Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)

2005

Examining the factors that promote sustained engagement in young people

Marla C. Pender
Wilfrid Laurier University

Recommended Citation

Pender, Marla C., "Examining the factors that promote sustained engagement in young people" (2005). *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*. 776.
https://scholars.wlu.ca/etd/776

EXAMINING THE FACTORS THAT PROMOTE SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT IN

YOUNG PEOPLE

by

Marla C. Pender

B.A. Honours, University of Saskatchewan, 2002

THESIS

Submitted to the Department/Faculty of

Psychology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Master of Arts

Wilfrid Laurier University

2005

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

Abstract

Little research to date has explored the kinds of factors that promote sustained engagement in young people. In order to address this gap in the literature, 20 individuals who attended national youth conferences (the goal of which being to promote engagement above and beyond the conferences themselves) between one and 14 years earlier were interviewed about their experiences before, during, and after the conferences. Specifically, participants were asked to discuss their levels of involvement in their schools and communities after attending the conferences, as well as the factors that sustained or hindered their participation. Four emerging themes—the nature of the activities/tasks; feeling confident, empowered, and motivated for action; building knowledge, skills, and capacity; and being supported and having their contributions recognized—were particularly salient and were thus chosen to form the basis of a proposed model for sustained engagement. The importance of these four factors in promoting sustained engagement as well as the ways in which, when absent, these factors can inhibit sustained participation, are described. Whenever possible, insight into the critical components and/or processes of the conferences and/or the other community-based activities in which participants were involved that appeared to be particularly effective in cultivating these sustaining factors is provided. Finally, implications for practice are discussed and suggestions for future research are proposed.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank Mark for all of his help with this project.

You were always there to offer me support and encouragement and I truly appreciated

that you challenged me to be so independent (even though I probably didn't act like it at

the time!). Thank you for being there as I fumbled my way through this little endeavour!

And to thank you to Patti, Linda, and Stoney for all of your support and thoughtful

suggestions…I can safely say my thesis is better because you were all a part of it.

Charles: where would I be without you? There's no one else I would have rather

had "by my side" through all of this than you. Thank you so much for not even hesitating

to move across the country with me so that I could pursue my dreams—you made what

could have been a very difficult transition extremely enjoyable. And thanks for always

believing in me and being there for me when I needed you, despite the distance…I know

this has been hard, but the worst has passed…WE MADE IT!!

I'm also not sure where I would be without my family. Judy and Kelly, thank you

so much for always being so supportive. Ron, you're the editing master, what can I say?

The fact that you are all so interested in my life and my work really pushes me to put

everything I have into everything I do, so thank you for caring so much, it's made all the

difference to me.

I also need to thank "Master Miles Bowman" for always looking out for me and

for always doing everything in his power to help me overcome whatever it is I need to

overcome. It doesn't seem to matter what I'm dealing with, you always make me feel

better, and for that I am truly thankful. And to Michelle: I looked forward to your

distractions everyday. Thanks for making sitting in front of my laptop all night more

bearable. And I can't forget Lora, whose phone calls were always the perfect

break...thanks for working so hard to keep in touch. And to all my other friends from

back home who are too numerous to list, I can't express how grateful I am to have you all

in my life...I couldn't ask for a better support system or more caring friends!

To the girls from my year (you know who you are) and all the other amazing

people I've met here at Laurier, thank you so much for always being there. We've gone

through so much together and I consider myself extremely fortunate to have shared this

wild ride with so many amazing people. Special thanks goes out to Seema for, well, being

Seema, and to Jenn for dragging me away from my laptop every now and again. You'd

both better come back to the K-dub soon...it's just not the same without you! Extra

special thanks goes out to Rita Sharkey, the Graduate Program Assistant here at

Laurier...we grad students are so lucky to have someone as thoughtful, caring, organized,

and pleasant as you looking out for us...thank you so much for all the things, big and

small, that you do for us everyday.

I cannot forget to thank Vanessa for making all of those initial phone calls for

me...it was a big job, and I am so grateful that someone as dedicated, responsible, and

professional as you was willing to take it on.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the Students Commission alumni who

volunteered their time to participate in this research project. To those I had already met at

conferences, it was joy to reconnect with you. To those I met for the first time during the

interviews, it was a pleasure to learn about you and your experiences. This thesis would

not have been possible without your generosity and your willingness to share your

experiences with me—thank you, thank you, thank you!!

Preface

Youth engagement is very important to me because I suppose I feel it saved me. When I was younger I was an athlete; that was my identity. I started playing sports at a very young age and I tried many different sports over the years. I was good at a lot of different sports, but soccer was my favourite. When I first started to play soccer I had to play on a boys team because there was a lack of girl soccer players. Playing on a boys team always caused a lot of tension, probably because I was faster and more skilled than a lot of the boys on my team, and they did not appreciate that very much. When I was old enough to play on a girls team, I excelled even more. I had learned to play like a boy and I was fiercely competitive, which set me apart from a lot of the other girls in the league. The older I got the more I began to focus on soccer and, by the time I was in the ninth grade, I had cut pretty much all other sports out of my life.

One of the main reasons I think soccer was so important to me was because it made me feel good about myself. I was constantly being complimented on my abilities, I was sought after by many different teams in Saskatoon, I scored a lot of goals, and my coaches always loved me. I realize now that soccer was the one thing in my life that I felt really good about and it was the one thing in my life that I could give myself credit for being good at. I soon became a starter on the Saskatchewan Under 15 girls provincial soccer team and had found my calling: I was a soccer player and I was going to be a soccer player. I had decided that I was going to go to university in the United States on a full soccer scholarship and I was going to play soccer. My body, unfortunately, could not handle the intensity with which I played and in the tenth grade I started to have very serious knee problems. After three major knee injuries, one minor surgery, and one major

reconstructive operation all within one year I began to wonder if I was going to need a new life plan. I didn't spend too much time thinking about what that new life plan might be, however, because I was determined to beat my injury. When I took the field after the reconstructive surgery and a year of dedicated rehabilitation I realized that I had lost a lot of my speed, endurance, strength, and, most importantly, confidence. I knew I would never be a soccer player, although I was not ready to admit it at the time.

In grade twelve I joined the peer support group at my high school, which essentially changed my life. Through the peer support group I learned about the Saskatoon Action Circle on Youth Sexuality. The Action Circle is a group of community-serving professionals who are dedicated to promoting a holistic view of youth sexuality and who are also dedicated to youth empowerment. Through the Action Circle I was able to get a job coordinating a group of young people who created workshops aimed at teaching adults how to better work with young people. Things snowballed from there and I ended up getting involved in a variety of different committees, groups, and projects all with the goal of helping young people find their voice through becoming engaged. I even ended up working for the Students Commission (the organization I am focusing on for my thesis) in Montreal one summer doing outreach with young people and helping plan and facilitate conferences and roundtable discussions on issues relevant to young people.

When I returned to Saskatoon after living in Montreal I wanted to get even more involved in the youth engagement movement. I became involved with a multidisciplinary committee that focused on high school curriculum development and was soon hired as a researcher by the committee to examine the construct of youth engagement through a school-based youth facilitation-training project. This committee had a major impact on

my life for several reasons, one of which being that it provided me with my first experience conducting qualitative research. From this opportunity I became hooked on qualitative research and I became positive that, not only was this the kind of research I wanted to do, but also that working in the area of youth engagement was my passion. At this point I was hardly upset to no longer consider myself a soccer player (and in fact sometimes I even feel thankful for my injuries, for without them I doubt I would have found the time to pursue these opportunities).

It should be clear that I am very passionate about and dedicated to youth engagement because it has played such a major role in shaping who I am today and, as such, I realize that I carry many assumptions/biases with me. I believe that youth engagement is very positive (when done right) and that getting engaged/involved can make a significant difference in someone's life (both young people and adults alike). I believe that becoming engaged is a valuable experience for young people, regardless of their strengths and interests, and I believe that youth engagement programs can provide opportunities for all young people to find something they are good at and something they can excel at. I also believe that engaging programs are a great way for young people to empower themselves as they begin to stand up for themselves, find a voice, and figure out what they believe in and how to fight for it. I also believe that virtually all services offered to young people can function more efficiently and effectively if young people are involved along the way and I advocate for this and fight for it whenever I can. In sum, I believe in and identify with youth engagement; I am a person who lives and works by the youth engagement philosophy and who is willing to fight for the rights of young people.

I believe that it is important to not only share my personal story, but also to acknowledge my assumptions/biases, as my feelings about and relationship with youth engagement will undoubtedly affect my research in this area. It is my hope, however, that because was aware and open about my assumptions/biases that I was able to be as reflective and critical as possible during all aspects of this research project in order to keep these assumptions/biases that I carry in check as much as possible.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Introduction

Young people benefit significantly from becoming meaningfully involved in their schools, communities, and other places they learn, work, and play. As a result of becoming engaged they can, among other things, learn about themselves, form meaningful relationships with others and develop important social connections, experience a host of health benefits as well as a reduction in risk and problem behaviours, and derive personal satisfaction from making a difference and creating change at local, national, and international levels. It is important to note, however, that it is those youth who achieve *sustained* involvement who appear to benefit the most from their participation (Brown, Pancer, Henderson, & Ellis-Hale, in press). Given that sustained participation is so important, the goal of this thesis was to identify the kinds of factors that contribute to sustained involvement in young people by interviewing individuals who had participated in large-scale national youth engagement conferences between one and 14 years earlier. In elucidating some of the many factors that promote sustained involvement in young people I sought to ultimately be able to provide youth-serving professionals with pertinent information regarding what they can do to increase the likelihood that the young people they are working with remain engaged over time.

Youth engagement

There is no single agreed upon definition of the term engagement in the literature, nor is there a common term adopted by all researchers to describe the phenomenon of engagement. When scanning the literature, it becomes apparent that terms such as engagement, involvement, and participation are used almost interchangeably to denote the same thing. According to Nakamura (2001), vital engagement is an intense and

positive relationship between an individual and some sphere of the world. Individuals who are vitally engaged experience a "felt meaning" as they connect to or integrate with an aspect of the world that is meaningful and significant to them. Moreover, individuals become completely caught up in and experience an "enjoyed absorption" in the activity, so much so that they often lose track of time and feel that the activity is rewarding regardless of the outcome. Finally, vital engagement requires the development of a "sustained connection" to an aspect of the world that ultimately gives direction to a person's life.

In terms of youth engagement—the focus of the present research—the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (CEYE), a partnership of Canadian researchers and practitioners, uses a similar understanding of engagement to guide their work. According to the CEYE, engagement is defined as "the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity that has a focus outside him or herself. Full engagement consists of a behavioural component (such as spending time doing the activity), an affective component (for example, deriving pleasure from participating), and a cognitive component (for example, knowing about the activity)" (Pancer, Rose-Krasnor, & Loiselle, 2002, p. 49).

It should be clear from both Nakamura's description of vital engagement and the definition provided by the CEYE that engagement arises when young people are connected to an activity or endeavour and find it meaningful. That being said, young people can become engaged in almost any sphere of the world, including community-based organizations, ethnic or cultural groups, social action, religious movements, organized sports and extracurricular activities, and more (Centre of Excellence for Youth

Engagement, 2004; Mahoney, Schweder, & Stratting, 2002; Tashman, Wesit, Nabors, & Shafer, 1998). To assist in understanding this process, Pancer et al. (2002) developed a conceptual model of youth engagement (also see The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2003). This framework outlines the critical factors that are in effect at different points in the youth engagement process. These factors are appraised in the context of three separate but complementary levels, with the first level being focused on the "individual" aspect of the engagement process, the second level being focused on "social factors", and the third level focusing on the "systems" that are in place to support and enable the engagement process (see Figure 1).

According to the model, the presence of *initiating factors* is required to promote involvement in young people. For example, a young person may join an activity because the activity fits with his/her interests (individual-level factor) or because he/she is asked or encouraged to do so by an important individual in his/her life such as a friend, parent, teacher, or youth worker (social-level factor). At the systems-level, examples of initiating factors would include the presence of community initiatives, agencies and organizations that are committed to young people and provide venues for them to become involved.

Once engagement has been initiated, *sustaining factors* cause young people to remain involved over time. Young people may choose to stay involved in an activity because they enjoy positive experiences as a result of their involvement (individual-level factor) or feel highly supported by others involved in the activity (social-level factor). Young people may also choose to sustain their involvement when they are part of an environment that promotes youth engagement (a systems-level factor). Such environments are conducive to engagement because they adopt working philosophies and

structures that encourage and facilitate youth engagement, and also support adults who collaborate with youth and help to create and maintain engaging environments.

The presence of initiating and sustaining factors leads to prolonged *engagement* or *participation* in young people. As previously established, engagement/participation can take on many shapes and forms. An individual-level example of engagement is when a young person becomes involved in an endeavour, such as participating in a peer-helping program at his/her school, or volunteering for a community-based organization, on his/her own. An example of engagement/participation at the systems-level is when young people impact groups, agencies/organizations, or entire systems by collaborating with others. For instance, a youth-adult team may create a workshop for youth-serving professionals to help them to develop strategies and tactics to make their services and practices more youth-friendly.

While both initiating and sustaining factors can lead to engagement or participation, Pancer et al (2002) note that it is sustained engagement that leads to *engagement outcomes*. There has been much research to date that has focused on engagement outcomes, some of which will be described in the following section.

There have been other conceptual models developed to explain the volunteer process (see Pancer & Pratt, 1999; Snyder & Omoto, 1992); however, the conceptual framework developed by Pancer et al. (2002) is an important development in the area of youth engagement, for it is the first of its kind to formally describe the process of youth engagement. Consequently, this conceptual model provides the framework upon which the present study is based. However, because the literature exploring systems-level factors of engagement is sparse, the following literature review will describe and discuss

mostly individual- and social-level factors. I will begin with a brief literature review outlining some of the current research in the area of engagement outcomes. Next, I will examine the research on initiating factors, followed by an exploration of the factors that sustain engagement in young people. Furthermore, although not a part of the conceptual model proposed by Pancer et al. (2002), the barriers to youth engagement will be explored, as I believe it is important to gain an understanding, not only of the factors that promote and sustain engagement, but also the factors that hinder and prevent engagement as well. I will then briefly describe some of the critical processes and components of engaging activities and endeavours, with a focus on youth conferences as a context for engagement, as youth conferences are the focus of the present study. Finally, the objectives of the present study will be outlined.

Engagement outcomes

For the most part, engagement appears beneficial for young people, as it is associated with primarily positive outcomes for them. These outcomes can take many shapes and forms, such as opportunities for exploration and identity work, personal development, capacity building, developing peer relationships, self-fulfilment, and various positive health benefits. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of some highlights of the vast array of literature on the impact of engagement on young people and is not intended as an exhaustive discussion on the topic of engagement outcomes.

One of the major themes that arose from a study assessing growth experiences in engaged youth carried out by Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003), was that involved young people often partake in exploration and identity work as a result of their

involvement. Through focus group interviews with young people involved in community-based organizations, volunteer service, and a variety of school-based extra-curricular activities, Dworkin et al. (2003) found that involvement presented youth with ample opportunities to engage in personal exploration by trying out different roles, responsibilities, and activities. Through exploration, youth ultimately learned about their personal limits, as they were forced to learn to organize their schedules and manage their time. Participants also expressed that their involvement provided them with countless opportunities to gain self-knowledge, which consequently led them to engage in deep self-reflection. These findings are supported by other studies that have established that engagement provides young people with opportunities to conduct identity work (Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999), become increasingly self-aware (Pancer et al., 2002), learn something significant about themselves and discover aspects of themselves to appreciate (Primavera, 1999), and positively impact their sense of, not only who they are, but also their skills and abilities (Roker & Eden, 2002).

Through engagement young people are presented with opportunities to experience personal development and growth as well. Engaged youth have been found to gain respect for themselves and others (Finn & Checkoway, 1998), become more open-minded (Primavera, 1999), gain moral reasoning skills (Conrad & Hedin, 1982), develop an increased sense of duty (Conrad & Hedin, 1982), develop increased social responsibility (Checkoway, 1998; Hamilton & Fenzel, 1988), develop strong citizenship skills (Checkoway, 1998), and become interested in the community and learn to value community participation (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Finn & Checkoway, 1998). That young people stand to develop in such profound ways as a result of becoming involved may

explain why Primavera (1999) found that many youth reported feeling as though they had grown and improved as individuals as a result of their community involvement. Moreover, their involvement increased their feelings of competence, as they realized they were capable of contributing to society and making a difference, and ultimately came to view themselves as community resources.

In addition to personal development and growth, engagement also provides young people with opportunities to recognize the skills they possess, provides them a venue in which to share these skills with others (Finn & Checkoway, 1998), and fosters the development of new skills and abilities. The skills that young people develop as a result of becoming engaged can vary greatly depending upon the purpose of the activity they choose to become involved with. For example, Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, and Green (2003) interviewed young people who were involved in a community-based health promotion initiative. From their work in the community, participants developed a variety of skills and abilities to assist them in taking action and conducting advocacy work. These skills included learning how to create and set an agenda, make decisions, and express their issues and concerns. Young people involved in community-based youth initiatives reported gaining practical skills in evaluation, public speaking, budgeting, and community organizing (Finn & Checkoway, 1998). Other common competencies that young people build as a result of becoming engaged include learning about research processes, gaining experience in problem solving, improving their reading and writing skills, developing critical thinking skills, as well as other assorted practical and work-related skills (Checkoway, 1998; Matysik, 2000; Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1998).

As activities that promote engagement often require young people to work cooperatively in groups and teams, it is no surprise that engaged youth have increased opportunities to develop personal relationships and expand their social networks as a result of involvement (Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Roker et al., 1998). Dworkin et al. (2003) found that many young people credited their involvement in extracurricular activities and community service with providing them opportunities to meet people from outside of their original peer network. These relationships appear to become quite strong, as many young people reported developing intimacy with and feelings of loyalty to these new sets of peers. Furthermore, as a result of developing relationships with a more diverse group of young people, participants indicated feeling greater empathy for and understanding of their peers. Thus engagement is beneficial for young people, not only because it provides them with opportunities to expand their social networks, but also because it may provide them opportunities to increase their respect for, and understanding of, other individuals.

Another important outcome that merits discussion here is that engaged youth often report feeling as though they have made a difference and created change as a result of their participation (Finn & Checkoway, 1998). Youth involved in social actions groups have reported creating change in a variety of ways, including reducing street muggings in a local area; teaching individuals about sex, relationships, and racism through workshops; fighting for workers' rights in foreign countries; and more (Roker & Eden, 2002). Primavera (1999) studied young people who volunteered for a Head Start literacy program to improve the reading skills of children who also reported feeling as though they had made a difference as a result of their involvement. Many participants indicated

that they believed they were making a difference in the children's lives because they were well received by the children and developed meaningful relationships and personal connections with them. It should come as no surprise that young people who feel as though they are contributing positively at some ecological level derive personal satisfaction from their involvement in making the world a better place to live (Primavera, 1999). Thus, youth engagement appears to be beneficial, not only as a result of the positive impact young people can have locally, nationally, or internationally, but also because their involvement tends to also bring them personal satisfaction.

