Canada in 1984 when the age of criminal responsibility was raised from 7 to 12 years of age. SNAP was developed by the Child Development Institute (CDI; formerly Earlscourt Child and Family Centre) in Toronto, Canada in 1985. In 1996, the original SNAP clinical model (formerly called the Under 12 Outreach Project, ORP) became gender-specific and included a continued care component with the introduction of the SNAP Boys and SNAP Girls clinical programs. These gender specific, trauma informed, cognitive-behavioral, multi-component model programs aim to reduce antisocial behaviors through family-focused interventions to enhance self-regulation through self-control, emotion regulation, and problem-solving skills. The key focus of SNAP is to help children learn to stop and think before they act and make better choices 'in the moment'. The programs provide intervention with children, their families, schools and communities (see Augimeri, Walsh, Levene, Sewell, & Rajca, 2014). The SNAP middle years clinical programs have a well-established research-base (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2018), which includes randomized controlled trials (RCTs; Augimeri, Farrington, Koegl, & Day, 2007; Burke & Loeber, 2015, 2016), cost–benefit analysis (Farrington & Koegl, 2015), and qualitative studies (e.g., Levene, Madsen, & Pepler, 2005; Lipman, Kenny, Brennan, O'Grady, &

Augimeri, 2011). The research base demonstrates positive results, including: increases in prosocial behavior, reductions in aggression and antisocial behavior, enhanced emotion regulation (Augimeri et al., 2007; Burke & Loeber, 2015, 2016), increases in self-control (Augimeri, Walsh, Donato, Blackman, & Piquero, 2018; Burke & Loeber, 2015) and social competency (Walsh, Pepler, & Levene, 2002), skill improvements in parent management (Pepler et al., 2010), and reductions in parental stress (Burke & Loeber, 2016).

In 1994, a small grant was provided which allowed for youth "graduates" of the SNAP Boys program to participate as leaders-in-training with the program's summer therapeutic SNAP day-camp (i.e., Camp Wimodausis located at CDI in Toronto, Canada). This was the beginning of youth leadership within the SNAP Boys program, and given the positive anecdotal accounts provided by participants, was a service component that was continually offered within program resources. Prompted by youth and parent contacts, program staff repeatedly raised the ongoing challenges associated with adolescence that these youth leadership participants faced throughout the school year, with staff advocating for additional resources to be able to better support these youth. In 2011, a philanthropic grant was obtained to enhance and expand the program to meet the needs of SNAP graduates through their adolescent years.

SB-YLS: A Continuing-Care Component of the SNAP Boys ESI

SB-YLS focuses on mitigating individual, family, peer/ social, and community risks (e.g., disruption in care, risky sexual behavior, school expulsion, abusive dating relationships, drug/alcohol experimentation, severe mental health issues, negative peer associations and gang involvement), and enhancing protective factors (e.g., social/recreational activities, school investment, developing life skills, and relationships with positive same sex adult role models) that are connected with interrupting the development of youth violence and enhancing positive youth development. SB-YLS focuses on building and exercising strengths and personal agency through creating a supportive, safe environment, building positive relationships with staff and peers, and encouraging social connectedness and a sense of belonging.

Service Components

The program is based on the SNAP service approach and principles first introduced to the youth and their families in the SNAP Boys program (see Augimeri et al., 2014). In addition, SB-YLS seeks to provide a strong focus on positive relationships, mentorship, and leadership. SB-YLS offers a range of service components based on an initial and ongoing assessment of youth and family motivation and need which inform treatment planning. *SNAP Youth Leadership Club* is a weekly, two-hour, gender-specific group which focuses on skill development and addressing challenges youth experience at home, school, and/or in the community. This ongoing voluntary program is facilitated by the SNAP Youth Leadership Coordinator, peer mentors, and other volunteers. The group size varies according to the number of youth being serviced. The focus is on providing a positive, safe, semi-structured therapeutic environment to support youth and involves preparation of a meal, engaging youth in activities of interest (e.g., sports, art, music), family-style dinners, therapeutic discussions, and mindfulness exercises. Within this setting, youth are able to practice SNAP skills, develop pro-social future-oriented plans and life skills, discuss challenges or issues (e.g., with mental health, relationships, school) and access caring adults with whom they can build strong relationships. In so doing, SB-YLS aims to provide a sense of continuity for these youth facing multiple challenges through adolescence.