In addition to providing young people with opportunities to partake in exploration and identity work, experience personal growth and development, build capacity, expand their peer networks, and make a difference, there is ample evidence linking youth engagement to a host of positive health benefits as well. In a study examining the relationship between different types of involvement and various health outcomes, Barber, Eccles, and Stone (2001) examined longitudinal data collected from young people over an eight-year period, beginning when participants were in the tenth grade. Data was collected via self-administered questionnaires containing a variety of different measures, including a checklist measure of activity involvement and a measure of psychological adjustment. Barber et al. (2001) found that individuals who participated in prosocial activities, such as volunteer/community service and attending church, had increased self-esteem when compared to young people who participated in other types of activities. Involvement in prosocial activities in the tenth grade was found not only to be a predictor of increased self-esteem during the tenth grade, but also of increased self-esteem up to eight years later. Other research has also linked improved self-esteem to

volunteer/community service, adventure education, political action, and participatory community health promotion interventions (Cargo et al., 2003; Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Primavera, 1999).

Along with improved self-esteem, engagement has also been linked to academic success in young people. Allen, Philliber, Herrling, and Kupermine (1997) examined a Teen Outreach intervention program designed to "engage young people in a high level of structured, volunteer community service that is closely linked to classroom-based discussions of future life options, such as those surrounding future career and relationship decisions" (p. 730). Youth who participated in the Teen Outreach group failed fewer courses and were suspended from school less during the year of the program than their non-participating peers, even after the differences among students in the two groups were controlled for. Other studies have also demonstrated a relationship between involvement and academic success (e.g., Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, Ferrari, 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Jacobs & Chase, 1989; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). Moreover, engagement has been linked to decreased school drop out in young people, especially those at a higher risk of attrition (e.g., Bell, 1967; Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; McNeal Jr., 1995).

Another health benefit associated with youth participation is decreased substance use. A study conducted by Komro, Perry, Murray, Veblen-Mortenson, Williams, and Anstine (1996) assessed the effects of a peer-participation program in which young people planned alcohol-free social events for their peers. After spending one year planning the events, the youth planners had significantly lower rates of alcohol use and were significantly less likely to intend to use alcohol in the future than their non-planning

peers. Participating in planning appeared to have the greatest impact on students who reported using alcohol prior to becoming involved, as they reported significantly lower rates of alcohol use at the conclusion of the project than their uninvolved peers. Barber et al. (2001) and Eccles and Barber (1999) have also observed a relationship between engagement and reduced drug and alcohol use. It must be noted, however, that there are some instances where engagement does not appear to protect young people against substance use. For example, Barber et al. (2001) found that involvement in sports was linked to *increased* alcohol use among youth. Thus it appears that when it comes to substance use, not all types of involvement assert protective effects on youth.

Finally, in addition to the host of other positive outcomes described above, researchers have also noted a relationship between engagement and a reduction in risk and problem behaviours (Agnew & Peterson, 1989; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999; O'Donnell, Stueve, San Doval, Duran, Atnafou, Haber, et al. 1999; Youniss, et al., 1999). For example, Mahoney (2000) examined the relationship between participation in school extra-curricular activities and the development of antisocial patterns (e.g., criminal arrests). It was found that young people who were involved in school-based extra-curricular activities were less likely to be arrested on criminal charges as young adults than similar peers who were not engaged. These findings held true mostly for the youth who were at the highest risk of engaging in antisocial behaviours. Thus, these findings indicate that engagement during high school can have positive impacts on young people that last beyond graduation.

To summarize, young people can experience many potential benefits as a result of becoming meaningfully engaged in their schools, communities, and other places in which

they live and work. The current literature suggests that the positive outcomes young people experience as a result of becoming engaged can include, but are by no means limited to, learning about themselves and developing as people, building capacity, developing peer relationships, and feeling satisfied as a result of making a difference in other people's lives. Moreover, past research suggests that engaged youth can also experience various positive health benefits such as improved self-esteem, academic success, decreased substance use, and a reduction in risk and problem behaviours as a result of their involvement.

Initiating factors

Most individuals seem to be aware that engagement is associated with many positive outcomes, such as those described in the previous section. In fact, this desire to experience positive outcomes is a common reason many individuals are initially motivated to become involved (Horton Smith, 1994). Helping others appears to be a major motivating factor for individuals who become involved in programs that are focussed on helping. In a survey of volunteers of all ages—including youth under the age of 18—Anderson and Moore (1978) found that the majority of participants, regardless of age, indicated that their main motivation to volunteer was to help others. Moreover, the desire to help others appears to be a strong motivating factor for young people to become involved in activities that promote change, as young people involved in youth-driven evaluation research (Youth Impact, 2002) and community-based health promotion initiatives (Cargo et al., 2003) have also reported becoming involved due to a desire to help others.

Of course wanting to assist others is just one of many outcomes young people hope to experience by becoming involved in activities. In interviews with young people who were nominated by community agencies as outstanding and committed volunteers, Pancer and Pratt (1999) were able to shed some light on additional motivating factors for young people. Many young people indicated that a desire to improve their chances of gaining entry into university or being awarded scholarships were major motivating factors in their decision to become involved in the community. Other young people were motivated to volunteer because they saw it as an opportunity to experiment with different career options or because they felt the experience would make them more competitive candidates for employment. Naturally not all young people were motivated by opportunities to enhance their future success as scholars or workers, as some young people indicated that a desire to have fun was their main motivation to volunteer.

While hoping to experience some sort of personal enrichment as a result of becoming involved—be it helping others and making a difference, improving employment opportunities, or simply having fun—is a significant motivator for youth involvement in programmed activities, it is not the only reason youth report becoming engaged. Young people also become involved because of their personal, religious, and/or moral beliefs (Pancer & Pratt, 1999) and because they are interested in the purpose of the group/activity/organization (Eden & Roker, 2001). For instance, Eden and Roker (2001) found that many young people involved in social action groups such as peer education groups, community action groups, youth councils, support groups, and youth wings of national organizations became involved because of an interest in fighting for youth rights. That is, many young people admitted that they joined social action groups because they

felt frustrated that young people were rarely listened to and wanted to make their voices heard. Other youth participants reported that they wanted to influence decision making in order to assist children. Similarly, young people who joined a participatory community health promotion intervention reported doing so because they were unhappy with their inactive role in community and they were tired of being excluded and treated unfairly as result of their age (Cargo et al., 2003).

Another common initiating factor reported by young people is encouragement from another person. The encouragement typically comes from important individuals in their lives such as friends, family members, teachers, or youth workers (Roker & Eden, 2002; Pancer & Pratt, 1999). Other individuals report becoming involved because they were invited by someone from the agency or organization to volunteer (Pancer & Pratt, 1999). Sometimes, however, young people may become involved in certain activities because they have no other choice. For example, Anderson-Butcher et al. (2003) surveyed young people who attended Boys and Girls Clubs and found that many of young people surveyed indicated that the reason they went to the Club was that their parents made them.

However, it must be recognized that not all individuals require third parties to facilitate their engagement, as some individuals report becoming involved through their own initiative—because they want to help advance a specific cause or are intrigued by flyers or posters advertising an engagement opportunity (Roker & Eden, 2002). Other young people join groups, activities, or organizations out of an interest to find a project that fits with who they are and that aligns with their interests or because they are seeking somewhere to belong (Cargo et al., 2003). Furthermore, some young people are drawn to

activities because they are interested in expanding their horizons by trying something new and different (Cargo et al., 2003). Finally, Anderson and Moore (1978) found that young people under the age of 18 often indicate that they participate in community service as a means of occupying free time and keeping busy and Roker and Eden (2002) found that some young people reported becoming involved in social action groups out of boredom.

Sustaining factors

It should be clear that there are many factors that, when present, may initiate engagement in young people. However, initiating factors alone are not sufficient to keep young people involved over time. Another set of factors—sustaining factors—must also be present if young people are to achieve prolonged and vital engagement.

It appears that the influence of others can play a major role in promoting sustained involvement in young people. During interviews with dedicated, young volunteers, Pancer and Pratt (1999) discovered that almost all of the young people who participated in the study belonged to a family and/or social network that supported and modeled community involvement. That is, many of the dedicated volunteers had parents, family members, and/or friends who were also active in the community. Friends seem to be an especially important sustaining factor for young people, as Fredricks, Alfred-Liro, Hruda, Eccles, Patrick, and Ryan (2002) found that many young people stayed involved in extra-curricular activities, such as sports, instrumental music, singing, drama, dance, or art because their friends were also involved. Finally, some young people may stay involved in order to avoid disappointing their parents, coaches, and peers (Fredricks et al., 2002).

Another key sustaining factor for young people is that they achieve early successes and have ongoing positive experiences with the organization, activity, or group that they are involved with. Young people report staying involved because they are satisfied, not only with their work, but also their experiences in the community and because they feel appreciated for their contributions (Pancer & Pratt, 1999). Other positive reinforcing factors identified by young people include recognizing that they developed important relationships and meaningful friendships, along with a strong sense of belonging to the organization or group that they are involved with (Cargo et al., 2003; Pancer & Pratt, 1999). Moreover, young people often sustain engagement in community-based activities that they believe are enjoyable, meaningful, have a specific purpose, and are important, not only for themselves, but also the community (Cargo et al., 2003). Finally, experiencing concrete successes during projects and initiatives can motivate young people to stay involved over time (Cargo et al., 2003).

Young people who feel that they are good at what they do, be it sports teams, the arts, and the like, often achieve sustained engagement (Fredricks et al., 2002). Many young people report that participating in activities at which they excel boosts their confidence and makes them feel good about themselves. This can be an especially important sustaining factor for young people who do not excel in academics, as having the opportunity to succeed in extra-curricular activities can act as a powerful counterbalance to the negative aspects of their lives by allowing them to experience feelings of success in at least one aspect of their lives (Fredricks et al., 2002). This does not mean, however, that young people seek out less challenging activities simply so that they can excel at something. Instead, many young people note that they stay involved in

activities that prove to be adequately challenging; that is, activities that are not too easy, and not overly difficult (Fredricks et al., 2002).

Engagement barriers

The literature has identified many important factors that promote and sustain engagement in young people. However, some young people who join activities never achieve sustained engagement, and ultimately withdraw, while others never become involved in the first place. This section will explore the research literature surrounding the factors that prevent and hinder youth participation, or, in other words, the barriers to youth engagement. The goal of this discussion is to identify the factors that prevent some young people from initiating or achieving sustained and meaningful engagement.

For many young people, lack of time is the greatest barrier to involvement. There are several ways in which time constraints can prevent or hinder involvement. Young people may simply have too many other demands on their time to be able to partake in youth engagement initiatives (Cargo et al., 2003). It is not uncommon for young people to juggle the demands of school, their friends and family, and part-time employment, thus leaving little time for extra-curricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2002; Jacobs & Chase, 1989). Other young people simply join too many activities and become "over-engaged," ultimately stretching themselves too thin. Consequently, some young people are faced with so many demands on their time that they often cited stress as a negative aspect to participation in extra-curricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2002).

Lack of time can cause stress and may hinder engagement, but there are also many other stressful life circumstances and events that prevent youth from achieving sustained engagement. Young people who face major life transitions often have difficulty

staying involved. Cargo et al., (2003) found that moving was a barrier to participation for some young people, as they could not continue their involvement in the project from their new location. Personal problems can also prevent sustained engagement in young people (Cargo, et al., 2003; Matysik, 2000). This can be especially true for initiatives that aim to engage "out-of-the-mainstream" youth, such as street-involved youth. Harper and Carver (1999) describe a project where street-involved youth were involved in an HIV-related collaborative research project. While some of the young people were able to achieve sustained involvement in the project, many were not, as they faced stressful life events such as arrests, pregnancies, and homelessness. Thus, whether the project engages primarily high-risk youth or more mainstream youth, it should be clear that life circumstances and events pose possible barriers to engagement for all young people.

While young people's life circumstances can interfere with their ability to initiate or sustain engagement, there are other important barriers to be considered as well. Occasionally, a young person joins an activity only to discover that it is not a proper fit with who he or she is as a person. For example, Cargo et al. (2003) found that some young people withdrew from a participatory community health promotion intervention because they felt that the project did not align with their personal interests as they had originally hoped. Similarly, Fredricks et al. (2002) found that young people withdrew from extra-curricular activities because the values espoused by the activities did not mesh with their values and beliefs. Therefore, when young people perceive a mismatch between themselves and an activity, they are likely to cease to participate in that activity and search for something that is a better fit.

There are many potential barriers inherent within structured activities that prevent young people from becoming or staying involved. Despite the fact that peers are often cited as an important initiating and sustaining factor for young people (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Pancer & Pratt, 1999), group work with peers can be extremely frustrating and difficult for some young people (Matysik, 2000). In addition, young people occasionally join an activity or group only to find the climate unwelcoming and unsupportive (Cargo et al., 2003) or to find the activity insufficiently challenging (Fredricks et al., 2002). Finally, social stigma often plagues organized group activities. The stigma often stems from misconceptions that participating in structured, organized activities is boring, "uncool", and for the "goodie-goodies" (Cargo et al., 2003). Thus, there are many aspects of structured activities that may dissuade young people from participating, including the complications surrounding group work, the activity's climate, and the negative stereotypes associated with structured group activities.

Activities that require adults and young people to work in concert present a whole new set of potential barriers. Adults themselves can act as barriers to youth participation in several ways. Adults are often in positions of authority compared to young people, which allows them opportunities to act as 'gatekeepers' to involvement. Roker and Eden (2002) found that many youth involved in social action groups faced obstacles created by adults to impede their progress or hinder their involvement in certain domains, particularly research. It is sometimes the case that adults create barriers for young people because they are unwilling to share their power (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Lorens, 2001). Some adults set up barriers for young people because they possess negative attitudes towards them (Zeldin et al., 2001), and doubt that young people have the right or

possess the ability to be involved in spheres traditionally reserved for adults (for examples see Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2001; Fitzpatrick, Hastings, & Kintrea, 2000). Therefore, adults can create barriers for young people, whether by controlling access to engagement opportunities, refusing to share power, or by doubting the capabilities of young people.

Fitzpatrick et al. (2000) pinpoint another significant problem that plagues efforts to increase youth participation in spheres where youth are typically uninvolved (such as urban regeneration in this case). "So far, the process of urban regeneration has been one of assimilation whereby only the young people have been expected to change, rather than one of insertion whereby the community and regeneration process itself has also adapted to 'let in' a new set of people. This has to change if young people are to be given a proper stake in regeneration" (p. 504). This is not only an issue for urban regeneration; any sphere or endeavour, large or small, must adapt in order for young people—or any other stakeholders for that matter—to become meaningfully involved. On committees and boards, for example, young people are often brought to the table with little preparation or training and are expected to keep up with heavy paperwork, understand jargon and technical language, and attend meetings during regular school hours at locations that are difficult to access (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Zeldin et al., 2001). A failure to account for the unique needs of young people and modify these and many other "unfriendly" practices can make it difficult for young people to participate. Accordingly, involving young people in spheres typically reserved for adults requires compromises on the part of all parties involved. Adults who expect young people to assimilate to "adult practices" risk creating barriers that prevent youth participation.

The final barrier to youth participation that will be discussed is a lack of supporting networks for young people. A support network facilitates youth engagement in several ways. First, engagement involves braving uncharted territory for many young people, especially when it comes to getting involved in domains that are typically reserved for adults. Because "adult turf" is so unfamiliar and can be intimidating, young people face many obstacles to involvement, such as a fear of facing the unknown or of taking risks (Matysik, 2000), lacking the confidence, background knowledge, or training to participate alongside experienced adults (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Zeldin et al., 2001), or being sceptical that they can make a difference or have an impact (Zeldin et al., 2001). Second, simply adding youth members to a committee or board is usually not sufficient to foster meaningful youth participation (Zeldin et al., 2001). Without dedicated support to ensure that young people are given the chance to experience success and to contribute significantly to the process, youth involvement often becomes merely symbolic (Zeldin et al., 2001). It must be noted, however, that many barriers are unintentional. For example, expecting young people to assimilate to "adult ways", not accounting for young people's unique needs, and not providing adequate support are not always the result of adults' negative attitudes towards young people or their fear of relinquishing power. Rather, many adults are unfamiliar with strategies and techniques that they can employ in order to facilitate and sustain engagement in young people (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000). So while it is often unfair and inappropriate to blame adults, the result of intentionally and unintentionally created barriers remains the same: meaningful youth involvement is hindered. Thus, without support in overcoming internal or external barriers they may face, and in creating and maintaining an atmosphere conducive to meaningful youth

participation, young people may struggle to achieve full, meaningful, and sustained participation.

Youth conferences and engagement

As demonstrated in the literature reviewed thus far, engagement can occur in a variety of contexts. This may indicate that certain critical processes and/or components of programs/activities are necessary in order to foster engagement in young people, regardless of the type of activity/program, or the context in which it occurs. While there exists little research examining the critical processes and/or components of successful youth engagement programs, in a scan of 78 different organizations, youth-serving professionals indicated that key factors to engagement are the structure or nature of the program and its relationship with the community, that young people have control over the services/activities, and that young people develop skills, feel empowered, and have a voice as a result of their participation (Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2001).

It is clear from the literature that activities such as volunteer/community service, extra-curricular activities, participatory evaluation research, and social action groups are contexts in which engagement commonly occurs. Less conventional contexts such as youth conferences, however, have received little attention from researchers to date. Pancer et al. (2002) have conducted one of the only published studies examining youth conferences as a context for engagement. In their study, Pancer et al. (2002) examined the experiences of Canadian youth from diverse backgrounds and geographical locations who attended a national youth conference. Over the course of the conference, delegates discussed violence, discrimination, and education (topics that were chosen by young

22

people in an on-line poll) and developed strategies and programs to implement in their

home communities in order to create change. The conference provided young people with

opportunities for dialogue, not only with other youth, but also with government officials,

in hopes that the exchange would benefit young people and government decision makers

alike. Furthermore, an important goal of the conference was to create a supportive

environment for young people, not only by emphasizing respect, communication,

listening, and understanding, but also through small working groups led by experienced

youth facilitators.