The *Summer Leaders in Training (LIT) Program* is connected to Camp Wimodausis, a therapeutic SNAP day-camp for clients aged 6–11 located in Toronto, Canada. As LITs, the youth have opportunities to put their leadership skills into action by facilitating sports activities for campers, organizing special theme days, and mentoring younger campers. This is the first stage of the *Supportive Employment Continuum* and successful candidates often move on to various paid part-time opportunities as junior camp counsellors and peer mentors in the SNAP Boys groups. With an emphasis on providing a mechanism for positive citizenship through employment opportunities, youth are engaged in treatment and feel like they can make a difference, or "act to enhance their world" (Lerner, Lerner, von Eye, Bowers, & Lewin-Bizan, 2011, p. 1109). The social capital produced by this framework adds a profound element of reciprocity. Youth relate to the younger boys in the program and visa-versa, as they share an understanding of what it is like to face challenges and live with mental health issues. Youth who progress through the employment continuum and become staff in a variety of programs (e.g., SNAP Boys as peer mentors, SNAP Leadership Club as co-facilitators, and Intensive Community Home Services as relief staff) are valuable assets to CDI as they provide extra connection to engage children, instill hope for parents, and provide insight while receiving training and support in transitioning to paid employment. Youth within SB-YLS have also been consulted for their expertise and experiences, contributing a youth voice to program development across agency programs, contributing to academic conference presentations, as well as taking the lead on specific projects (e.g., a government funded documentary on cyberbullying).

Individual Support and Mentoring Youth are offered individualized support to foster SNAP skills and strategies

(e.g., social and leadership skills, coping ability, cognitive restructuring) through creative problem solving; working to improve relationships with adults and peers; reinforcing and enhancing SNAP skill, and working toward goal attainment. *Family Support* This component is family centered and implements the SNAP approach to address issues across settings and reach goals. Sessions aim to foster mutual understanding in families and implement strategies to help minimize conflict in the home, as well as enrich relationship capacity between the youth and his parent/caregiver. *Parent/Caregiver Support* Parents/caregivers explore family dynamics, risks, and needs that impact youth, and how to enhance parent–child interactions. Support is provided in adapting parenting styles, parenting skills, coping skills, limit settings and consequences for adolescents, as well as how to find additional community resources. *School Advocacy and Teacher Support* Resources and strategies are shared with teachers and schools, and advocacy occurs for the youth in receiving the best possible education to meet their individual behavioral/emotional and learning needs. *Crisis Support* This service is available to assist youth and parents/caregivers in dealing with challenging situations as they arise and/or referral to appropriate crisis services. *Victim Restitution* Youth are supported to "make things right" if they have wronged someone/something (e.g., vandalism), with a focus on enhancing empathy, repairing relationships, and understanding consequences. *Homework Club/Academic Tutoring* is also available. The program is currently delivered by one full-time staff member with direct service and coordination responsibilities, three part-time paid staff (two of whom have been involved with the supportive employment continuum within the program), one long-time volunteer, one PhD student (KF), and multiple volunteers, overseen by a social work manager. This team comprises members from different cultural, and age backgrounds.

The Current Study

In combination with their program goals, participants regularly complete quantitative self-report behavioral measures to direct an individualized program which typically includes the core Leadership Clubs, and summer LIT, along with a range of other service components based on risk and need. While these evaluation measures are reviewed regularly to enhance service and programing, the ability to use these measures to better understand change and why youth regularly participate in this program is a challenge given the cumulative impact of personal, external, and programmatic factors (Deutsch et al., 2017), combined with youth wanting to highlight strengths and therefore report in a socially desirable manner (Fredricks et al., 2017). Program staff initiated interest in exploring and understanding the experiences and

value of the program from the youths' perspective, including processes leading to engagement (Dawes, Pollack, & Garza Sada, 2017). For the purpose of gaining insight into what youth valued about the program, we examined the following research question: (1) What are the youth participants' perceptions of value related to SB-YLS?

Methods

Study Design

As noted by Wasserman, Postuvan, Herta, Iosue, Värnik, & Carli (2018), qualitative research can bring forth youth voices and surface what matters from their perspectives. As our research objectives are exploratory, we employed face-to-face interviews with a convenience sample of youth who were participating in SB-YLS during the summer of 2017, using a semi-structured interview guide. This method allows for responses to be provided in participants' own words, with opportunities to modify questions and/or wording for understanding if needed, as well as seeking additional clarity in responses (Singleton & Straits, 2010).

Recruitment and Participants

All of the youth who were actively participating in the summer LIT program component of the SB-YLS at the Child Development Institute in Toronto (N = 28), were approached during the summer of 2017 by one of the program staff to determine if they would be interested in participating in a voluntary study exploring youth perceptions of the SB-YLS. A meeting was set up with a different staff agency member without connections to the program, or relationships with program participants. This staff member described the study, explained the study was voluntary and separate from their participation in the program, and engaged in an informed consent discussion with the youths. Twelve youths, whose parents provided informed consent for their youth's participation in the interviews, agreed to participate in the study. In recognition of their time, these youths were offered a $5 Tim Horton's gift card.

Participants all identified as male and were involved with the SB-YLS program. At the time of the interviews, the participants ranged in age from 14 to 18, with a mean age of 15.75. Families identified the youths' racial and ethnical backgrounds upon initial involvement with the agency. Based on this administrative data, six participants (50%) were identified as White (i.e., Canadian-European, Caucasian), four youth (33.3%) as Black (i.e., Caribbean, Jamaican, Canadian-Jamaican), one youth (8%) as having multiple ethnicities, and one youth (8%) without ethnicity identified.

Procedures

The interviewer was a bachelor's level social worker employed in a different clinical service, who was trained with respect to informed consent, use of the semi-structured interview guide, and how to manage information shared. This staff member reviewed and obtained informed consent prior to beginning the interviews. Interviews were conducted following the 10-question semi-structured interview guide. This interview guide was developed through consulting the literature, and was reviewed by four graduates and peer mentors in the program to ensure understandability. The questions asked included: What does the SNAP Youth Leadership Program mean to you?; Why do you come to the program?; What do you like about the program?; What would you change about the program?; Do you think you have changed because of coming to the SNAP Youth Leadership Program?; Does the program support you in anyway?; What, if anything, have you learned since coming to the program?; Have your relationships with staff and other participants influenced you in any way?; Based on your experiences, what would you tell a new person thinking about joining the program?; Do you have any other thoughts about the program you would like to share? The interviews ranged in time from 10 and 20 min, averaging 15 min. These interviewers were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the qualitative interviews was analyzed using the steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, and (5) name and define themes. Additional methods to enhance rigor were followed, as guided by Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017), and Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig (2007). This study used an inductive approach to explore new ideas that surfaced from the analysis of data (see Creswell, 2003).

Step 1: Through the use of a qualitative analysis tool, NVivo, the interview transcripts (n = 12) were first read in their entirety by the two members of the researcher team to become familiar with the data (KS, KF). These two researchers are doctoral candidates who have prolonged engagement with the program. The primary researcher is completing a PhD in social work (KS). She was previously employed by CDI and involved in the development of the program. The second student is in criminology and social justice and has been volunteering with the program for familiarity as part of her educational process (KF). The research team met on multiple occasions to discuss data and engage in reflexivity discussions in order to identify and mitigate potential

bias, specifically in relation to program involvement and age being different from the youths in the study.

Step 2: These researchers both engaged in line by line coding, generating a list of preliminary codes inductively and potential definitions. After comparing for similarities and differences in provisional codes and definitions, the primary researcher built a code book with finalized codes and definitions to analyze the data. After each researcher coded all interview data using discrete thoughts as a unit of analysis, a coder comparison was used to ensure similar understandings. Following discussion and modification of codes, a second round of coding was conducted, and two transcripts were randomly selected for coder comparison. After this round of coding, the researchers were able to reach consensus on discordant codes and definitions of codes.

Step 3: The data was then thematically categorized, while also highlighting a hierarchy of concepts and potential relationships between themes. Step 4: A thematic coding chart was created to review the data to capture codes, descriptions, and quotations that represent and illustrate each larger theme within the data. Step 5: A brief summary exploring the potential story told within each theme was then connected to this coding chart. An audit trail was maintained throughout the phases of analysis, including raw data, memos that captured coding and thematic thoughts, reflexivity discussions, methodological decisions and the research process in order to enhance trustworthiness and increase dependability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Findings