In order to assess the impact of engagement, Pancer et al. (2002) examined the

themes that emerged from letters young people wrote to themselves describing their

experiences and their impressions of the conference. One common theme that emerged

from the letters was that young people experienced personal growth and learned a lot

about themselves as a result of attending the event. The theme of empowerment was also

present in the letters, as many young people indicated that they valued having

opportunities to make a difference, work towards solutions to problems and develop and

refine certain practical skills (e.g., public speaking). In addition, the letters indicated that

the conference increased many delegates' knowledge regarding the conference topics

(violence, discrimination, and education) and helped provide them with a better

understanding of some of the issues other young people face. Furthermore, many young

people wrote about having hope for the future, as they expressed a desire to attend future

youth conferences and reconnect with new friends, as well as a desire to implement the

projects they created at the conference in their home communities. Finally, young people

indicated having the opportunity to form social relations over the course of the

conference. This occurred, not only in terms of fun and friendship (i.e., youth enjoyed the conference and the opportunity to make new friends), but also in that many young people indicated benefiting from meeting people who shared their values and beliefs and/or from hearing opinions that differed from their own (although differing opinions created tension in some breakout teams).

Self-awareness and personal growth, empowerment, awareness raising, hope for the future, and social relations are "key ingredients for effective youth engagement processes and environments" (Pancer et al, 2002, p. 61). That these themes emerged from letters conference delegates wrote to themselves after attending a youth-driven conference suggests that these types of conferences are indeed environments where engagement can be fostered. Yet given that so little is understood about youth conferences, further investigation is still needed, particularly in terms of identifying the factors that promote, sustain, and prevent engagement in youth who attend conferences.

The present research

The current literature clearly delineates the kinds of factors that promote engagement in young people, the many benefits associated with youth engagement, as well as some of the factors that prevent or inhibit youth engagement. What is less clear, however, are the factors that promote sustained engagement in young people, as there exists only sparse literature in that area. It is important to understand these factors, as sustained engagement leads to engagement outcomes (Pancer et al., 2002). Thus, the main objective of the present study was to identify the factors that sustain or inhibit prolonged engagement in young people. In order to accomplish this, the present study examined the experiences of young people who attended conferences organized by one

particular youth organization, the Students Commission. The Students Commission (henceforth referred to as SC) is a charitable youth organization that was co-founded in 1991 by Tiny Giant Magazine, Optimist Clubs, and young people. Each year, the SC brings Canadian youth who would not normally have the opportunity to attend a national event to youth-driven conferences. Over the course of the conference, young people engage in discussions on critical issues that affect their lives and work to develop projects that can be implemented across Canada in order to address these issues. Each conference culminates with the creation of a national report that is distributed to government officials and various non-governmental organizations, thus allowing conference delegates an opportunity to influence Canadian social policy. At the conclusion of each conference, SC staff support delegates in implementing their projects in their home communities. More information on the SC can be found by visiting www.tgmag.ca.

These youth conferences were considered to be ideal venues through which to study the construct of sustained youth engagement for two main reasons. First, young people who have attended these kinds of youth conferences would likely be able to provide rich insight into the factors that promote and prevent sustained involvement in youth conferences specifically. This is important information to collect, not only because youth conferences are rarely explored venues for engagement, but also because they offer a relatively unique context for youth engagement, which may promote sustained engagement in unique ways and/or present a distinct set of barriers to participation before, during, and after the conference. Second, because one of the goals of SC conferences is to promote involvement above and beyond the conferences themselves by encouraging young people to create and implement interventions in their schools and

communities, past conference delegates would also likely be able to provide valuable information regarding the kinds of factors that sustain and inhibit engagement more generally, that is to say, in settings such as their schools and communities.

Methods

Ethical considerations

In order to ensure that all ethical considerations were properly addressed, the procedures and standards outlined in the Tri-council Policy Statement on "Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans" were followed at all times during the course of the present study. Specifically, to ensure that potential participants did not feel pressure from the researcher to participate in the present research, all potential study participants were initially contacted either by SC staff or by a research assistant from Wilfrid Laurier University and asked if they would be interested in learning more about my study (see Appendix A for the recruitment script). When individuals indicated that they were interested in learning more about my study, their contact information was passed on to me and I then contacted them to provide them with more information about the study (see Appendix B for the telephone interview script).

Before beginning telephone interviews I read a consent script over the telephone to participants (see Appendix B) and prior to beginning in-person interviews I provided participants with a consent form that I took them through orally (see Appendix C for consent form). Participants who were interviewed via telephone consented to participate verbally over the telephone, while participants who were interviewed in person consented to participate by signing a consent form. Once informed consent had been obtained from participants, I asked for their permission to tape record the interview and at the

conclusion of the interview I gave them the option of viewing the interview transcript once it had been transcribed.

In order to ensure confidentiality, I transcribed all of the tape-recorded interviews verbatim and no other individuals—with the exception of my thesis advisor—had access to the tapes or transcripts at any time, as they were stored in a secure location, either in my locked apartment or in Mark Pancer's research laboratory. Participants' names and/or any other identifying information were not included on the raw data (e.g., transcripts, tapes), as each participant was assigned a unique participant identification number. Moreover, confidentiality of the data will be ensured with respect to any products (reports, publications, tools, etc.) reporting the findings of the present study as the data will not be presented in any way that would allow the study participants to be identified.

Sampling strategy

The present study employed a purposeful sampling process in which "information-rich" cases were chosen in order to provide important information about the factors that promote and inhibit sustained involvement. Specifically, because SC conferences attract such a diversity of youth from across Canada and because time and resources allowed only a relatively small sample size, a maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was employed in the present study. Maximum variation sampling involves purposely selecting a sample of great diversity in order to capture as much relevant information as possible. Its strength is that it yields both "high-quality, detailed descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniquenesses, and...important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity" (Patton, 2002, p. 234).

In order to maximize variation in the present sample, I began by identifying four important criteria for constructing the sample (Patton, 2002). First, because SC conferences attract such a diversity of young people from coast to coast, it was deemed important to select individuals from a variety of provinces and territories, as well as rural and urban areas, to participate in the present study. Second, because both male and female youth attend the conferences, it was deemed important to ensure that both genders were represented in the present study. Third, because the SC has been holding conferences for over 14 years, and because the goal of the present study was to examine the factors that contribute to sustained involvement over time, it was deemed important to ensure that individuals who had attended a variety of SC conferences were selected to participate; specifically, those who had attended their first conference between the years 2002 and 2004, between the years 1997 and 2000, and between the years 1991 and 1995. Finally, because the goal of the present study was to examine the kinds of factors that promote and inhibit sustained involvement, it was deemed important to ensure that individuals with a range of involvement experiences were interviewed.

As the present study was focused on exploring the factors that promote ongoing involvement, it was deemed important to interview participants who had achieved relatively high levels of sustained involvement after attending SC conferences, as it was assumed that these individuals would be able to provide rich insight into the kinds of factors that helped to keep them involved. Consequently, the founders of the SC were approached to nominate ten individuals (one half of the sample) who fit within the study criteria in terms of location, year of first conference, and gender, and whom they considered to have achieved relatively high levels of sustained engagement after

attending the conferences (e.g., individuals who had attended multiple SC conferences, taken on leadership roles at conferences, worked/volunteered for the SC, become active in their home communities, etc.).

In order to select the other half of the sample, delegate names were retrieved from the SC conference database, where the names and phone numbers of all past delegates are stored. First, the names in the database were sorted based on the year of the conference they attended (i.e., the names of all individuals who attended SC conferences between the years 2002 and 2004 were grouped together, the names of all individuals who attended SC conferences between the years 1997 and 2000 were grouped together, and the names of all individuals who attended SC conferences between the years 1991 and 1995 were grouped together). Within each of these three groups, sub-groups were formed first based on location (as determined by area code) and then by gender. Ten of these sub-groups of potential study participants (e.g., females from North-Eastern Quebec who attended a conference between 1997 and 2000, males from Nova Scotia who attended a conference between 1991 and 1995, etc.) were then selected in light of the characteristics of the individuals already nominated by the founders of the SC so as to ensure the most heterogeneous sample possible. The names and contact information of all of the potential study participants in each of the ten chosen sub-groups were then given to a research assistant, who was instructed to contact individuals in each of the ten sub-groups until she found one individual from each sub-group who was interested in participating in the present study (e.g., the research assistant contacted individuals from Group 1 until she found one individual from that group who was willing to participate, at which time she began contacting individuals from Group 2 until she found one individual from that

29

particular group who was willing to participate, and so on for each group). When all of the individuals from a particular sub-group either declined to participate or could not be reached by telephone, a new sub-group of potential participants was selected (again, with every step taken to ensure the most heterogeneous sample possible) and the names and contact information of each potential participant within that sub-group were passed on to the research assistant so that she could contact them via telephone. This process continued until ten past SC conference delegates (each representing a different sub-group) had been found who agreed to participate in an interview regarding their experiences before, during, and after the SC conference(s) they attended.

Participants

Twenty individuals between the ages of 17 and 30 (mean age = 23.75) who had attended at least one SC conference since the year 1991 (henceforth known as "SC alumni" or "alumni") volunteered their time to participate in the present study. Alumni from nine different provinces and one territory were interviewed, the majority of whom were female (70%). Five alumni who had attended their first conference between the years 2002 and 2004, nine alumni who had attended their first conference between the years 1997 and 2000, and six alumni who had attended their first conference between the years 1991 and 1995 participated in the present study. A summary of alumni characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Students Commission youth conferences

The SC believes "that every youth has ideas that can make a difference if they are given the framework and the tools" (Tiny Giant/The Students Commission, 2005). One of the ways in which they strive to provide young people with the framework and the tools

Participant	Year of their first SC conference	Approx. age at first conference	Province/ territory at time of first conference	Number of SC conferences attended	Age at time of interview	Gender
1	1999	18	Southern Ontario	3+	23	F
2	1991	16	Ontario (GTA)	3+	30	F
3	1997	15	Manitoba	3+	23	M
4	1998	17	British Columbia	3+	23	F
5	1998	15	Newfoundland	3+	22	F
6	2002	15	Newfoundland (rural)	3+	17	F
7	2002	20	Alberta (rural)	3+	23	F
8	2002	17	Manitoba (rural)	2	19	F
9	2004	18	Saskatchewan (rural)	1	19	F
10	1999	20	Saskatchewan	2	26	F
11	1994	17	Nova Scotia	2	27	M
12	1992	17	Quebec	1	30	M
13	1992	16	New Brunswick (rural)	1	29	F
14	2000	16	Northwest Territories	2	21	F
15	1999	17	Nova Scotia	2	22	M
16	1999	20	Alberta	1	24	M
17	2002	17	British Columbia (rural)	2	20	F
18	1995	18	Northern Ontario	1	27	M
19	1993	16	Saskatchewan	1	28	F
20	1999	17	Quebec (rural)	2	22	F

Table 1: Summary of interview participant characteristics

to make a difference is by holding anywhere from one to four youth engagement conferences each year. The conferences focus on bringing Canadian youth between the ages of 14 and 18 who represent a variety of linguistic groups, ethnic backgrounds, family income levels and who have diverse interests and a variety of levels of academic achievement together to discuss issues that affect their lives. Through their conference program, the SC aims to provide young people with opportunities to express their thoughts, feelings, concerns, and opinions; have their voices heard; and develop the capacity and tools they need to take action and create positive change within their communities (Loiselle, 2002; Tiny Giant/The Students Commission, 2005).

SC conferences are developed for youth, by youth—who work in partnership with adult allies—and, as such, young people generally play significant roles in everything from planning the conference program to selecting the themes and topics they would like addressed at the events (e.g., the SC often polls young people in order to determine preferred conference themes and topics). Despite the fact that nearly every SC conference has a different theme or focuses on different issues (e.g., some of the many topics the alumni interviewed addressed at SC conferences were child poverty, the environment, education, and mental health), the majority of SC conferences share a common program structure which includes:

- *plenary sessions* where presenters (who are often young people) speak to the conference topic and engage in question and answer sessions with the audience;
- *breakout team discussions* where delegates have opportunities to share their personal experiences, ideas, problems, and suggestions for change regarding the

issues they have chosen to address with the members of their small working

group;

- *team production sessions* where delegates apply what they have learned at the

conferences by making tools, action plans for projects they can implement in their

communities after the conferences, and more; and

- *optional activities* that allow delegates time to network, participate in recreational

activities, and relax.

Another common feature of SC conferences is that they generally culminate with the

creation of a national report that is distributed, not only to government officials, but also

to certain non-governmental organizations, thus allowing delegates the opportunity to

influence Canadian social policy. Finally, at the conclusion of each conference, the SC

aims to support delegates in implementing the projects they developed at the conferences

in their home communities (Loiselle, 2002; Pancer et al, 2002; Tiny Giant/The Students

Commission, 2005).

Data Collection

The majority of the data was collected through standardized open-ended

telephone interviews; however, two alumni opted to be interviewed in person. Each

interview began with a series of background questions designed to gather relevant

information about participants regarding the Students Commission conference(s) they

attended. Participants were then taken through a series of questions developed to explore

1) how youth conferences produce engagement, 2) the factors that initiate engagement, 3)

how youth conferences affect young people, 4) the factors that contribute to sustained

involvement, 5) the factors that prevent or inhibit sustained engagement, and 6) how SC

conferences can be changed/improved in order to facilitate sustained engagement in young people at the conclusion of the conferences. The interview guide is presented in Appendix D. All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in order to facilitate data analysis.

Data analysis

In order to analyze the qualitative data gathered for the present study, I entered the interview transcripts into QSR Nvivo software for research in order to manage, sort and code the data. The process of data coding involved two steps. First, my thesis advisor and I began by coding one interview transcript together so that we were in agreement as to how to organize the data. After this joint coding session, I proceeded to code the rest of the interview transcripts and ultimately organized the data into eight categories: alumni pre-conference self-descriptions, initiating factors, conference key features, the immediate post-conference experience, conference outcomes, sustaining factors, factors that promote and inhibit involvement, and recommendations for improvement. Once I had organized the data into these categories, I then examined the data in each category line-by-line to identify and compare emerging themes and ideas. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, my thesis advisor reviewed all of the codes and selected alumni quotations as I began writing up the results of the study. When my advisor disagreed with how I had coded and/or organized the data we engaged in discussions regarding how to code/organize the data and the final decisions about coding were arrived at by consensus.

Results

The interview data have been organized according to the three distinct phases of conference participation: pre-conference, in-conference, and post-conference. The *pre-conference* section features a brief description of alumni before they attended their first conference and describes how they came to attend their first SC conference. Next, the *in-conference* section highlights and discusses the key features of SC conferences and explores alumni's experiences attending the events. Finally, the *post-conference* section describes alumni's experiences as they leave the events and move back into their communities, as well as the ways in which attending the conferences affected them. Moreover, as SC conferences aim to promote youth engagement, this section also highlights the factors that both sustain and prevent alumni involvement, not only in SC conferences, but in their schools, communities, and the other places they live and work as well. To conclude, recommendations on how SC conferences can be improved so as to promote sustained post-conference engagement in delegates and alumni are presented. In each section the prominent themes emerging from alumni interviews are reported and direct quotations are italicized.

Pre-conference

Alumni self-descriptions

In an attempt to gain the most comprehensive understanding possible of the ways in which alumni were affected by SC conferences, interview participants were asked to describe themselves prior to attending their first conference. The prominent themes that emerged from the alumni self-descriptions are summarized below.

Several alumni reported feeling negatively towards or frustrated with their home provinces and communities prior to attending their first conferences. One participant recalled having such a negative relationship with her home province that she was ashamed of her roots, while another participant recalled feeling frustrated that she was unable to connect with the other young people from her hometown because none of them shared her interest in social issues, politics, school, and so on:

I was so ashamed that I was from this part of the world. ... I hated [my home province]. At that point that I went to that conference I needed to get out of here. I was so disgusted with here...

...it was always so frustrating growing up when...you tried to get talking about politics or something and everyone would tell you just basically to shut up.

Several participants described themselves as being shy, quiet, timid, and/or introverted prior to participating in SC conferences. They described keeping to themselves, finding it difficult to speak out in front of others, and finding encounters with new people to be intimidating. Moreover, many characterized themselves as observers rather than active participants and described being so reserved that it held them back from becoming actively involved and/or taking on leadership roles:

...before I was...really shy. I wouldn't really talk to anybody.

...I'm extremely shy...not very talkative...not outgoing at all. ...more of an observer than...the one who's out there making the action and stuff...that's pretty much me back then.

Other alumni reported being extremely unsure of themselves before their first conference and doubting their skills and abilities, particularly in terms of taking action, participating in their communities, and implementing community-based projects and interventions:

> *...I was really unsure of myself too and I'd...ask some questions at that first conference and it was kind of weird getting up to that microphone [during a plenary session] and there was...that whole room of people and...I did it and it was freaky...*

Finally, some alumni felt they were more close-minded prior to attending their first conference because they had had little exposure to diversity up to that point in their lives:

> *I would say probably a lot more closed-minded...because...everybody [in my hometown] was the same as me. (laughing)*

The abovementioned themes are by no means a comprehensive list of the ways in which alumni described themselves prior to attending SC conferences. These themes were carefully selected so as to facilitate the comparison of alumni pre- and post-conference self-descriptions by highlighting some of the main areas in which alumni experienced growth and transformation as a result of attending SC conferences. To provide a glimpse of some of the other themes emerging from the data, the consolidated responses show that many alumni also considered themselves to be helpful, driven, happy, intelligent, and passionate about social issues prior to attending their first conference.

In addition to describing their personal characteristics, interview participants were also asked to discuss the kinds of activities they were involved in prior to attending their first conference. It was clear from their involvement descriptions that, although

interviewees varied greatly in their levels of involvement (with the majority falling

somewhere in the middle), some alumni were quite highly engaged and others were

minimally engaged prior to attending their first SC conference. That is, some reported

being so involved in their communities and schools, as well as in sports, the arts, etc.

prior to attending the conferences that they actually had very little free time:

Yeah, a bunch of different stuff. I was involved. I was never home, that's for sure.

Conversely, a small number of alumni described themselves as being very minimally

involved outside of school and work. One alumnus in particular described herself as

being involved in *"nothing"* despite belonging to a school club, which she admitted to

attending the meetings solely for the free lunch:

[Interviewer: ...(prior to the conference) you were just involved (in a

school club) a little bit, right?]

Yeah, I just went there for the pizza.

[Interviewer: So you wouldn't consider yourself to have been very

involved at all?]

No, I just went to eat. It's a good lure.

[Interviewer: ...what kinds of activities were you involved in before you

attended the conference?]

Nothing. ... Just school.

To summarize, many alumni were extremely shy and reserved and doubted

themselves as well as their skills and abilities prior to attending their first SC

conferences. Moreover, some alumni felt they were fairly closed-minded as a result of

having relatively limited experience with diversity prior to attending the conference, and

a few alumni had somewhat negative relationships with certain aspects of their communities and home provinces. With regards to engagement and community involvement, most interview participants were at least somewhat active in their schools and/or communities prior to the conferences; however a handful of interviewees fell on both extremes of the engagement continuum—some being highly involved in a variety of activities; others being minimally involved outside of school and work. As previously indicated, the abovementioned themes were carefully selected so as to facilitate the comparison of alumni pre- and post-conference self-descriptions (the latter being reported in the *conference outcomes* section) by providing a glimpse into some of the key areas in which alumni experienced growth and transformation as a result of attending SC conferences.

Initiating factors

Interview participants learned about SC conferences from a variety of sources— the majority learning about it through their schools. Some became involved in the conferences through courses they were taking; one through an applied broadcast journalism course where the instructor had arranged for several students to work in the media room at two conferences, and another through a co-op placement. Others first heard about the conferences and were encouraged to apply through school clubs that were closely related to the topics and themes being addressed at specific conferences. In addition, some discovered SC conferences by happening upon posters or bulletins advertising the events that had been put up around their schools.

Many participants reported learning about the conferences from important adults within their lives such as such teachers, guidance counsellors, principals, family

members, co-workers, etc. Alumni recalled that these adults encouraged them to apply because they believed the conference topics would be of interest, the conferences would be enriching experiences, the conferences provided good opportunities to travel and experience different parts of Canada, and/or because they felt the alumni possessed the skills or personality to make them an asset to the conference. In addition to learning about the conferences from important adults within their lives, several alumni also reported receiving information and encouragement to attend from their close friends and peers.

Participants recalled being motivated to apply for the conferences for a variety of reasons. Some were intrigued by the unique opportunities the conferences presented to experience something completely new and different from anything else they had ever been involved in:

> *I think that's what motivated me to go to the conference because...I wanted to experience something new...*

They recalled finding the idea of meeting youth from across the country, discussing important social issues, developing and refining certain skills and abilities, and increasing their knowledge base to benefit the members of their communities extremely appealing and exciting:

> *...I liked the idea of...getting together with other people from across the country...and working on social issues...I've always been interested in social issues and poverty and stuff like that. ...and I think in high school I was just always kind of seeking opportunities like that. ...I was from...a really small isolated area, so...I always thought it was a good opportunity to get out and meet other people and...work on stuff like that...*

The part that interested me, I think was that...the one [conference] I went to was

in Ottawa and there was kind of like a political...connection to it and I'd been a

page at the Ontario legislature and I was kind of interested in...politics...so I

think that's one reason why I wanted to go.

...I did a lot of peer mediation training in high school so I figured [the

conference] was another way to advance my...knowledge to help out the students

in my high school.

What is more, several interview participants reported finding the travel component of the

conferences extremely enticing, as they were interested in visiting exciting locations

across Canada:

...one day [the people in my school club] were talking about this conference in

Banff and I was like, 'Banff is cool I'm going to come...'

And it was a trip to Montreal. I'm not turning that down!

The majority of participants completed an application in order to attend the

conferences, and for some this included composing a brief essay outlining why they

wanted to attend the conferences and/or what they would say to the Prime Minister of

Canada if given the opportunity. Not all participants had to apply for every conference

they attended, however, as some reported being invited to subsequent conferences by SC

staff in order to assume leadership roles at the events.

Some were fortunate enough to attend conferences on an all expenses paid basis,

but the majority of interview participants reported having to raise funds in order to cover

the costs associated with travel, food, accommodations, registration, etc. Participants

raised funds in a variety of ways, with the majority seeking funding from sponsors, such as their student council; their community, city, or municipality; or local clubs, charities, and/or community-based organizations/services. Alumni also completed odd jobs for friends and family members and held car washes and bake sales within their communities in order to raise the funds. Such endeavours were usually successful; however, at least one alumnus struggled to raise funds and reported paying for the trip out of her own pocket. While many participants did not look back fondly on their experiences fundraising, one alumnus in particular believed it was an important part of the overall conference experience:

> *I did a lot of fundraising. I think that that was a big part of why I felt the way I did about the conference because I really felt as though I had gotten myself there. ...I look on fundraising now and I think what a pain...but at the time that experience of fundraising and getting myself there was very meaningful. I remember being so frustrated because I was getting such small increments at first. And then there was one group that gave me...500 dollars or something and I remember being so happy that I got that and that I had really sold myself and sold the opportunity. So I worked really hard...*

In sum, alumni learned about SC conferences through school courses and clubs, through posters and bulletins, as well as through important individuals within their lives such as teachers, family members, co-workers, and friends. The conferences appealed to alumni because they presented new and unique experiences, opportunities to meet youth from across the country and engage in issue-based discussions, and opportunities to travel and experience Canada. Most alumni had to apply for conferences—however, SC staff

invited some alumni to subsequent conferences—with the majority having to raise funds in order to offset the costs associated with the conferences.

Having summarized and described how alumni came to attend the conferences and also what they were like before they attended the events, the focus of the discussion will now shift to an examination of alumni's experiences as conference participants, as well as a description of the keys features of SC conferences.

In-conference

As several alumni pointed out during the interviews, it is difficult to do justice to intense experiences such as SC conferences using words alone. That being said however, this section is an attempt to do just that. The goal of the discussion presented below is both to describe the experience from the perspective of conference participants while at the same time communicating the "essence" of the events. It is hoped that this section will provide a deeper understanding of the SC conference experience, particularly for individuals who have never attended the events or been involved in the program. The discussion will begin with an examination of the conference key features that emerged from the alumni interviews and conclude with an examination of some additional themes that help to better describe and capture the range of experiences that alumni reported having at the events.

Conference key features

Several prominent dimensions—or key features—emerged from the data that, when taken together, seemed to truly capture the essence of SC conferences. These particular conference features were salient for a variety of reasons: they were the highlights; the most memorable moments; the most personally significant, relevant,

and/or impactful aspects of the conferences; the features that made SC conferences stand out from similar events or activities; and more. What follows is a summary of ten conference features that were identified by alumni as being central to the overall conference experience: getting away, meeting young Canadians, positive atmosphere, feeling a sense of belonging and comfort, celebrating diversity, valuing young people, role modeling, sharing, tackling issues, and focusing on action.

Getting away. Considering that the "trip" aspect of the conference was an initiating factor for some young people, it is not surprising that traveling was considered to be a key feature of SC conferences. Many alumni described the excitement they felt at the prospect of leaving home and exploring another part of the country, particularly those who had had limited experience traveling prior to attending the conferences:

So it was a really neat experience and getting to see a new city...

...I finally got to travel somewhere...

And I thought that it was a good vacation away from family too.

Not only was the act of leaving home and visiting a new part of the country an important experience in and of itself, traveling appeared to be important for another reason as well. Because the conference programs often encourage young people to critically examine their communities—among other things—the act of traveling to an often remote conference location effectively removed, and thus distanced, youth from their home communities. This was important in allowing them to gain perspective, as illustrated in the following passage:

...it's good to go away and get those skills 'cause you can't always get that perspective when you're at home. ...you kind of need to be a little bit removed from that to truly see what goes on...and get that perspective...

Thus, traveling was a key component of SC conferences, not only because it added an exciting dimension to the overall conference experience, but also because it helped delegates gain the necessary perspective to critically analyze their communities.

Meeting young Canadians. As the majority of SC conferences were large-scale events attended by hundreds of youth, it was hardly surprising that meeting other young Canadians was identified as an essential ingredient of the events:

...a huge part of it is the people you meet. ...and for myself it was always the major deal...there hasn't been many times in my life that I've gone somewhere for a week and left crying. And that was always the case at Students Commission [conferences].

...I remember the friends, the people that I met there...more so than some of the issues and the...statements that came out of it. I couldn't recall any of that. But I remember the people...

The characteristics of the conference delegates—specifically that they were open-minded, welcoming, and passionate—appeared to be significant in contributing to the overall conference experience, as exemplified in the following quotations:

Just the people. It was hard to describe it. ...everyone had the same mindset, I think everyone was prepared to be just open and be yourself. ...everyone was just so open-minded and accepting, it was a change from when you're in school, you know, you have the cool kids...there was none of that at all.

45

...it's great because we have...200 other youth that surround you so...you can

have your lonely moments but really you're never alone 'cause you can just...go

out and there's probably...groups of people around and stuff. And you can talk to

anyone and they're not going to be like, 'why are you talking to me?'

...just the fact that everybody including the facilitators and the people who were

attending the conference were just really passionate and outgoing and they were

into....displaying fun and informative information. And they were all really there

just to make a big difference...

Moreover, it is important to note that the conferences offered delegates opportunities to

connect with like-minded youth from across Canada as well as delegates with different

backgrounds, opinions, values, and beliefs:

...just meeting people and you stay up all night talking...you don't get much

sleep...and it's just incredible to meet all these different people whose values and

stuff are so much like yours. ...it's empowering but it's...kind of a boost to your

self-esteem almost...you're not alone and there are other people out there like you

and...it makes you feel really good about yourself...

...they made an effort to put...people together in groups that were...I don't know

if it was necessarily a conscious effort or if it just happened, but we were put in

groups with people from other regions of Canada and from a lot of different

cultural and historical backgrounds and so you spend so much time about these

people and you learn a lot that...you never would have learned from that sort of

perspective. ...you have to interact with these people and so...you learn more

about them and...rather than just reading it from a textbook from some biased

opinion you're learning it from them. And so something like that sure made a

difference.

It should be clear that the passion, open-mindedness, and welcoming nature of SC

delegates play large roles in making *meeting young Canadians* such a key component of

SC conferences. Moreover, these interactions made a lasting impression on alumni in part

because they received a positive *"boost"* from connecting with delegates who shared

their interests, views, and opinions. What is more, alumni valued that meeting other

young Canadians presented them with opportunities to learn new and different

perspectives from youth whose interests, views, opinions, and backgrounds differed

significantly from their own.

Celebrating diversity. As alluded to in interview excerpts featured in the

preceding *meeting young Canadians* category, many alumni recalled that conference

organizers made concerted efforts to ensure the attendance of young people from diverse

backgrounds at the conferences. Alumni appreciated that both official languages of

Canada were represented and accommodated as much as possible; and that youth from a

range of backgrounds, representing as many Canadian provinces and territories as

possible, attended the conferences. For many the experience of being at a national event

that embraced and celebrated bilingualism and multiculturalism was particularly

memorable as it was their first sustained exposure to an environment with such ambient

diversity:

I was exposed to a lot of things and it was very interesting and...there was so

many aspects. Being in a bilingual setting...just the appreciation for difference.

...being at that conference was really cool because I'd never been in a

multicultural environment, like, people from everywhere...

...I just remember that I'd met people from PEI, people from BC, and this was

really the first time in my life that I'd met all of these people from different places

across Canada.

It is clear from the above passages that the presence of diversity added an

interesting and exciting dimension to the conferences. That conferences promoted an

appreciation for and celebration of diversity was something that alumni—particularly

those who had limited experiences in bilingual or multicultural settings or who had never

attended a national event prior to attending the conferences—generally valued and

appreciated.

Positive atmosphere. The positive, fun, upbeat, and energetic atmosphere proved

to be another key part of the conference experience for alumni:

...it was just such a positive atmosphere with people actually willing to hear

you...

So there was definitely a buzz the whole time. And the delegates, the other people,

of course, I mean everybody there was kind of go getters and student leaders and

that kind of thing, everybody there had a lot of energy and that was really kind of

infectious.

It was clear from the alumni interviews that the SC conference environment was

one where delegates felt, not only empowered and heard, but also free to have fun and

enjoy themselves. It is therefore not surprising that so many of the alumni interviewed

came away with such fond memories of the conference atmosphere and that this positive atmosphere was singled out as part of the essence of SC youth conferences.

Feeling a sense of comfort and belonging. Many alumni described SC conferences as being very comfortable environments were they felt a sense of belonging and felt free to be themselves. This theme is captured in the following alumni quotations:

...it was probably the first time I felt comfortable in a very, very large group.

...when...you're home with your own friends or something...you kind of feel out of place sometimes. ...that feeling just like completely disappears when you're at these conferences where...not everybody knows someone there and...it'll be like people's first conference or it could be...their third...

Basically I felt I could belong to something. ...my opinion mattered and I felt...I was meeting people so I felt like I belonged basically...I could relate to a lot of young people and things like that.

...for me it might be a little different than a lot of people. I grew up with very strict parents who...it was always 'you come home every night' kind of thing and have this curfew and for me it was...just so liberating to be able to be with people who really trusted me and being able to stay up as late as I wanted to and hang out with people and...just getting to meet so many different people that I would have never met in [my hometown]. Just...a feeling of freedom almost where you, you feel free to be yourself...I know that growing up it was always like you have to be a certain way or you just didn't fit in, but I felt like I could really be myself and not worry about what everyone thought about me.

Thus, interacting with like-minded youth and being in a setting where they felt trusted and that their voices and opinions mattered helped contribute to making SC conferences such comfortable environments where alumni felt a sense of belonging and felt free to be themselves. It was clear from the interviews that the feelings of comfort and belonging that alumni experienced while attending the conferences helped to make the events stand out, as for many these were feelings they rarely experienced elsewhere.

Valuing young people. A salient theme emerging from the data was that the SC conferences were places where young people were truly valued. According to the alumni interviewed, SC conferences demonstrated they valued youth in the fundamental ways outlined below.

First, staff conveyed that they valued the young delegates by, not only meeting their needs and addressing their concerns, but also by treating them like *"adults"* and/or *"professionals."* This was a pleasant surprise for some alumni, as they had not expected to receive such treatment:

> *...at the second conference I didn't really expect them to take such good care of us, I guess I could say. ...I kind of expected to go there and just do our thing but ...they took really good care of us, they paid for our expenses and they made sure we were well taken care of and that our concerns were met and...showed that they really cared about and respected what we were there to do.*

> *'Cause you went there and I think you were taken very seriously from the time you arrive to the time you leave. ...you're treated as an adult...even when you're young. And you're respected for your opinion, you're respected and it helps you gain perspective...but more than anything it's empowering.*

Second, conference organizers and staff demonstrated that they valued delegates by allowing them to make decisions and have control over certain aspects of the conferences, as expressed in the following passage:

> ...they would kind of check in everyday and see how we were doing and make sure everything was going smoothly and if we had a problem they would seriously look into it and...take into consideration our perspectives on how things could be changed. ...for example on the set we didn't really like the way the set was set up for the commercials that we did and so all the students just said... 'this doesn't really look like a, appealing set for youth who are going to be watching the commercials' so they kind of let us take control over changing the set around a little bit and so...they actually respected what we had to say.

Third, SC staff communicated that they valued young people by providing them with opportunities to assume key roles during the conferences. Youth—particularly those who had already attended at least one SC conference—were involved in many different aspects of the events, such as planning, leading and facilitating breakout teams, working in the media room, presenting on panels, and more:

> ...you got to be involved in the conference and speak on panels and it was just so...interesting and empowering how you could be involved in it and adults were listening to you and it was just really interesting.

Finally, SC conference organizers demonstrated that they valued young people by making it clear that their voices, thoughts, and opinions truly mattered, something some youth had never before experienced:

...I had not been in an environment where youth or people...or ME, my opinion

was valued or appreciated or even wanted [before attending a SC conference]. I

had not been in that kind of environment and I thought that was like, wow!

This was achieved in two important ways. First, conferences were organized in such a

way that delegates were presented with many opportunities to speak and be heard. One

such opportunity occurred during team breakout sessions, where delegates engaged in

discussions with their peers. Another opportunity for delegates to speak and be heard was

during the "open mic" sessions at the conclusion of plenary session panel presentations.

During these sessions delegates were free to approach the microphone and speak their

minds, react to the plenary sessions, and/or challenge the panel of expert presenters

(which on some occasions were adults and on others were youth). That these sessions

provided young people with opportunities to express themselves and be heard is

illustrated in the following passages:

...it was just very empowering and...there would be all these adults in panels

speaking and then the teenagers getting up and kind of telling them off. Not telling

them off, but...I remember...in the environment panel, like, 'well why can't we do

this?' and 'why can't we do this?' ...and the adults are getting all flustered, like,

'well, uhhhh.' So, I dunno, it was just really cool to see...and it kind of makes you

realize that...you can have a lot of power if you do something about it.

[One delegate] was...enraged [by a presentation given by government officials at

the conference], and I can always remember, I don't remember who, but I think, it

was Students Commission staff...they actually really encouraged her, 'you know

what, go in front of the microphone and tell people how you feel.' Which is kind of

unheard of. Somebody telling you to stand up, obviously all the government

people were there, and to stand up in front of them and say, 'you know what, I

don't agree with what you're saying. This is wrong.' And, they encouraged her

and she went up and did it. And it was a huge...shock moment, just to see...the

faces of these politicians as this girl stood up and said 'you guys are wrong, why

are you here?' And I think that was one of those moments that I'll never forget.

Like that's how they do it, they empower you to speak your mind and to be

respected and she was. And I mean like all these people clapped, it was a big to

do...

Second, conference organizers successfully communicated that young people's

voices, thoughts and opinions truly mattered by taking the information gathered from

delegates throughout the conferences and turning it into a concrete document. These

"final reports" were a synthesis of the key themes and ideas that emerged from the

breakout team discussions, as well as a compilation of delegates' thoughts, opinions, and

personal stories. At most SC conferences the final reports were taken to Parliament Hill

and shared with government officials; which was yet another way the conference

programs were crafted to demonstrate to the attendees that their voices, thoughts, and

opinions truly mattered. This theme is exemplified in the following quotations:

To have somebody listen to you at that point in your life and acknowledge the

things you're thinking and the way you're feeling. And then to take that and to do

something with that information...certainly gives you a feeling of

accomplishment...

...all our input was going to be finalized in a report and given to a representative

to the government and it just really felt as if what we had to say was important

and there were government officials there that were listening to our comments

and...as corny as it sounds, it really feels like you are making a difference at that

time.

In sum, it was clear from alumni interviews that SC conferences were successful

because they were founded on a core belief that young people were extremely valuable

and capable beings. This positive result was achieved because conference-goers believed

that they were given control and allowed to assist in decision-making, were provided with

opportunities to assume key conference roles, and were treated in a way that exceeded

their expectations. Furthermore, SC conferences conveyed that they valued young people

by making it clear that delegates' voices, thoughts, and opinions truly mattered,

particularly by providing youth with opportunities to speak and be heard and also by

creating a tangible result—the "final report" from each conference—that was distilled out

of the information gathered from them over the course of the event. This contributed

positively to the overall conference atmosphere and added an interesting and exciting

dimension to the event. What is more, it helped convey the message to delegates that they

had gathered to accomplish something extremely important and were making a

difference; and contributed to making them feel respected, listened to, and empowered.