All of the youths interviewed for the study (100%) spoke to valuing aspects of the SB-YLS program. In response to our research question, youth shared their perceptions of value which connected to three main themes: (1) motivation, (2) "second home", and (3) personal growth. Participants spoke of their motivation to attend the program and how important it was for them to choose and want to be involved with services. This motivation was connected to the subthemes of feeling engaged, their earlier positive experiences with the SNAP middle ages program as well as early experiences within SB-YLS, and the opportunities they felt they had access to as a result of being part of the program. The environment fostered within the program was referred to by multiple participants as, "a second home," and their "family", with the name of this theme presenting the sense of community they reported. Contributing to this "second home", were the subthemes of experiencing a positive environment, staff and peer support, as well as being a place they enjoyed being because they had fun. It was this environment which they reported allowed them to grow and develop. They spoke about building both leadership and life skills,

as well as nurturing personal attributes within the program. We now present our themes, including discrepant findings. These findings reflect depth and nuance of the responses, rather than coverage and quantity of similar answers.

Motivation

The first major theme that arose from the data connected to what the youths valued in regard to motivation. They relayed positive associations with the program, which impacted their motivation for joining and attending the SB-YLS program. These associations were related to engagement, earlier connections, and opportunities. The youths discussed several initial reasons for joining the program, but also shared that for many, their motivation for attending the program changed once they began participating and engaging in SB-YLS. Reasons for initial motivation to join and attend the SB-YLS included those on a personal level, such as wanting to become leaders and try working with kids. Other reasons for joining were related to positive associations and past experiences of participation and connection in the SNAP Boys program when they were younger or being a camper in the summer at Camp Wimodausis. For example, one youth stated, "Yeah, initially, [I] remember this program that it was good for me when I was young" (Participant 10). Another stated, "I used to be a camper at the camp, and from when I was a camper, I wanted to join the leadership program once I was older enough…" (Participant 06). As both of these youth had positive experiences within SNAP programming in the past, they were inspired to continue programming.

Some youths stated that they joined the program because they had nothing better to do, wanted to stay out of trouble, and that the program sounded cool. However, engaging in the program became exciting for them, as one youth shared, "during the year I have boring weeks, but now I come to [CDI] during the week I feel I'm like literally excited, I'm excited to come here" (Participant 12). A few of the youths also spoke about their parents telling them to come. However, for this youth, like others, his motivation for attending the program changed through engagement and participation, "well at first I actually didn't want to, my parents they put me in the program, and then that's how I got in, but then I eventually started to like it …" (Participant 04). Regardless of initial motivation, the youths kept attending the program because they genuinely found value and enjoyed participating in the program, as one participant explained, "I wanted to join because I wanted to work with kids… it's just good. Just keep coming back… is better than I thought it was gonna be" (Participant 09).

Additionally, several youths discussed joining and engaging in SB-YLS as they were able to access opportunities. This involved obtaining employment and working with others, completing volunteer hours, and gaining experience that

they can use for future and other jobs. To illustrate, one youth thoughtfully stated, "it gives us a chance to experience like umm, volunteer work, actually get like, we can put this maybe on our resume if we're going to get a job soon" (Participant 10). Similarly, another youth expressed that he can "use this experience to help myself in the future" (Participant 07). Therefore, these youth were able to see the personal advantages towards their future from attending the program.

While participants shared their thoughts on what motivated their attendance and engagement, a couple of the youth also provided ideas to change or enhance the program: that some new activities would be welcomed in the group, as well as additional sports equipment. Interestingly, most of the youth indicated they would not change the program, as they appreciated it the way it was.

Engagement and participation in the program allowed the youth to see the benefit in attending SB-YLS, even if they initially joined the program for a reason beyond personal development or interest. Arguably, these findings under the theme of positive experiences and motivation, particularly their change in motivation for attending the program, can be linked to the subsequent larger themes of community and personal development. To elaborate, it is possible that the change in motivation for these youth was drawn from the community built within this program, leading to their enjoyment in the program, and further linked to their own development through participation in SB-YLS.

"Second Home"

Youths described the program as a "second home" with participants and staff being "family". As youth discussed a number of positive experiences, they focused on those derived from the environment, interactions and support from staff and other youth, as well as enjoyment and fun, which can be attributed to a sense of community present within the SB-YLS. Most predominantly, the youth discussed the welcoming, positive environment promoted in the program at all times.

As part of this environment, youths stated that they felt they were in a safe, comfortable, generally welcoming place. One youth shared, "It's a good place to go. You feel welcome…" (Participant 08). Importantly, youth expressed that they were in a supportive environment, where they could also open up to others and be themselves. They felt comfortable talking about problems or any issues that they are having. For example, one participant of the SB-YLS stated that they could, "…talk about any like problems, or things that like happened during the week outside of the program, and I think it's awesome that people are willing to share that information" (Participant 07). Similarly, another youth explained that SB-YLS is, "Just a place where I come to

like uhh, talk about, like if I had a problem or something I'd talk about them, a place where I could be open about myself" (Participant 05). The environment established in the program allowed youth to feel comfortable within the group, fostering the ability to further reap the benefits of communicating and engaging with other youth, strengthening the sense of community among one another. Not only did the youths feel connected to each other, but they also noted feeling impacted by the positive, supportive nature of the staff.

Based on responses from youth, it seems that the staff facilitators of the SB-YLS were able to influence the youths in various ways. As mentioned, the youths expressed that the staff were always positive and supportive. In having a staff member that they could connect with, one youth reported, "It was like I had somebody, an extra person to talk to, I felt very comfortable" (Participant 12). Another youth shared, "Well I know that whenever I come here, if I need to talk to someone, there's always someone who will listen. Everyone's so supportive, ummm they're really encouraging" (Participant 06). The quotes from these youth speak to trust which has been developed, and that they can rely on staff to support them when needed. The youths further explained that staff consistently acted as role models to them and helped them discover things about themselves, with one youth noting that "They helped me find things in myself that I didn't know were there…and they showed me and taught me how to embrace it…like courage" (Participant 07). One youth described the role modeling in stating, "sometimes the staff, like, they basically like set a good example for us" (Participant 08). As such, the modeling and treatment by, and supportive nature of, the staff in the SB-YLS contributed to the sense of community that is found within the program.

In a more general sense, feeling connected to both staff and youth, one participant explained,

I feel supported because I know that other people are here to help me with, if I have any problems at home or at school, and that and just knowing that they're here is all I need to, is all I need to keep coming back here. (Participant 07).

While a few youths indicated that staff and/or peers have not impacted who they are, they shared sentiments related to developing meaningful relationships. For example, one participant stated when asked what keeps him coming back to the program he shared, "It's fun, the people I guess… the staff, the kids, everything" (Participant 03). In conjunction with the welcoming, supportive nature of the program found within the environment and through connections with staff and other youth, several LIT members expressed having fun and enjoying the program, which could also add to the sense of community.

In terms of the LIT portion of the program being fun, several of the youth conveyed that the various activities like sing songs, sports, cooking, and swimming made the program fun and enjoyable. These activities contributed to the sense of enjoyment and community building in the program, as demonstrated by one youth, "It's really nice, like it helps me get out of my house, [use] less technology, more people to have nice conversations with, more people to interact with and have fun with, and you know it gives me a nice time for the day, especially for the summer" (Participant 12). As explained by this youth, the community within the SB-YLS affords youth the ability to interact with one another in a positive way. Youths also spoke to how they were accepted within the program, as there was not an expectation that they would never have issues, as noted by one youth, "If we do something wrong, then like we'll get in trouble for it, but like if we come clean and like tell everything then we won't like get in as much trouble" (Participant 02). They also shared a sense of safety, "Some places where I live, there's not much to do, or it's not that safe basically, so it's better to be here" (Participant, 10).

Ultimately, the youths discussed feeling like they are among friends and that they are part of a family. One youth described,

We just hang out. We're basically like a family. So, we umm, we do everything, we play video games, or we do some art stuff, and we go on trips, and umm, and we like make food and stuff, we eat together… (Participant 08).

Presumably for this youth, the fact that they were able to do everything together contributed to the sense of community within the SB-YLS. Another youth shared how the staff member was available and connected regularly, "he just checks up on me, makes sure I'm good and stuff, and he checks up on my mom too." (Participant 03). Another spoke about the positive impact of the staff member and the continuity in their relationship, "Cause he's been there since I was starting out … and he's still there … he's always encouraging" (Participant 06). Similarly, another youth shared that the youth leadership worker created a family like environment, where guys who are facing struggles or challenges can come and feel supported,

Well like, most of the guys here, I think they're from like, uhh not so great of places, so like, some of them like, have uhh, maybe anger management issues, or something else, and like here we can help umm just make them feel like, well what [youth leadership services worker] said was, he wants people to feel like this is a second home, and basically that's what they do. (Participant 10).