Role modeling. This conference key feature builds on a theme identified in the

preceding *valuing young people* category, in which youth played vital roles at SC

conferences. As previously mentioned, returning delegates took on roles as team leaders,

panel presenters, conference staff, and more. This placed them in positions where they became role models to their peers, as expressed in the following passage:

> *... I definitely, even still remember...some of the [facilitators] that were at the conference when I was there and I still think of them on a pedestal and...as role models and I think that was probably one of the biggest things.*

Many alumni seemed to appreciate having the opportunity to observe and learn from these young leaders. They also found it inspiring that youth—and not adults—were assuming these important roles:

> *...it's for youth by youth kind of model so that's pretty exciting to go there and...you don't see old people...and that kind of gives you some perspective on what you can do with your life. You go in there at the age of, I was probably 16 at my first conference, so, I went there at the age of 16 and I saw people who were 20 who were out there leading people and who were showing people a different way of thinking and helping really...shape lives in a way.*

> *...at the conference I liked how students got up and shared their ideas. They were able to go on panels and there was just one girl who was just amazing, she was so positive about how we have to think, to think more positive...instead of thinking... 'no, I can't do this' you have to actually try and it just made me think about things that I always just say, 'that's just impossible' and you have to be more creative in our thinking. ...it just made me think and all these panels, and it wasn't just her, but, just the fact that people my own age are telling me this, not...just an adult up there or teacher up there. Just people my own age with these*

wonderful ideas and I was empowered by them...to think like that or to think a little outside the box.

It is clear from the above passages that a key feature of SC conferences was that they modeled meaningful youth engagement in action by providing young people with opportunities to act as positive role models to their peers. This was a powerful element of each conference, not only because it made for an exciting and interesting conference experience for youth, but also because being surrounded by so many positive and engaged young people inspired and empowered many of the delegates.

Sharing. Many alumni identified sharing as an integral part of the SC conference experience, as illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

They're [the other delegates] there...they want to know about you and...you want to know about them and it's just like a total sharing experience...it's really hard to explain...

This category highlights how central the concept of sharing is to the overall SC conference experience, and it conveys how important respect, listening, mutual curiosity and eagerness to learn among delegates is in fostering such a climate of reciprocal sharing. That sharing is so central to the conference experience exemplifies the equality among delegates and the acknowledgement that, despite the number of SC conferences they have attended, their background, or their life experience, all SC conference-goers have something important to share, be it relevant knowledge/information, skills and talents, ideas, or simply their personal story.

Tackling issues. A key feature of SC conferences was that they brought together youth from across Canada to discuss issues and topics that concerned them. Having

opportunities to engage in discussions regarding relevant issues was important,

particularly considering such opportunities are generally few and far between for many

youth. This theme is expressed in the following passages:

> ...we actually got to talk and...we let everything else go from our lives and talked about an issue that's really important and I learned a lot.

> ...[another youth organization] was international too and did go to their conferences eventually as well...and that was interesting. It was very different than...the experience with the Students Commission was, most definitely. Because it wasn't really issue-based, it was more about just being a volunteer. Almost like being a mindless volunteer, whereas the Students Commission was encouraging me to think, so they were highly different...

> ...I think the conferences really give kind of a forum for young people to express...what they're thinking because...I certainly felt a lot of the topics that we discussed at the Students Commission were not things that I would have brought up with...my high school friends and stuff, right? I think...that surprised me that so many youth could come together and talk about such an important issue in kind of a mature manner.

The focus on issues appeared to be a dimension of the conferences that alumni

truly valued and appreciated because it challenged them to think, learn, and express

themselves. These issue-based discussions helped make SC conferences stand out from

some of the other events and activities in which alumni partook, as they provided unique

opportunities to explore topics and issues in a way that many youth were not able to experience elsewhere.

Focusing on action. This theme goes hand-in-hand with the preceding *tackling issues* category. While *tackling issues* highlighted the importance of the issue-based approach to conferences taken by the SC, the present category emphasizes the value of encouraging delegates to move beyond conversation into action:

> *...the other thing I really liked is the fact that in the report we always made recommendations, not only for government, but also for ourselves and...for different people and what we could do. ...we weren't just saying 'ok the government needs to make these changes.' We were saying everybody needs to make changes so how can we help as individuals and how can...our parents help and how can schools help? ...so just kind of recognizing that we were also responsible and I think that's what empowered a lot of students to go and say, 'well ok, here's the ideas I can do in my hometown' and then...students can go home and actually do them... So I think that was a big part of it too that was really important.*

> *...I think because a big focus of the conference is in fact action oriented and...the report and that you walk away with, and it has changed over time even since I've been there...so they've gone more to actually giving people very tangible things to walk away with, like a project action plan. I think that that's something that was really, really good because...I knew at the end of it it wasn't just all this gibberish for a week, you know, we talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. I actually felt like I had*

something that I had to go back and do. ...I felt that there was a purpose, a means to an end...

SC conferences encouraged action by bringing youth together to discuss issues and develop recommendations for change that acknowledged that everyone—government, institutions, and citizens alike—is accountable for addressing issues and solving problems. In addition, the conferences encouraged action by featuring project/intervention ideas that delegates could implement in their home communities in the conference final reports. This action focus was a key feature of SC conferences that contributed largely to making the experiences purposeful and meaningful for many SC conference-goers.

To summarize, there were several key features of the conferences that made them especially memorable experiences. The conferences provided young people with opportunities to travel to exciting locations across the country where they met and befriended interesting and diverse young Canadians. In addition, delegates spent a week in a positive, fun, comfortable environment where diversity was celebrated and embraced, they felt a sense of belonging, and where they, as young people, were valued and respected. What is more, the events presented conference-goers with opportunities to share with and learn from their peers, while at the same time engaged them in relevant and meaningful issue-based discussions with the ultimate goal of creating change. Given that the conferences were such overwhelmingly positive experiences for most interview participants, it is not surprising that several alumni considered them to be major highlights of their teenage years and felt the conferences were extremely worthwhile and personally enriching experiences:

...the first conference I went to was in my final year of high school and...I thought

it was probably one of the highlights of my high school...it was just incredible, I

thought.

I came away from both of them with...different feelings but both...really

enriching. ...I felt...it was worth my time.

While the majority of the feedback received was positive, it is to be expected that

events such as SC conferences would not necessarily result in positive experiences in all

respects for all delegates. For example, some alumni reported finding the conference

experience intimidating and overwhelming at first:

The first one was a little intimidating 'cause we went to Kemptville...I've never

really traveled that much...

...the first conference was incredibly overwhelming, just sensory overload...

In addition, while some alumni reported feeling a sense of belonging at the conferences,

others reported feeling out of place because they did not connect with the other delegates

and/or felt unprepared for the conference experience, either because they were unsure of

what they were trying to accomplish at the conference or because they felt they were not

as passionate about the issues being discussed as their peers:

...I think it felt like I was kind of out of place. ...there had been people there who

had been there more times than me and that's why I guess they kind of had a

handle on what they were doing and I just kind of felt...like I didn't belong and it

kind of felt like I didn't really want to be there.

...I remember feeling in blur a lot. ...I didn't find that I mixed well with people

there at all probably because most of them...wanted to and did research to be

there and really had issues that they wanted to talk about.

Moreover, while the majority of alumni felt that having the opportunity to meet other

young Canadians was an extremely valuable and interesting experience, some found that

their interactions with other delegates left them feeling attacked and/or frustrated at

times:

Sometimes I felt a little cornered because...basically getting out of your comfort

zone sometimes. ...sometimes you'd get into some sessions where there was a lot

of...I know it wasn't on purpose or anything, or it would feel like Christianity was

being attacked kind of thing. ...it's hard to avoid when...not everyone is a

Christian, but sometimes I notice that...it's seen as the majority and so it's ok,

kind of thing.

...I remember feeling frustrated because I couldn't believe that in this day and

age people were still asking me how come I spoke French and I wasn't from

Quebec. ......and that was only 12 years ago. And so I would have spoken French

to one of the Quebecers and people were saying, 'well...where are you from?'

And I would say, '[my home province]' and they would say, 'well that can't be.'

... So for me I was kind of proud and yet frustrated because I couldn't believe that

people were so naive into this beautiful country we live in...people can...speak

French outside of Quebec...

Thus, while the majority of interview participants felt that, overall, the conference

experience was positive, it is important not to overlook the fact that certain aspects of the

conferences might intimidate and/or overwhelm delegates, that some might struggle to fit in or feel out of place, and that certain peer-to-peer encounters could leave delegates feeling frustrated and/or attacked.

The themes presented above are helpful in conveying the "essence" of the SC conference experience and in describing the events. However, taking into account young people's post-conference experiences can further enrich our understanding of the overall conference experience. Thus, alumni's post-conference experiences will now be detailed.

Post-conference

As this section explores a variety of aspects of the post-conference experience, it is broken down into five subsections. To begin, alumni's experiences returning to their home communities after attending the conferences are described and then the positive benefits they experienced as a result of attending the conferences are presented. Next, because SC conferences aim to engage delegates in activities above and beyond the weeklong events, the factors that both sustain and prevent alumni involvement, not only in SC conferences, but in their schools and communities are then described. Finally, a series of recommendations is presented detailing how SC conferences could be improved so as to promote sustained post-conference involvement in delegates and alumni.

The immediate post-conference experience

The emotions and experiences that alumni reported having as they left the conferences and returned to their home communities help us gain an even richer understanding of the overall SC conference experience. As such, this section aims to further capture and describe the SC conference experience from the perspective of

conference participants by highlighting the gamut of emotions, feelings, and experiences youth might face as the conferences conclude and they return to their daily routines.

Considering that SC conferences were such intense emotional experiences, that the days were jam-packed and there was always something to do, and that delegates often sacrificed sleep in order to spend time with the exciting new friends they had made, it should not be surprising that many alumni recalled leaving the conferences feeling completely exhausted:

...[I was] really tired because I didn't sleep all week! (laughing)

Therefore, the emotional recollections of the delegates, as detailed in this section, must be considered within the overall context of their physical condition during the period of transition between the end of the conference and their arrival at home.

Because the conferences were such intense, enjoyable, and enriching experiences many were sad to see them come to an end. In addition, several interviewees were so overcome with emotion that they cried as they parted ways with the new friends they had connected so deeply with during the week, and they also reported feeling lonely in the weeks following the conferences because they were so used to being surrounded by fun, positive, and energetic youth:

...it was so upsetting to have to walk away from...being in an environment that you really felt comfortable in an accepted.

...leaving we were crying. ...you just kind of missed it and all this, 'cause you're...there for six days and you tend to get closer to everybody and you feel like you're not going to see them again. So basically that was, I just kind of got lonely [after the conferences] but at the same time I had a good feeling.

At the same time, however, many were eager to return home from the conferences so that they could put their plans in motion, and recalled feeling proud, excited and energized for weeks after the conferences ended:

...it is obviously very difficult, like I said it was so hard to leave the conference because it was such an intense emotional experience but at the same time there was a real keenness to get started on the work that you had planned.

Energized in a way because you've got this whole mission, this whole new outlook on life and you're like, 'I can make a difference, I can do something...wow, now what can I do?'

...I just remember you want to tell everybody about it. I can remember...wearing my Students Commission t-shirt in school and...I'd want people to ask me... 'what's that all about?' ...you're just so proud...that you were a part of it. ...not that you want to show it off, but you really just want to tell the whole world...and then I started telling all my friends... 'you have to go, you have to go.'

A large part of what seemed to make leaving the conferences so difficult for some (other than missing their new friends) was that returning to their home communities was a sobering reality check. That is, making the transition from such a positive environment where they felt comfortable, accepted, supported, and empowered back into the "real world" was hard for some, as they found it challenging to keep the momentum of the conference going and stay motivated and optimistic in the absence of others who shared in the intense experience:

...obviously it's hard to go back and it's hard to lose the momentum like I said before. To be back in your community and come off...it's like a high, the conferences are a high. You go there and people pump you up and you're pumped and you can identify with those people so you have...all this energy and you go back to your community and it just drops. It just...dies because...it's so infectious being in that community and then when it's taken away from you, what are you left with really? So...I would say it's pretty sobering, I guess. (laughs) Of course you're hopeful, but, like, reality.

It is important to note that not all interview participants recalled feeling any sort of overwhelming emotions—either positive or negative—as the events came to a close or in the weeks that immediately followed the events. For these alumni making the transition back into their communities and returning to their pre-conference routines was smooth:

...actually it wasn't...a dramatic change, I dunno.

...there was really not much that happened. The big hype was before I go...people wanted interviews and...local newspapers and stuff like that, they heard that I was going...but not much after.

This section highlighted the gamut of emotions, feelings, and experiences youth faced as the conferences concluded and they returned to their home communities. With feelings intensified by the physical exhaustion that grows over the course of the event, by weeks end youth might experience an intense mix of loneliness, sadness, pride, and excitement, along with a strong desire to take action. Not unexpectedly, some youth might really struggle with the transition back into their communities and with the

challenge of coming down off the "conference high," while others might feel no particularly strong emotional reactions upon leaving the conferences and experience a smooth transition home.

Now that alumni's immediate post-conference experiences have been described, the more profound and longer-term affects of the conferences will be explored.

Conference outcomes

The overwhelming majority of alumni interviewed felt that SC conferences had positively influenced their lives, even if only in minor ways. This section outlines and discusses the six major impact-related themes that emerged from the alumni interviews: personal growth and identity development; capacity-building; relationship development; awareness-raising; empowerment, self-esteem, and confidence; and motivation for action. The outcomes are summarized in Figure 2.

Personal growth and identity development. Many alumni reported that SC conferences allowed them to grow and develop as people by challenging them to think, become more open-minded, and learn new ways of viewing and understanding issues. What is more, alumni reported learning a lot about themselves, realizing they have the potential to create change, and achieving self-acceptance as a result of attending the conferences. These benefits are highlighted in the following passages:

> *...it was probably my first time really getting to do this sort of thing and so...it*
>
> *opened me up in a lot of ways to understanding things that I...had never thought*
>
> *about before.*

> *...they [the conferences] certainly did have an impact on my life. ...I never really*
>
> *think about it probably but...I think it has gone a long way to*

helping...shape...who I am. Because...you're attending these conferences at...roughly the age where people start to make their own identities and...they stretch you to make you think about so many things that you never really do and to help you...understand who you are as a separate person...separated from...this is what my mom and dad think, so therefore this is what I think. It was probably one of the first time I had to think about things outside of that...

...I think it was at that point in my life where...you're deciding what you want to do and...I was going to be going away from home and stuff and so I think...the conference was definitely at a point in my life where it helped me figure myself out a lot.

And from being at that conference I realized that I can do something...I'm not worthless, I've got a mission and I'm going to do it.

This is a bit of a big leap, but I would say that it largely changed the course of my life. ...I think that had someone not taken a chance on me and challenged me to think outside of mindless volunteer...I would have never done it. If I hadn't had that experience of having gone away and meeting like-minded people I think I would have been happy to have been who I was. ...but I think that after having gone to that and experiencing that...I realized that I had a lot more potential than I had ever thought and that I could contribute. ...it is a big thing to say that it changed my life, but I really do believe that.

Conference outcomes

Friendships and networks

Made friends, expanded social networks
Felt more connected to others
Became more accepting and understanding of others
Developed contacts

Motivation for action

Became motivated to create change within their communities

<u>Involvement-related impacts</u>
Increased levels of school and community participation
Changed focus of community work
Changed attitudes towards and/or motivation for involvement
Changed perspectives brought to school- and community-based work

Capacity building

<u>Social/interpersonal skills</u>
Leadership, talking to strangers, networking, communication, group work

<u>Practical/applied skills</u>
Public speaking, needs assessment, develop project action plans, research, mobilize community members

<u>Other</u>
Organization, perspective-taking

Empowerment, self-esteem, confidence

Felt empowered
Felt more confident
Increased self-esteem

Personal growth and identity development

Became more open-minded
Learned about themselves
Realized they had the potential to create change
Became more accepting of themselves
Became more open, less shy

Awareness-raising

Became more knowledgeable and aware of conference topics, community, diversity, etc.
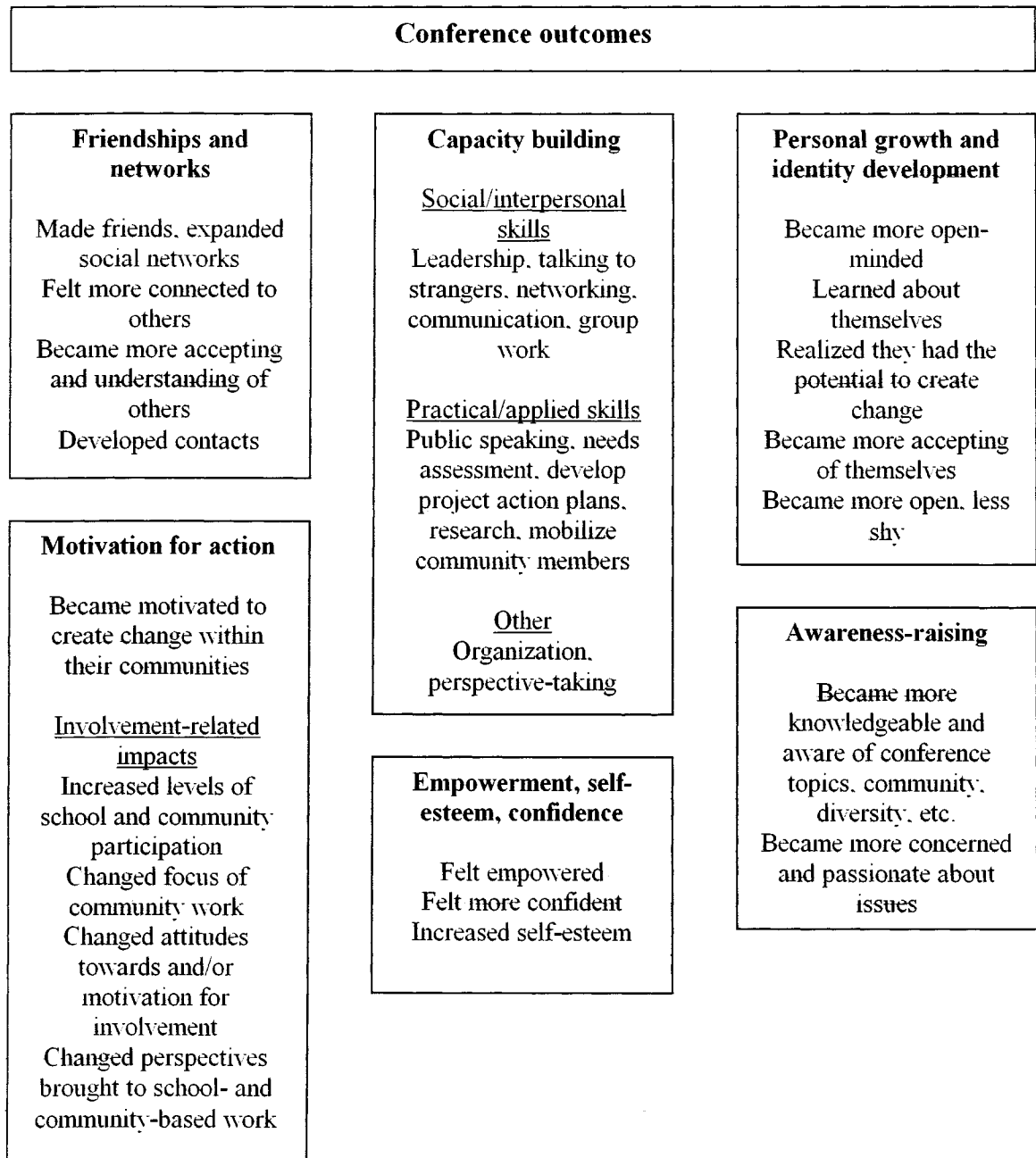Became more concerned and passionate about issues

Figure 2: Summary of conference outcomes

68

...I think I actually did become a lot more proud of where I actually came from and my

background. And it was through conversations and people being curious about what was

this place and who I was and just even taking a general interest in you when you actually

talk to them and it not being, like, here everybody knows everything about everyone. Why

even bother to ask...you already know. But I think that it would be, like, it was an

interesting opportunity to learn about others and for you to talk about yourself.

In addition to the personal growth and development aspects described above,

many of the alumni who described themselves as being extremely shy before attending

their first conference noticed they had become less timid and more open after attending

the conferences. For one alumnus in particular, the growth was so striking that SC staff

noticed her transformation into an active, contributing team member. This theme is

identified in the following passages:

...it [the SC conference] just made me open up more...before I was...really shy. I

wouldn't really talk to anybody.

...at [my last SC conference]...[a SC staff person], he mentioned, because I was

in front of the group and I was talking, I wasn't a facilitator, just a delegate and,

anyways he just said that I completely changed from [a previous conference]

when he was my facilitator because he couldn't really get me to talk because I

was really shy and here I was up in front of a group and giving ideas and stuff.

The conferences had profound impacts on many alumni in terms of personal

growth and identity development. They were challenged to think for themselves and form

their own opinions regarding important issues, topics, and concepts, and as a result, came

away from the conferences feeling that they were more open-minded. Through the

conference journey they also learned about themselves and their interests, realized they were capable of contributing to society and making a difference, and learned to accept themselves for who they are. In addition, many of the more timid and reserved alumni opened up as a result of the experience, as participating in team-based activities and being constantly surrounded by hundreds of other youth helped them to overcome their introversion and/or tentativeness.

Capacity-building. Many alumni reported building and refining two key sets of skills and abilities as a result of attending SC conferences: social/interpersonal skills and practical/applied skills. It is not surprising that leadership was the most commonly mentioned social and interpersonal skill cultivated at conferences given that opportunities to assume leadership roles and observe other young leaders were plentiful. Several alumni then went on to apply these leadership skills in their schools and communities. For example, one alumnus—who was reserved and a self-described *"observer"* prior to attending her first conference—was applying the leadership skills she developed at the conferences as a co-facilitator of a school club—a huge step for someone who had never taken on a leadership role prior to attending a SC conference:

> *...something woke up again. So basically the leadership skills that I*
>
> *learned...through school...[the conference] basically just kind of helped enhance*
>
> *it better.*
>
> *[Interviewer: So you feel like it was all kind of already there?]*
>
> *But I just needed someone to basically help me. And that's what I think the*
>
> *Students Commission conference did.*

...this year is like the first year that I've really taken a leadership role in anything, which I honestly think is because they let me be a facilitator at the conference. So I was like if they can trust me to be a facilitator at a conference then I'm sure I can be...the leader of smaller groups of people [from my school]... (laughs)

In addition to leadership skills, alumni also mentioned developing and enhancing several other valuable social/interpersonal skills such as initiating conversations with unfamiliar individuals, networking, communicating, and working in groups.

But this experience allowed me to...meet people, I went with one person and met... so many people and I was able to really improve my social skills, meeting people I didn't know. And it was really comfortable...it was just very nice and a nice feeling to...know that you learn when you don't know someone that you have to try to initiate some sort of contact and that really helped in that type of thing.

...there was some reward for that involvement...it helped me network better with people...

...[I learned about] pressure with the group, working with a group and I learned a lot about...having patience and...how to communicate with others...

In terms of practical and applied skills, the most commonly noted gains were in large group/public speaking. This is expressed in the following passages:

Public speaking is another thing. I was always a good speaker but I...through the Students Commission became a really good speaker...

71

...I think it gave me a lot of experience, it was kind of my first experience

doing...public speaking a lot...

In addition to enhanced public speaking skills, many alumni reported learning a host of skills related to program and community development. Alumni generally felt that they came away from the conferences with an increased capacity to assess community needs and resources, develop project action plans, conduct research, mobilize community members (especially youth), and more. Many alumni then went on to apply these skills and abilities by developing and implementing projects/interventions in their home communities:

...I think that that's really what the conferences enabled me to do was to look at

my community and sort of do an assessment, a needs assessment and...act on that,

develop a plan.

...I was building a [new] Students Commission office...but that's precisely what

that was, taking those lessons and stuff back to the community and putting them to

work.

...I was really empowered to come back and do something in my own community

so I started a group in my own school... ...we were motivated to do more

and...the two of us that went and the others started a conference, a regional

conference with...schools in our area... So it was really nice...I was able to take

from my experience there and apply it...

Finally, in addition to building a variety of social/interpersonal and practical/applied skills, alumni also credited SC conference attendance with being instrumental in helping them to develop and refine other skills and abilities:

...I became better organized and better able to organize, which are very different things. So, yeah, I think those were major changes I've seen as a result [of attending SC conferences].

...I find that I'm using a lot of the skills [that I developed through the SC in my university courses]...I'm able to look at [the professor's] perspective and I'm able to look at the perspective that learned at the Students Commission and then I'm sort of able to formulate my own perspective a lot better by...having that experience and by being able to draw on things that I've seen and heard about and worked with and stuff like that...

Thus, SC conferences provided young people with opportunities to build personal capacity through the development and enhancement of social/interpersonal skills, practical/applied skills, and a variety of other important growth-enabling skills and abilities. Many alumni were able to identify specific benefits resulting from their increased capacity, especially those who put their newly developed and refined skills and abilities to work in their communities and schools by taking on leadership roles and also creating and implementing their own projects and interventions.

Friendships and networks. As previously discussed, a key feature of SC conferences is that delegates meet a diversity of youth from across Canada. Thus, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of alumni interviewed reported that making friends and expanding their social networks was one of the benefits they experienced

while attending the conferences. While most expected to meet new people, few

anticipated developing such strong, lasting relationships over the course of a weeklong

event:

> *...you meet...amazing people. ...I think I probably met...some of the best*
>
> *people...better friends than I had met...in 16 years in my hometown, kind of thing.*

> *...I met one of my best friends at the conference, which I didn't expect to happen*
>
> *because I already had one and I figured...most of these people live all across the*
>
> *country and...I probably wouldn't see him again ever. ...I talk to the guy I've*
>
> *been best friends with for...two years and I talk to him pretty much...on a day-to-*
>
> *day basis.*

As also previously mentioned, a key feature of the conferences was that delegates

encountered and engaged in dialogue with youth having both similar and different

interests, values, beliefs, and opinions as them—and it appears that both types of

encounters were equally beneficial in terms of impact. First, networking and developing

relationships with like-minded individuals showed alumni—particularly those who felt

few youth shared their interests—that they were not alone and that there were indeed

other young people out there like them. As a result, these alumni came away from the

conferences feeling a strong sense of belonging and a greater connection to others, as

expressed in the following interview excerpts:

> *...it was just more getting to see that yes there are other people who do care*
>
> *about school and who do care about their community, because...I lived in a town*
>
> *where not really anyone seemed to really care. And so it was nice to be around*
>
> *people who do, you know?*

...I think the biggest change I felt was that there were...more people to connect with out there. Because I think...[in my hometown] a lot of us didn't end up going to university or things like that...I think after the conference...I changed in the sense that I felt...a connection more with other people who had the same interests and stuff as I did.

Second, interacting with youth of diverse backgrounds, life experiences, opinions, values and beliefs appears to have been an unexpected but equally enriching experience for several alumni. Many identified these encounters as being central in helping them become more accepting and understanding of others, as expressed in the following passages:

It's given me just amazing experience and it's a completely different view...especially because I was working on the poverty conference and...just the completely different views that...I'd never really had a negative view of people who lived on the street, it gave me just like almost, not real life experience, you can't have that unless you're living on the street, but as close as you can get to that, like talking to people and meeting with people who had grown up so differently from me. It really helped me learn how to accept people.

...probably more just the people that I really spent a lot of time with and became closer to were definitely people that I never would have thought that I would have. ... ...I'm fairly conservative and just...making friends with the people with the piercings on the face and the different coloured hair and stuff like that. I was actually talking with one of my friends about this because she's certainly that type

of a person. ...I think about it now and I'm like... 'you would have been the person

I would have been pointing and staring at.' ...even in probably...grade 11. And

just how perception can change by getting to know people who are like that,

rather than just seeing, 'oh, that person in the mall is a freak,' you know?

While the majority of SC conference-goers are youth, a small number of adults attend as well, which creates an environment where young people can experience very positive, high-value youth-adult interactions. As illustrated in the following passage, having adults—particularly those in positions of power—present allowed delegates to network and develop important contacts that they could use even after the conferences had ended:

...it was really good for networking. ...there was a lot of different important

people that went to the conferences...a lot of famous business people...a lot of

people who had a lot of influence in the government and stuff, so, it was a good

way to kind of make connections for life...that I could use if I ever needed

anything.

One alumnus in particular benefited tremendously from the adult presence at conferences. By befriending an adult participant the alumnus was able to come to terms with her past, which helped her to transform her life in a truly positive way upon her return home from the conference. The profound impact the adult participant had on this alumnus is captured below:

And the most significant thing that stood out wasn't even the conference itself; it

was one of the participants who was invited to the conference. It was one of the

Elders...and I sat with him every day that we were eating and from listening to his

stories I came to a point in my own life where I could forgive myself because I was so angry at who I was as a person and what I'd done to myself...I'd forgiven everybody else who had done wicked, evil things. You gotta remember that...I had only been clean for a short amount of time too when I was there and I was feeling an atrocious amount of guilt and anger at what I'd done to [my daughter] and what I'd done to me, but talking with this Elder and listening to his stories I came to a place where I could forgive myself and that was...huge.

To summarize, many alumni developed strong, lasting relationships with other young Canadians during their time at SC conferences. They also expanded their social networks to include a diversity of youth—some who were very much like them, others who were very much different. These social interactions affected alumni in several key ways: they felt a greater sense of connection to others and became more accepting and understanding of others. Some alumni also benefited by networking with adult conference participants, as they were able to develop important contacts and relationships, which, for one alumnus in particular, was life-altering.

Awareness-raising. Considering that SC conferences bring together a variety of youth from across the nation to engage in discussions on a wide range of issues (e.g., poverty, education, sexuality, the environment), it is not surprising that many alumni reported increased knowledge and awareness on a range of topics as a result of their conference experiences. Through various aspects of the conference program as well as informal discussions and interactions with other delegates, alumni learned a great deal about the specific conference topics (which varied greatly from conference to conference), the meaning of community, and the different issues facing youth form across

the nation. In addition, the conferences helped some become more aware of diversity and diversity-related issues—particularly those who had spent little time outside their home communities or provinces prior to the conferences. The theme of knowledge and awareness-raising is illustrated below:

But I felt that my experiences at the conference gave me really relevant information to use when discussing health and well-being in the broadest sense of health.

I wasn't really as aware of child poverty...I was an impoverished person but I didn't know the extent of it. I knew it affected me but not all the other people. And sometimes when I thought it affected me...I thought I was the only one and it helped me to realize...I'm not the only one, there's thousands of us out there. And it also helped me see people who were impoverished move on and not become impoverished anymore...if that can happen for others it can happen for me too.

...when I came home I started paying more attention to...the charities around my neighbourhood. ...I noticed that...my neighbour was actually a youth worker, which I didn't know...she had a youth centre down the street and I didn't know that.... ... So, yeah but mostly I started noticing all the organizations that help out the community. So I started paying more attention. ... ...I didn't think...to pay attention when I got home...I guess it [the conference] just opened my eyes more to what my community meant.

...and there's French people and English people and you're, like, 'oh I want to talk to you but I can't' (laughing) so it was kind of a weird experience and...it sort of opened up my eyes a whole bunch to a lot of issues and things.

It made me aware that there are other people and...where I'm from...I remember when I was going to high school if you didn't have cowboy boots and a pair of Edwin jeans...you were not cool...and that totally freaked me out. And when I went to the conference...I noticed, and where I'm from there was, like, one Black person EVER. There was two Natives but they didn't come to school with us, to the same high school, so we were all White. So when I went to this conference it was an awareness of there are more than just...county people here. There's completely different people, other nationalities, and...we do have the same concerns and sometimes we don't, but that was ok. ...I think it was...awareness awakening.

Not only did alumni feel that they had become more aware and knowledgeable, several also became increasingly concerned—and even passionate—about issues, topics, and concepts that they had not thought about before:

...shortly after I came back from...my first conference...there was this guy in my class and...he made this comment about immigrants and I went crazy on him. I was like... 'how can you say something like that...you've never even left the country, how can you begin to make that sort of comment?' And I noticed that I was...starting to care about a lot more things...social justice and things that I had never thought about before.

I guess I just wouldn't have expected to have become as involved as I did. Going

into it I was like, 'oh...three days off school!' ... And then out of that...I became

quite passionate about the issues I was working with. And it was funny...even to

this day my parents are always like, 'oh you'll never stay in business, you're

going to go to helping poor people or something like that,' and I think a lot of that

is coming from the Students Commission and the way it's changed me.

In sum, many alumni came away from the conferences feeling more informed and

knowledgeable regarding a myriad of important issues and topics, as well as having

learned a great deal about the country in which they live and life outside their own

communities. As a result, many developed a heightened sense of awareness that affected

the way they looked at and/or thought about themselves, their lives, and their

communities. Out of this increased knowledge and awareness, many alumni developed

passion, caring, and concern for causes, issues, and subject matter that they had not even

thought about in the past, which motivated some to begin taking a stand.

Empowerment, self-esteem and confidence. Many alumni believed that the

conferences helped to transform them into empowered and confident human beings.

When relating how they had changed, many indicated that they were more positive, that

they believed in themselves and their abilities, and that they no longer worried about

what others might think of them after having attended the conferences. For some, being

surrounded by supportive adults who believed in youth made all the difference, while for

others the confidence was tied to the increased motivation they experienced (which will

be discussed in more detail in the following section). Regardless, the boost in self-esteem

and confidence that alumni experienced as a result of attending the conferences empowered some to take action, as expressed in the following passages:

...the motivation that it [the conference] gives you kind of leads to the confidence...like I was saying once you...get this idea you're like, 'oh...I think I can make this work' and then you actually try it and it works and you're like, 'hey...let's try something else.' And so the more you do, the more confident you get...that really plays a role and then you don't worry so much about, 'oh people are going to think, you know, I'm crazy' or whatever, you just do it... Whereas, before the conference it's just like... 'this is a really good idea but it would never work' kind of thing and after you're just like, 'I can do anything!'

...probably the biggest thing for me was just building my self-esteem. ...I never had a very good self-esteem at all and I was not very confident...so that was probably the biggest thing for me...that it [the conference] did.

Well just the fact that all the people at the conference were willing to give us, the youth, a voice and do something and make a difference. ...so that kind of gave me the confidence to go into my community without being worried about them going... 'this is a stupid idea, what do you know? You're just a youth.' ...I wasn't as concerned about what people had to say because I knew that there were people in the community that would be respectful of what I was trying to do...

Motivation for action. Many alumni reported leaving the SC conferences feeling extremely motivated to take action and get involved in their communities. According to the alumni interviewed, the conference key features *meeting young Canadians* and *role*

modeling were fundamental in making the conferences so motivating in this regard. Encountering passionate, like-minded youth who were modeling meaningful involvement/engagement helped some delegates realize that they too were capable of making a difference. Moreover, learning about how other young people had created change within their communities inspired several delegates to want to do the same. This is illustrated in the following passages:

> *...it was just a motivator...I always kind of had the ideas I think...I always thought... 'oh, why don't people just do this?' or 'why can't we just do this...and things would be better?' but I just never thought to do anything about it...I just thought 'I'm one person what can I do?' So, it really motivated me to say... 'hey, I'm not alone there are other people out there' and also... 'if I don't do it no one else will.' ...it totally motivated me to do it and once you start and you see that it can work, you're like, 'oh wow' and you're kind of like 'I can do anything.' So you just keep going and you kind of just do as much as you can...but I don't think I ever would have done it without the Students Commission. Not at all. ...first of all it gave me ideas on what to do and then just the motivation to do it.*

> *I think it kind of...helped keep me motivated. ... ...I always felt like, 'wow, I'm so busy, I don't have time to do anything,' and just seeing people that were doing so much more than I was and were stretched way more than I was and that they were still going on and thinking of new things to do and...if they can do it, I can do it, sort of thing.*

Well it wasn't really anything specific, it was just the conference. ...just to see other young people doing...their own kinds of programs and fun things in their communities, it kind of pushed me to say, 'ok, well I want to do the same thing, I can,' and...basically meeting different people and having so many different approaches.

That conferences were so motivating for young people may explain why many, but not all, alumni felt very strongly that SC conferences had an impact on their involvement, although the extent of the influence varied greatly among participants. For some alumni the conferences were catalysts to increased involvement, as attending the events inspired them to develop and implement projects or become more actively involved in their schools and communities. Other alumni claimed the conferences triggered a shift in the focus of their community work by prompting them to want to work with populations (e.g., children) or take on causes (e.g., child poverty) that they had not in the past. In addition, several alumni felt the conference affected their involvement by motivating them to become more engaged in the projects, activities, groups, or organizations in which they were already involved. Finally, some alumni noticed that the conference experience affected the perspectives they brought, the approaches they took, and/or the motivations driving their involvement. It is interesting and important to note that some alumni experienced various combinations of these impacts on their involvement (e.g., one alumnus was inspired to implement a project and felt the conferences changed the perspective she brought to the activities she had been involved in prior to attending the conferences). The range of involvement impacts/influences are illustrated in the following alumni interview passages:

...because of the child poverty ones [conferences] I started a Brownie group in an inner city school.