Therefore, the environment, support, and various daily activities enable the youth to be engaged and enjoy the program, and more importantly, develop a feeling of community

and connection with each other. Facilitated by and within this environment, youth illustrated a number of skills and forms of development through attending and engaging in the SB-YLS. These findings are captured in the subsequent theme, personal growth.

Personal Growth

Through participation in the SB-YLS, youth described personal growth and acquiring a diverse set of skills and traits that they gained for their own development. Youths who spoke about building leadership skills within the program touched on their increased ability to cooperate with others and work as a team, learning to take initiative, and role modeling for younger program participants. One participant shared that being a leader to the younger campers meant, "…taking initiative and no matter what happens, just keep going like, no matter what life throws at you, you just have to keep on going" (Participant 06). Another shared, "Being a leader means that, like I feel like, if somebody needs help, then you can help them out for whatever problem they have" (Participant 08). Shifting their sense of self towards leadership and positive interactions was a benefit, as one youth shared, "Before I was just a kid that just hung around his friends, doing what they did. But now I take the lead in uh, most of the things in my life, and I'm proud for that." (Participant 07). Arguably, these youth see leadership as being reliable, resilient, taking initiative, and supporting those who need help, which they learned through their interactions and participation in the SB-YLS.

When discussing anger management, youths stated they were able to learn how to control their anger. They shared that they were able to develop numerous related skills for helping with self-control and anger management, including patience, deep breathing, walking away, and using their SNAP. For example, one youth shared a variety of self-control and anger management tools that he learned and uses,

> There's a lot of things I didn't know before, like deep breath, drinking water, and walking away and stuff, but now, after they taught me all those, I've been taking bad situations really easily. It's not really that hard for me anymore. (Participant 12).

This youth was able to use the tools he learned and developed in the SB-YLS to deal with hard situations in a more positive way.

Similarly, youths stated that through participation in the SB-YLS they were able to develop and strengthen their empathy skills through understanding the perspectives and needs of the younger children they are interacting with. To illustrate, one youth shared their experiences in helping, "[if] they're having a bad day like they're angry in a way you find ways to calm them down, you go over, get some water, help

them calm down, and keep them really happy" (Participant 12). Another youth articulated that,

> cuz like they can flip out sometimes you know, at the same time understanding that they're kids, so you have to think of what to do now, or are youth gonna show them attention cuz sometimes they just want attention, you have to think what you wanna do, so you just have to be patient with them. (Participant 09).

Both of these youth, like others, demonstrated gaining the ability to care for, support, and interact with younger children to meet their needs in an empathetic manner.

In terms of personality characteristics and traits, youths mentioned developing confidence, better time management, responsibility, and patience. For example, one youth stated, "…think I'm a bit more reliable than I used to be. And I know that I have to be very mature" (Participant 06). With recognition that he is in a leadership program and interacting with young kids that look up to him, this youth developed and became more responsible during his time in the program. Coupled with these developmental skills and characteristics, youths recognized that they were able to gain tangible skills by engaging in the SB-YLS, such as cooking and taking public transit. One participant attributed his ability to cook through participation in the program, "I like that we get to do different things, like cook and stuff, I learned to cook from here, to be honest" (Participant 03). Proudly, another youth explained, "SB-YLS is the reason that I've actually started, learned to use the TTC [Toronto Transit Commission, i.e., public transit], it's pretty cool" (Participant 10). Not only were youth able to develop their character and personal attributes, but also learned tangible skills they can use now and in their futures. Importantly, youths who stated that they could use the skills (developmental and tangible) and traits discussed applying the skills that they learned primarily at home and at school. Through motivation to attend and engage in the program, and being in a supportive, community-like environment, youth are able to grow and develop, gaining skills they value and that can assist in their overall well-being and self-worth.