...I guess you could say I got way more involved than I did before. ... 'cause when I first attended that first youth council meeting I was just there because I needed a ride home... But after the Students Commission conference I basically got home and it kind of engaged me to get, like, because I thought... 'is this it for youth council?' So basically I wanted to keep...staying involved with the group...as much as I can...

I think that [SC conferences] encouraged me to not just be...sitting on the sidelines and trying to get things done, I really stepped forward in a lot of my activities and...a lot of the things that I've mentioned before like the peer counselling...I think that...the conference helps you bring another perspective to all of the activities that I was already in. ...I don't think I started anything really new...other than the project that the Students Commission, like the very specific project, but the majority of my activities stayed the same, but it was sort of a different perspective is what I brought to them.

...after the Students Commission...I started giving ideas to my student council...about raising money for different groups and we did some things that were different and I started thinking outside the box a little...besides helping ourselves...we should try to help others and I was a little more positive thinking that we could make a difference afterwards.

...all the people who were my helpers, I watched them and how they interacted

with other people and I learned from that. ... ...the people that I facilitated that

[community-based] group with...never even thought to ask the young women in

that group what they wanted. Never even thought of that. Well I probably never

would have thought of that either had I not been to a Students Commission

conference or been around people with that type of philosophy of 'well let's ask

the youth what they youth want. Let's not just do this to them, let's do it with

them.' So, I would have probably never had that attitude had I not been involved

in those types of things.

It is important to note that not all alumni experienced involvement-related impacts

as a result of attending the conferences, and a small number felt the conferences had little

impact on them personally. While none of these alumni reported that the conferences

affected their involvement in a negative way, this group simply felt that they would have

sustained or changed their involvement in the ways they did even if they had not attended

the conferences. This is highlighted in the following quotations:

...[the activities I was involved in stayed] pretty much the same. And if I did [take

on new activities] it had nothing to do with the conference.

...I can't say it [the conference] was the most life-changing thing.

Nothing turned me off. It's just it didn't motivate me... It didn't motivate me to go

out and conquer the world either, you know what I mean? It's like, yeah, it was

nice, it was a good experience and life goes on.

85

Based on the interview data, it seems clear that the conferences were profound experiences that helped to transform and shape young lives in many key ways. Through the conferences youth learned about themselves, grew and developed as people, developed and refined important skills and abilities, and also built relationships and important social networks. Furthermore, they became more knowledgeable and aware of a diversity of important issues and topics and came away from the conferences feeling empowered, confident, and motivated to take action. That young people stand to benefit in the ways described above is a significant finding for a variety of reasons, particularly because, as will be discussed in the following section, some of these outcomes young people experience might play important roles in promoting and sustaining community involvement in delegates after the conferences.

Sustaining Factors

It should be clear from the preceding section that SC youth conferences can affect young people in a variety of ways, particularly by motivating them to take action thereby positively affecting their community involvement/engagement in some way. The present section builds upon this finding and explores in depth the factors that assist in sustaining this involvement. Alumni discussed the factors that kept them involved in a variety of engagement activities and settings. Thus, the factors that sustain involvement in SC conferences will be explored first, followed by a discussion of the factors that sustain general community involvement—which includes a variety of activities such as school- and community-based activities, volunteer/community service, and the like. The latter part of this section (examining sustained community involvement) will begin by detailing the ways in which the SC as an organization provided sustenance and encouragement for

the community involvement activities of the youth who attended their conferences. It will then continue with an examination of key individual-level success factors, followed by an examination of key social-level success factors, and, finally, the section will conclude with an examination of the systems-level factors critical to sustaining community involvement in young people. See Figure 3 for a summary of the sustaining factors identified by alumni.

Factors that promote ongoing SC conference involvement

Many interview participants either attended multiple SC conferences or remembered wanting to attend future conferences at the time of their first SC conference. When alumni were asked what it was about the SC conferences that kept them wanting to return year after year they identified two reasons: the social aspect of conferences and the particular topics/themes that were being addressed. Additionally, some alumni attended subsequent conferences as a result of being invited back by conference organizers. These three themes are described in more detail below.

Social aspect of conferences. Many alumni reported wanting to return to SC conferences time and time again because they felt that the opportunities to meet and befriend capable, passionate, and engaged youth were interesting and valuable. What is more, many looked forward to making new friends and reconnecting with old friends at each conference. This theme is expressed in the alumni quotations presented below:

...you had access to such a tremendous amount of young people who had such

potential. ... ...I think that just knowing that you had access to young people who

were really involved kept me coming back because I wanted to have a bigger

database of friends. ... ...and that just encouraged me to stay a part of it because

I do want access to that passionate group of young people.

...[I kept coming back to SC conferences] out of pure interest and [because of]

the people that are involved in them. ...I don't know how I would be able to stop

going to the conferences because I miss everybody. Like, I miss them now, but I

know I will eventually see them. If I just don't go to the conference anymore then

I'm not going to see them and then, oh wow...

Conference topics/themes. Some alumni recalled wanting to attend multiple

conferences because they truly appreciated the opportunities to discuss issues and topics

that they felt were relevant and applicable, not only to themselves, but to their

communities as well. Thus, as expressed in the following quotations, many young people

returned to the conferences because they wanted to increase their knowledge base and

because they enjoyed the meaningful and engaging issue-based discussions:

...there are a lot of the issues that were being discussed at the conferences that

were very relevant to...the reality of my community. Child poverty is a huge issue

in this part of the country, ...education, ...so many things, like everything...I could

definitely related it back to the issues that young people in my community were

facing so I though it was important to be involved and to be talking about things

all the time. There was never anything that I didn't think was applicable to either

myself or my community.

Invitation to return. Most delegates returned to conferences as a result of their

own initiative, but some were actually invited back by SC staff. Several interview

participants were amongst those invited to a subsequent conference in order to apply their

Sustaining factors

Factors that promote ongoing SC conference involvement

Social aspect of conference
Conference topic/theme
Invitation to return

Factors that promote ongoing community involvement

<u>Factors related to the SC and SC conferences</u>
Positive conference outcomes
Post-conference support and recognition

<u>Individual-level factors</u>
Capacity
Interests
Values and beliefs
Sense of responsibility/commitment
Positive outcomes and experiences

<u>Social-level factors</u>
Social aspect of involvement
Social influence

<u>Systems-level factors</u>
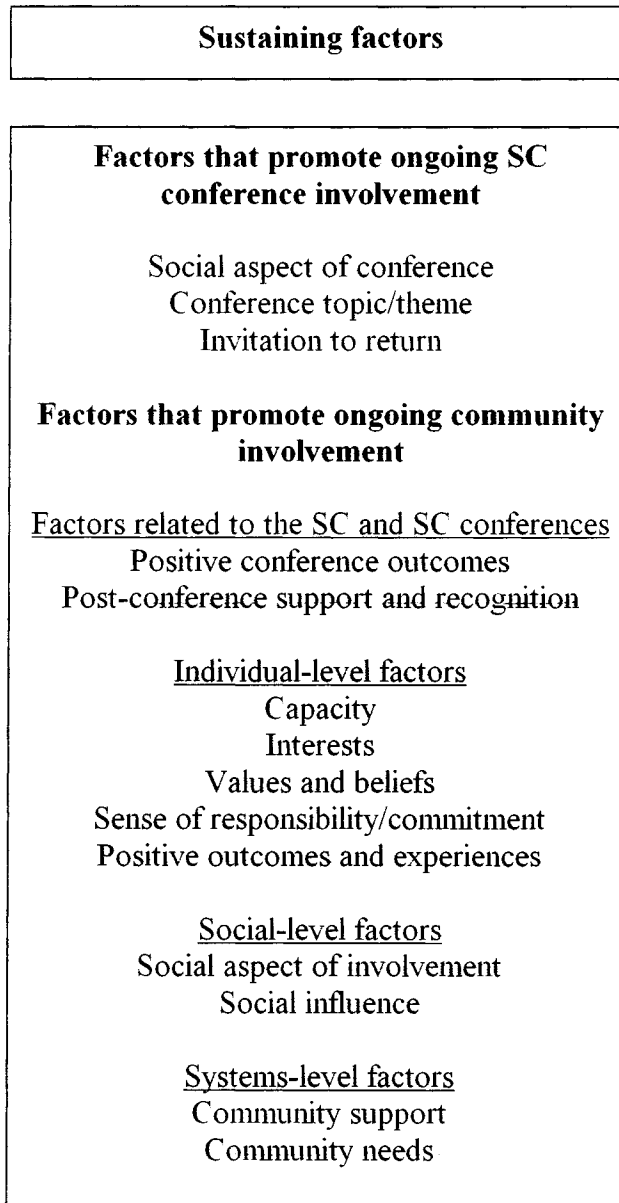Community support
Community needs

Figure 3: Summary of sustaining factors

skills and share their expertise as facilitators, panel presenters, conference staff, etc.

Occasionally delegates received return invitations because of where they lived, as was the

case for one interview participant. That is, because the SC made conscious efforts to have

delegates from as many provinces and territories as possible at each conference, youth

from areas that were poorly represented were often invited to return to conferences to

help ensure diverse representation. Regardless of the reason, an invitation to return from

conference organizers was a key sustaining factor for several of the alumni interviewed,

as they would likely not have continued their involvement with the SC otherwise. This is

illustrated in the following passages:

> *...I think after I left the Newfoundland conference the coordinator from Montreal*
>
> *talked to me about coming back as [a facilitator].*

> *...what we find I think with the Students Commission is they're not terribly*
>
> *organized all the time and what tends to happen right before conferences, I mean,*
>
> *they realize that they're lacking people from certain areas and then they go into*
>
> *this panic mode and they start calling people and saying 'can you come?' And*
>
> *that's kind of what happened to me.*

It should thus be clear that delegates enjoyed the fact that conference attendance

allowed them to engage in interesting discussions on pertinent topics and issues and also

meet new people and reconnect with old friends, and it was primarily these factors that

motivated them to return to conferences time and time again. However, some alumni

attended multiple conferences not solely due to their own initiative; that is, they returned

to conferences at the request of SC staff, often to take on a leadership role and assist with

the conference proceedings.

Factors that promote sustained community involvement

Factors related to the SC and SC conferences. A primary objective of SC

conferences is to prepare and encourage young people to seek out meaningful

engagement opportunities through their schools, communities, etc. It is therefore essential

to explore what, if anything, the SC does—both as an organization and through their

conferences—to promote and facilitate this objective of creating sustained youth

engagement. It became clear from participant interviews that certain outcomes or benefits

that youth experienced as a result of attending the conferences were critical in helping

them to achieve sustained involvement in their home communities subsequent to the

conferences. Moreover, some alumni credited the ongoing support, encouragement, and

assistance they received from the SC and SC staff as vital to their sustained community

involvement. These themes are explored further below.

Positive conference outcomes. Alumni identified several outcomes they

experienced as a result of attending SC conferences that they believed were critical in

helping them achieve sustained and meaningful community involvement in the months

and years after the conferences. Some alumni reported that the information they received

as well as the skills, abilities, and capacity they developed and refined through the

conferences were key sustaining factors. Others felt they were able to achieve sustained

community involvement after attending SC conferences because they left the events

feeling empowered, motivated/inspired to take action, and supported. The following

passages illustrate how interviewees felt that the conferences equipped them with

knowledge, tools, capacity, and confidence that were critical to their sustained post-

conference community involvement:

...and then there's just the stuff that we already talked about in terms of just being motivated and...all that through the conference and getting the confidence and learning how to speak in front of a crowd and all that stuff helped [sustain my involvement] as well.

So basically I wanted to keep...staying involved with the [youth council]...as much as I can and basically, I guess from being empowered after [the conference]...I stuck with it.

...just getting...more information about the different issues that I was dealing with and realizing how serious they actually were [kept me involved after the conference]. ...most of the information that we get here in rural areas is outdated or is it just doesn't seem real...so actually going to a big city and meeting all these people that were having the same experiences.

[Interviewer: ...did your attendance at the conference play a role in your getting (more) involved?]

Well, of course it did, because I would have never done anything had I not. I would have stayed floating along that...space that felt stagnant. ...it was a shift when I would forgive myself. And listening to that Elder, I wouldn't have met him anywhere else...it was like we were brought there to meet. It was really cool.

...having people actually express support, having such a large group of people be supportive of you and what you wanted to do and giving you constant encouragement was a factor [in me wanting to stay involved].

...staying in contact with the people that I met at the conferences as well, hearing about the things they've been doing. If I've been lagging off a bit, if I've been lagging in my volunteering or lagging...in updating my information base, talking to the people that I went to the conference with and learning the things they've been doing and the things they recently implemented, different activities, makes me kind of go, 'oh yeah...I should kind of do something...'

<u>Post-conference support and acknowledgement</u>. In addition to the outcomes delegates experienced as a result of attending conferences, the relationships they developed with the SC were also vital in sustaining community involvement in many alumni. Interview participants described the importance of being able to access resources—such as meeting facilities and knowledgeable, experienced staff—through the SC. Furthermore, alumni discussed the importance of having their contributions to the community acknowledged by the SC in motivating them to continue their community work. The following passages illustrate how the support, encouragement, and assistance that alumni received from the SC were instrumental to their sustained community involvement:

...it was pretty great that there was actually somebody at the [SC] office because as a group I don't know if we would have just organized ourselves, right? Just having someone at the office to call and give us that...facility where you could...come at this time at this place...and...we'll debrief on the conference...just being able to do that. I think had I been in a small town where I was just by myself, that would have been it, because I wouldn't have had the resources or...even really the know-how to go and do that all by myself.

And the support too afterwards because the Students Commission and TG

Magazine were so supportive they would write articles about us and show what

we were doing and...always encourage us...so part of that...as well made a

difference.

...I don't know if I'd feel the exact same way if it had just been that one

conference. I think it was the combination of things. ...it was that...I proved

myself...after the first conference and the organization took an interest in me

because I was very passionate about it and did keep the communication up

and...really supported me in my initiative. So that was really the fuel that kept me

going and knowing that there was sort of positive reinforcement for what I was

doing. Not reward, but acknowledgement of my efforts. ...so I think that's what

kept me going...

The SC as an organization promoted and facilitated sustained post-conference

community involvement in young people who attend their conferences in two main ways.

First, the SC strove to structure conferences that would equip young people with the

knowledge, tools, capacity, and confidence that they would need to return to their

communities and become or stay actively involved. Second, the SC maintained an

organizational structure whereby conference attendees were assisted in their community

work and thus received the support and encouragement they needed to achieve sustained

community involvement. Now that the sustaining factors related to the SC and SC

conferences have been described in detail, individual-, social-, and systems-level

sustaining factors will be discussed.

Individual-level factors. Alumni identified an assortment of individual-level factors that contributed to their continued community participation over the years. When discussing what it was about them personally that kept them involved, several interview participants described the influence that their capacity, interests, values and beliefs, and strong sense of social responsibility had on their sustained community participation. In addition, alumni also explained that experiencing positive outcomes as a result of their involvement was a key contributing factor to their ongoing community participation. Each of these five individual-level sustaining factors will be discussed in more detail in the paragraphs that follow.

Capacity. One alumnus in particular reported staying involved because she knew she possessed the knowledge, skills, abilities, and capacity to make a difference in the community. Because she was, not only aware of, but also confident in her abilities, she felt it would be a waste of her talents if she did not put them to use by working to create change within her community:

> *I know that I can. I know that I have skills, I know I have the knowledge and why let that go to waste?*

Interests. It is not surprising that alumni reported that their personal interests were critical in influencing whether or not they maintained involvement in any given activity or organization. This theme is expressed in the following interview passage:

> *Like one thing that I'm getting involved in now is Habitat for Humanity. But that's because...I'm interested in building stuff so it's not only that I'm helping people but it's also kind of fun.*

Values and beliefs. Another theme that emerged from the alumni interviews was the importance of values and beliefs in sustaining community involvement. Several alumni reported valuing helping others and making a difference, and therefore chose to become and remain involved in community-based activities and organizations that provided them with this particular satisfaction. Similarly, one alumnus' religious beliefs provided motivation for ongoing community involvement, as being a caring and giving person was promoted by her faith; principles that she strove to embody in her life. This theme is exemplified in the following quotations:

I wanted to be involved with something...that was important to me and showed that it helped people.

...just wanting to do it I guess. And I have no idea why I wanted to do it, but it was something that's important to me.

...part of it I think is my religious background too. ...how God was so giving and I feel like it's something that I should be doing too. So I think that's part of it.

Sense of responsibility/commitment. It was clear that some interview participants' community involvement was driven by their strong sense of social responsibility and commitment. Some involved themselves in school- and community-based activities because they felt it was their duty as citizens who took from the community to give back in any way they could. Another alumni simply recognized that, in order for any action to take place or any positive change to be effected into the community, someone within the community needed to act as the catalyst—and she was willing to undertake the challenge. This theme is illustrated in the following passages:

...it's kind of in my nature that I feel like I should be doing something. ...I take a lot from the community and I think that it's my job as a citizen to give back to it in ways that I can. ...I'm a student so it's not like I can so much donate a lot of money, so I donate my time in kind.

...probably deep down I know that I can't just think of myself in that somebody's got to do something if something's going to happen. ... ...I've been at so many meetings...even when we were in high school it was just a plain student council meeting where it was like, 'so who's going to take part and who's going to take charge and organize this?' and nobody wanted to do anything. And I remember saying 'if you want this to happen somebody's got to do something.' ...sometimes it was just taking part because, for example in the choir, if nobody shows up you've got nobody to sing with and there will be no choir and there will be only one person singing and that becomes a singer and not a choir. And so even if it was just me being a part of a choir I still contributed to a greater sound, you know what I mean? ...basically I think that it's because I can't see myself just thinking of myself.

Positive outcomes. The positive outcomes many alumni experienced as a result of their community work clearly motivated them to continue to be involved over the following months and years. Alumni identified four positive outcomes that they felt most strongly motivated them to stay involved: success, satisfaction, recognition, and personal growth and development. This theme is expressed in the following quotations:

...it's the feeling you get from doing that kind of work and just...the sense of accomplishment and, for me, it just feels right. That's when I think I'm at my happiest when I'm doing that kind of work...

...the confidence I think was a big thing and just that feeling of just kind of being important...and making a difference, not so much being important, but making a difference.... When you can actually see that your efforts are paying off and you're reaching people and making a difference...that really makes...you want to keep going and do more...

...it's seeing the impacts of your involvement. For example, simple thing like playing with a baby at the hospital and then seeing that baby smile, it makes me so happy. Or giving someone a hamper at the food bank and them being so thankful is so rewarding that it...motivates you to keep involved.