Discussion

The voices of youth within our study who engage in SB-YLS provide insight into what these youths reported as valuable about the program and their participation within it, namely: motivation, "second home", and personal growth. It was through positive experiences, engagement, and available opportunities, that they felt motivated to participate in the program, a commitment they valued. The community experience within the program was reported to be a "second home" for participants, where they could experience a

positive environment, as well as develop supportive relationships with staff and peers. Their motivation coupled with the facilitative environment promoted skill development and personal growth, as reported by the youths. These themes provide tentative evidence to support the goals of the program related to youth-reported leadership and positive role modeling skills, enhanced emotion regulation, as well as increased sense of belonging and well-being, are resonating with the youth. In relation to our research question, what they value and their investment in the program can be linked to key positive youth development components of a skills focus, explicit leadership and employment opportunities, program structure, supportive relationships and a sense that they matter (Dawes et al., 2017). While not new concepts in the positive youth development literature with respect to after school programs, infusing these components into the development of continuing-care mental health intervention programs for youth who are considered to be "at-risk" supports a shift in youth self-perception away from being "clients" in need of services toward what can be considered a "positive identity" (Menon & Cheung, 2018) of being leaders who can achieve their own goals in life, and make a difference (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015). Both the opportunities the youths found and accessed through the program, and being able to reciprocally contribute to the program, were a big part of this shifting positive identity. Linked to greater overall well-being, supporting youth in obtaining and maintaining employment (Grosset, Frensch, Cameron, & Preyde, 2018) is one of the key goals of the program and a clear aspiration of the youths in SB-YLS. And while there are clear and high expectations of the youth (Hindes et al., 2008), as noted in the findings, there is an acceptance of youth and their challenging experiences that allows for struggles, missteps, learning, and growth all of which is supported by staff.

Related to continuity of care, it was the early experiences with the organization and the SNAP Boys program that introduced SB-YLS to some of the participants and their families, inspiring future involvement. Arguably, given the challenges and risks that persist throughout adolescence, continuity of care for these youth through community-based programming is an important element of intervention to aid in the success and positive development of these young people. As discussed by Dawes and Larson (2011), having a personal attachment to a program can facilitate engagement in a program, which can provide insight into why these youths continue to engage in SB-YLS. Of note, it is not necessary for youth to enter into interventions committed to the program objectives, rather engagement can be fostered if youth are encouraged to connect personal meaning to program activities (Dawes & Larson, 2011), which was referenced by some participants within the study. It was often program activities that contributed to the sense of enjoyment and

community building in the program, and can contribute to positive youth development (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016).

The theme of "second home" is in line with that of previous literature, in that through positive relationships between youth and staff, and other youth, these young people are able to foster a sense of social connectedness and belonging (Dawes & Larson, 2011; Drolet et al., 2013; Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2018; Ramey, Lawford, Rose-Krasnor, Freeman, & Lanctot, 2018; Salusky et al., 2014). This supports findings by Deutsch (2005) and Povilaitis and Tamminen (2018) that discuss the impact of positive relationships on creating a safe space for youth. The importance of program staff for youth and their relationships with the youths in this study, along with previous research cannot be overstated (Almqvist & Lassinantti, 2018; Ramey et al., 2018). As discussed by Aronowitz (2005) and Jones and Perkins (2006), adult mentors can serve as protective factors for youth, and it is evident that the youths in this study saw the value of the staff serving as mentors for their own development. As strongly stated by the youths in this study, staff are crucial in establishing program quality, leading to youth participation.

Participation in SB-YLS has supported progress for youth in their positive, social, and psychological development, all important outcomes of programming as discussed in the literature (Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2018). The youths in this study reported that they have not only gained skills related to SNAP—i.e., emotion regulation and problem-solving—but that they are able to generalize these skills to home and school environments. Furthermore, youths reported being able to gain tangible life skills, including cooking and taking public transportation. Youths were able to articulate a future-orientation and how participation in programming supported skill-development toward this vision. In doing so, youths in this study discussed the various leadership qualities that they gained from this program, such as role modeling, teamwork and taking initiative. These findings are in line with those outlined by Hindes et al., (2008), as personal skills, or Akiva and Petrokubi (2016) referenced a "first-hand learning" that can be gained by youth in leadership programs.

Limitations

As this study was initially conceived of as program quality assurance, ethics board approval was not sought. However, the purpose and potential for dissemination of findings was shared with participants and their parents who provided informed consent. Another limitation to note is that the interview guide was not piloted with program youths, it was reviewed for clarity and understandability by four SB-YLS graduates working in part-time positions within the program. Furthermore, this was a self-report study, allowing

youths to voice their opinions on the program. Although important for gaining youth voice on the effectiveness of community-based programming, issues of self-report in this study are further linked to social desirability bias, which can be heightened in work with young people when discussing sensitive topics. In an attempt to present themselves and the program in a positive way, there is a possibility of over-reporting good behavior and positive outcomes and skills developed (Camerini & Schulz, 2018). While participants did share certain aspects of the program they would like to see changed or enhanced, discrepant findings were limited as their reports of the program were predominately positive.

This study involved a convenience sample, which focused on a set of cases to learn about a larger phenomenon, rather than representation of a particular population (Luker, 2008). As a result of this, and due to the nature of qualitative research, this data has limits to generalizability, and acts more as an exploratory study of a community-based, continued care model program. However, as explained by Creswell (2003), the added value of qualitative research is the specificity that can be gained by studying a particular group within a certain context. Therefore, although these results are not generalizable to all programs that service and support at-risk youth, the findings are valuable for shedding light on the importance of continued care programs for personal development and growth, and to further highlight effective components as reported by youth who actually participate in these services.

Implications for Research, Policy and Practice

While the reduction of anti-social behaviors continues to be a goal of the program, the perspectives of the youths in our study speak to an enhanced view of effectiveness. Not only did this exploratory qualitative study allow youths to share the value they perceive associated with their involvement in SB-YLS, but also into how the program contributed to their personal growth, providing insight into constructs and areas for future research, including: program engagement, the creation of positive youth environments, the development of social-emotional and life skills, and employment, while ensuring practice is incorporated into evaluation research (Deutsch et al., 2017). In considering youth perspectives and how they connect to the objectives of the program, future research efforts are needed to establish effectiveness and success as defined by the youth.

Connected to study participants' view of the program as a "second home", continuity of care as a principle in supporting at-risk youth remains an under-studied topic in the literature and in practice. During an era of time-limited, research-based programs, articulating the value of establishing ongoing, supportive relationships in the context of continuing-care models of service for "at risk" youth is critical.

Establishing trusting relationships with this population takes both time, and the ability to engage in services that allow for more fluid boundaries to meet their needs (Ungar et al., 2018). Given what we know about the challenges for youth as they age and enter adolescence, it seems vital to have programs that provide a foundation of support for at-risk and/or high youth, and also continue to support these youths as their challenges and experiences change and intensify. This requires advocating not only for ongoing funding to provide these supports, but in supporting staff through program development, policies and procedures that can create conditions where youth see staff committed to their ongoing well-being.

Aligned with a positive-youth development approach, a scientist-practitioner framework guides the program. As such, the program coordinator (AM) now shares practice implications: As the full-time staff member working closely with the youths interviewed in this study, I am reassured to know that our efforts to be a constant positive force in their lives is resonating. One of the biggest challenges of running a youth program for males with a history of disruptive behavior problems is getting the youth to a point where they themselves want to participate, beyond an adult in their lives' expectations. Then it comes down to managing all of the potential risks, such as negative peer contagion and behavioral outbursts, all while keeping them engaged, interested, and connected. What these interviews make clear is that our success in being able to mitigate risks and draw youth to 'buy-in' to the program is rooted in continuity, tradition, culture, opportunity and community. These are important principles that are not always feasible in our current mental health and youth justice systems, but ones to which we should all strive.

In hearing the voices of the youth reflected in this study, there were important considerations for practice that stood out. Creating a safe welcoming environment includes having a youth-friendly dedicated space, kind, attentive staff, and very clear rules around safety and respect. The promotion of an ongoing connection to at least one adult in their lives is so critical. Developing and fostering healthy relationships between peers when appropriate is also important. Continuity of care is vital for these youth to navigate around the turbulence of adolescence. This is true for adult to youth relationships, but also for youth to youth. Seeking meaningful opportunities for youth is important, whether it is paid or volunteer—something youth are interested in and want to be a part of. This can include helping youth connect to opportunities outside of the program and work collaboratively with other stakeholders in the community. Being creative, flexible, and responsive to youths' needs and interests is required on an ongoing basis. There is benefit to organic learning that is practical and relatable for youth. This involves creating as many opportunities to provide feedback and input regarding

the program and how to improve it. Representation is also very important. It is an asset to have a team that reflects the youth served and goes a long way to fostering mentoring relationships.

In conclusion, our study highlights the voice of youth in articulating the value of participating in SB-YLS. Their perspectives support the creation of a continuing-care program where youth are viewed as assets, and the focus is on creating an environment with opportunities to contribute and a skill focus to support positive growth and development.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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