... through all the activities I had done I received several awards along the way and it's really...nice to know that people recognize what you're doing.... When you're doing all this hard work and you don't get recognized eventually you would just stop...you would get burnt out and figure 'what's the point?' So when people recognize your efforts it really makes a difference and...continues your motivation basically.

I kept feeling better and better and better about myself. I kept saying...I can make a difference and I was making sense out of what had just happened to me. ...and

in making sense of what happened to me I was helping other people and that was

huge, so I was like, 'let's keep doing this.'

Alumni identified a host of individual-level factors that contributed to their

sustained community involvement. Some alumni credited their personal capacity to do

the job for keeping them involved, while others discussed the role their interests, values

and beliefs, and sense of responsibility and commitment to society played in their

ongoing community participation. Moreover, some alumni reported deriving motivation

to remain involved from the benefits and positive outcomes that they experienced as a

result of their work.

Social-level factors. This section describes the two main social-level factors that

alumni identified as critical in contributing to their sustained community involvement:

the social aspect of involvement and the influence of others. The ways in which these

factors sustain community involvement in young people are detailed below.

Social aspect of involvement. In the same way that the social aspect of

conferences kept delegates wanting to return year after year, the social aspect of

community participation was identified as a factor that kept them involved on an ongoing

basis in community-based activities as well. As expressed in the following passage, some

interview participants were motivated to stay engaged within their communities because

it allowed them to connect with like-minded youth on a regular basis:

What's kept me involved? I think I really like meeting the people that you get

involved with, because when you're volunteering you're volunteering with other

people that really care about what you're volunteering for ...

99

Social influence. Many alumni felt that important people in their lives were critical in helping them to achieve sustained involvement in community-based activities and organizations. Parents, close friends, and peers were all identified as having influenced alumni to some degree and having motivated them to continue to remain involved over the years. This theme is expressed in the following interview excerpts:

...a lot of peer pressure [kept me involved] too! (laughs) People kind of telling me, 'oh, well, you need to help out with this' and that sort of thing. But mostly it's just because I really want to do it usually.

...I think maybe my parents encouraged me to get involved when I was little and then maybe that carried on throughout the years. And...I made friends that were also involved with other things and so you sometimes try out the things that your friends are doing and then you find out that you like it and you carry on with it. So maybe the crowd of people that I hung out with impacted it as well.

I think also the family influence. If your parents encourage you to then you're more likely to or at least try it out and see if you like it. And also my teachers encouraged me as well so maybe teachers or profs that ask you, 'oh, maybe you want to try that out.'

To summarize, SC alumni identified two important social-level factors that they felt contributed to sustained involvement in young people. Specifically, some SC alumni suggested that the influence of others was a key social-level sustaining factor, while others identified maintaining access to like-minded youth as one of the many reasons they had remained involved in school- and community-based activities.

Systems-level factors. This section features the two systems-level factors that alumni identified as critical in contributing to their sustained community involvement: community support and community needs. The ways in which these factors sustain community involvement in young people are outlined below.

Community support. Just as alumni felt that support from the SC contributed to their sustained post-conference community involvement, they noted that support from the community was equally critical. Whether the support was obtained from the community in general or from key individuals within the community (e.g., youth-friendly adults working for community-based organizations), having others actively demonstrate that they believed in them and also expressed appreciation for their contributions to the community was extremely motivating for several alumni. This is theme of community support is expressed in the following passages:

> ...*I'm sure not all communities would be that supportive...they really let me do everything that I wanted (laughs) which was really nice...and...just supported me as much as they could. ...the newspaper...they got a little carried away! Like I swear! Every week there would be something about me in the paper...it got a little embarrassing after a while. ...but it was really sweet...that they would do that. ...the whole community was just really supportive as a whole.*

...I was fortunate because our coordinator...basically kept us involved in letting

us know that this is your guys' program, you guys can do it. So basically we had

that support but, unfortunately there are some people that they don't have that

kind of key support, you know, because you always need that adult, an adult there

for your support. So that's how I see it.

Community needs. A few alumni felt that the unique needs of their particular

communities contributed to their sustained community involvement. Whether they were

concerned about the lack of opportunities available for young people, concerned about

pressing social and/or health issues, or concerned about the absence of a venue for youth

voice within their community, the fact that their communities had specific needs was

motivating to those who were determined to address these needs and effect change. This

theme is illustrated in the interview passages below:

Probably the lack of stuff that was going on here...or what I felt to be a lack of

stuff going on. ... I think because I wasn't satisfied with the opportunities for

young people in this province...it's something that kept me involved...

...I would say maybe two percent of people that were actually doing something in

the community because the community has never ever been very involved in

changing social issues and changing health issues. ...everybody kind of just works

for themselves or...thinks that it's too big of an issue to deal with. So the lack of

motivation was kind of a motivator, I guess.

...our community is kind of messed up. ...young people weren't having a voice

here. ...I felt that nobody had a voice it was always just kids that were high

102

achievers or kids that were always in trouble were the ones that got programs or

just spoiled kids. So the kids involved in the youth council are basically the ones

in the middle...really just good kids, right? ...we were fighting for...that little

person in the corner that can't have a voice... ...that's basically really why I

wanted to get more involved in my community because I felt that...we needed a

stand somehow.

To summarize, having support from the community at large and living in a community with specific needs they feel they can address are important factors in sustaining community involvement in young people. In addition, the social aspect of involvement (i.e., having opportunities to connect with other like-minded youth) and having support and approval from important and influential individuals within their lives are also important sustaining factor for many youth. What is more, young people's capacity, interests, values and beliefs, and sense of social responsibility also contribute to their sustained involvement, as do the positive outcomes they experience as a result of their efforts. Furthermore, the outcomes or benefits that young people experience as a result of attending SC conferences as well as the ongoing support, encouragement, and assistance they receive from the SC and SC staff are important in keeping them actively involved in their communities.

In the following section the discussion will shift from an examination of the factors that sustain community participation in young people to a discussion on the factors that inhibit this type of youth engagement.

Factors that prevent or hinder engagement

The purpose of this section is to compliment the preceding sustaining factors

discussion with a description of the factors that hinder or prevent young people from

initiating and/or sustaining meaningful participation, not only in SC conferences, but in

community settings as well. That is, consideration will be given to the three distinct

phases of conference participation, pre-conference, in-conference, and post-conference

participation. In order to draw attention to some of the unique barriers to involvement

that youth conferences create, this section will focus on two general areas. First, there

will be an examination of the various factors that might prevent or impede young

people's involvement both with the SC itself and with respect to engagement in the

conference proceedings. Second, this section examines the challenges faced by

conference attendees when they return to their communities and attempt to implement SC

conference inspired projects and initiatives. In addition, this section will explore the

barriers to non-SC related community involvement; that is, the factors that present

challenges for young people wishing to initiate or sustain any type of participation,

including involvement in school- or community-based activities, volunteer/community

service, and more. See Figure 4 for a summary of the barriers alumni identified.

Factors that prevent and hinder SC conference involvement

Alumni identified a myriad of factors pertaining directly to SC conferences that

they felt might prevent youth from attending conferences, becoming fully and

meaningfully engaged in conferences, and/or developing and sustaining ongoing

relationships with the SC after conferences. The factors emerging from the alumni

Factors that prevent and inhibit involvement

Factors that inhibit SC conference involvement

Fundraising
Fear
Group dynamics
Conference topic/theme
Conference structure/process
Lack of follow-up

Factors that inhibit ongoing community involvement

Individual-level barriers
Personal characteristics
Interests
Lack of confidence
Lack of capacity
Lack of desire, drive, motivation for action
Commitments and priorities
Individual circumstances

Social-level barriers
Social influence
"Critical mass"

Systems-level barriers
Lack of support and recognition from the community
Community politics
Judgement and negative attitudes towards young people
Limited community resources

Figure 4: Summary of the factors that prevent and inhibit involvement

interviews that are detailed below include fundraising, fear, group dynamics, conference topic/theme, conference structure and process, and post-conference follow-up.

Fundraising. The majority of SC conferences require that young people raise funds in order to offset the cost of travel, food, accommodation, registration, and more. While alumni acknowledged that fundraising was necessary—and some even enjoyed it—most believed it was the largest potential barrier to bringing young people to conferences, as it could be time-consuming and often required patience, motivation, connections and/or support from the community, the ability to sell the conference experience to others, and more. Moreover, alumni expressed the difficulties associated with having to raise funds in smaller communities where there were potentially fewer funding sources and where they often had to work alone and without direct assistance or support from SC staff. Given all of the aforementioned potential challenges, it is not surprising that one of the alumni interviewed felt that fundraising was the main reason he was unable to maintain sustained involvement with the SC after attending his first conference. That is, from the moment he returned home from his first SC conference (which was all expenses paid) he was looking forward to attending future conferences; however, he was unable to raise sufficient funds to attend the next conference and ultimately lost contact with the SC. The following alumni quotations further illustrate some of the ways in which fundraising can present challenges in the pre-conference phase of involvement:

Money. Funding themselves to get there... Like if you're working a part-time job—and I know that things have changed over time with Students Commission conferences...it's gone up and down, sometimes it's been very affordable and in

times of like financial difficulty...it's like you can't come unless you raise money.

...so I think that I've felt that to be definitely a barrier in getting there. ...if you're

in high school and you have your entire summer off and you don't work and

you're too young to work then you have a little bit of time to be fundraising. ...if

you're into part-time jobs it's often really hard to get motivated in the few hours

that you have off...and especially if you're having to go by increments of like 10

bucks... And when you're in university it's even harder...especially if you've

moved to a different community and you don't know the people there. ...there's a

lot of things that can stand in your way of getting to a conference. Are you in an

area where there's an office for the Students Commission...? ...can you actually

go to someone and get...help in person or are you doing it all correspondence?

Have you even met this person before you tried to get there? ...do you have a

good understanding of what the conference is all about before hand...are you

able to talk it up to people? ...but I would have to say the number one thing that

prevents people from getting to a conference would be money.

...it would be easier to probably [get together with other delegates before the

conference to] fundraise and I felt kind of like I had to do it all on my own. ...I'm

sure that for people who lived in [larger communities], they probably were able

to do a bit more of that. But for people like me who didn't who live in [a larger

community with other delegates who were attending the conferences] it was a

little bit harder. I had to resort solely on contributions from within my

community...

Fear. Many young people attend the conferences not knowing any of the other delegates present and sometimes having never even met a SC staff member in person. In addition, as previously mentioned, many youth have had little experience traveling outside their home communities or provinces prior to attending their first SC conference; some having never before set foot on an airplane. For these and many other reasons, young people may be hesitant to attend SC conferences:

...being scared to leave home definitely can be a barrier.

Group dynamics. Having negative break out team experiences was identified as an important potential barrier to involvement, especially given that so much of the conference program revolves around team discussions and activities. Given that conferences are such intense emotional experiences and that breakout teams are made up of such a diversity of youth, it is not surprising that alumni felt that having young people work so closely in small groups presented many opportunities for conflict to arise. Specifically, alumni believed that feeling judged, excluded, put down and/or attacked by team members could potentially turn young people off to SC conferences and/or engagement in general. In addition, while having young people facilitate the groups was something that the majority of alumni enjoyed, they warned that having poorly trained and/or unskilled team leaders could be problematic as they might be unable to guide delegates through the conference experience in a meaningful way and/or facilitate the safe and respectful group processes that might prevent negative group dynamics from developing. This barrier to the in-conference phase of conference participation is highlighted in the following passages:

...who knows who's going to be in your group? They might say something that's incredibly judgemental and that's not necessarily something that the facilitator can control... ...poor facilitation too, I guess. ... ...I find the regular factors that can keep you from being in anything, just negative experiences...someone says something...you felt left out...

...at the conferences there were some people that had really extreme opinions in my group and...many people disagreed with those opinions...I know I would be discouraged if I tried voicing my opinions and then three people said, 'oh no, that's not right, that's not how it is.' So I think maybe that would have an impact, if you're constantly being told that your opinion isn't valid or isn't as important as other people's opinions...

...I don't even remember having someone who was in charge of our group or something like that...someone to oversee the process. I'm sure there was, but I don't remember them so they couldn't have been very prominent. I don't know, I guess it seemed kind of chaotic.

Conference topic/theme. Alumni identified several ways in which the conference topic/theme could be problematic for some youth during both the pre- and in-conference phases of involvement. For example, while many alumni appreciated and benefited from the issue-based approach to conferences, they warned that certain topics or issues might be too intense or personal for some delegates, which might in turn affect their desire and/or ability to participate fully and meaningfully in some or all aspects of the conferences. In addition, alumni suggested that the issue focus adopted by the SC could

109

act as a barrier to engagement if delegates were not interested in and/or failed to connect

with the issues or topics being discussed. This was the case for one alumnus interviewed,

who admitted he did not particularly enjoy his conference experience because the

conference topic was not of interest to him. Moreover, one alumnus recalled struggling to

connect with other delegates because she was not as passionate about, interested in, or

knowledgeable about the conference topic as her peers. The ways in which the

conference topic/theme can prevent engagement are exemplified in the following alumni

interview passages:

> *...how do they feel about the subject? ...is it something that...they feel pertains to*
>
> *them? Is it relevant? I mean, particularly like the Smoke-free Spaces conference,*
>
> *very issue-oriented. Like any of the ones that they've done like War Child...some*
>
> *people will simply not go because they think the issue has nothing to do with*
>
> *them...does the subject appeal to me? That can be a barrier. ... ...if it's a topic*
>
> *that's particularly emotional and brings up a lot of negative things for a young*
>
> *person, like violence...maybe that just hit home too much in a bad kind of a way.*
>
> *And I know that it's very important for the conferences to make sure that people*
>
> *are not stretched too far and that there are people on-site who are able to help*
>
> *them if they are. ...but you really don't know the extent of things until they go*
>
> *home and have to process that, I think. ... ...maybe you just didn't get it...child*
>
> *poverty, what, I don't know anyone who's poor... ...I think it's all about your buy-*
>
> *in to the subject is a large part of your involvement in how much you can*
>
> *personalize that idea.*

...at the Go Mental, Get Physical conference...there was a lot of...people who

didn't go to...some of the sessions and stuff, that's in mental health because it

more triggered some stuff that happened to them and I guess that would probably

make them lose interest in it and they won't want to go home and go 'hey

everybody, look what I didn't do.'

I just think the topic that we were doing didn't interest me very much. I was more

a science/math person. ...politics interest me, those types of things, but social

things...it was a lot of social stuff...how to you improve the situation for youth...it

just wasn't my thing.

<u>Conference structure and process</u>. One alumnus admitted to being *"turned off by*

the whole process" of the conference he attended. This alumnus struggled to achieve

meaningful participation during the event because he felt the conference process lacked

structure and that overall the event was highly disorganized. He recalled never being sure

what was happening where and when and was unclear as to what delegates had been

brought together to accomplish and why:

...I remember it wasn't for me. ... Yeah. That's probably why I never went back.

But I felt that it was very disorganized...maybe that's why I'm having trouble

remembering what we did because I remember that I didn't really know what the

point was, I guess.

[Interviewer: And was there anything about the conference that prevented

you from getting more involved?]

...I don't think so although I probably wouldn't get involved in that type of

conference again because...I remember that we would discuss all these things, we

would have to present things, what we thought...suggestions for how to

improve...life for youth and I guess it was just, like, what was the point of it?

Follow-up. Many alumni felt it was important for the SC to maintain post-

conference contact with delegates—even if only via a simple newsletter or e-mail

bulletin—as they believed failure to do so reduced the likelihood that delegates would

attend subsequent conferences and develop and maintain ongoing relationships with the

SC. Several of the alumni interviewed could not recall having ever received any sort of

post-conference communication from the SC, and while they could not guarantee that

follow-up would have kept them involved, they felt it was important to notify youth of

potential engagement opportunities so that they are aware of their options. Furthermore,

one alumnus pointed out that for some youth attending only one conference might not be

enough for them to build the capacity, experience the personal growth, and/or gain the

confidence to be able to apply what they have learned to create change within their

communities. Thus, as expressed in the following passages, without ongoing invitations

to participate or some sort of continuation after their first conference experience,

achieving sustained engagement could be challenging for many young people:

...I don't remember ever getting a piece of information after...other than a copy

of the report...I don't even think we got pictures. I don't, however, ever remember

having a phone call or a letter from somebody...saying, 'hey...we're going to

have another conference, do you want to participate, do you want to get

involved?' ...I don't recall that ever happening.

[Interviewer: Do you feel like you might have gotten more involved if that had happened?]

...the opportunity would have been there. ... So, without that I kind of just went on my merry way.

Well some people may feel very isolated when they leave the conference. ...maybe they are still in contact via e-mail or whatever with staff and other young people...and I think that I would have been one of them, needed that extra conference...needed to go again...a little boost for morale, depending upon where you're living. ...if you're the only kid who came from up north...I think you sort of need that...buffer session...some continuation...I think that's really important. I think that if you're completely cut off and that's sort of it and you're never going to see the people again then I think that can be a really big challenge. ... ...I think that conference follow-up is a big thing and how that's done.

In sum, there are many factors that act as full or partial barriers to SC conference involvement that prevent or hinder young people from attending conferences, limit to some extent the engagement quality of their participation in the conferences, or minimize the opportunity for participants to establish and maintain relationships with the SC organization. Pre-conference factors include being intimidated by the idea of attending such large-scale events, being unable to meet fundraising objectives, or being turned off by a particular conference topic or theme. During the conference they might struggle to participate meaningfully because they do not connect with the issues being discussed, they might become averse to the entire experience as a result of having negative experiences in their breakout teams, or they might be turned off by the event's structure

and process. Subsequent to the conference they may simply fail to remain involved or suffer waning interest because of poor or non-existent post-conference follow-up and/or lack of ongoing support from the SC.

Having considered the barriers associated with participation in the actual youth conference it is of equal importance to examine the factors that inhibit or hinder post-conference community involvement. This is a key aspect of the study because one of the goals of SC conferences is to encourage young people to work within their communities to create change. Given that barriers to community involvement exist at many levels, the following discussion will begin with an examination of individual-level barriers, then explore the social-level barriers, and conclude with a discussion of systems-level barriers.

Factors that prevent and inhibit community involvement

Individual-level factors. Alumni mentioned several individual-level factors that they felt might prevent young people from initiating or sustaining involvement in both community- and SC-based activities. Specifically, alumni identified personal characteristics; interests; confidence; capacity; desire, drive, and motivation for action; commitments and priorities; and personal circumstances as potential barriers to sustained involvement. These seven factors are discussed in detail below.

Personal characteristics. Alumni identified two main characteristics that they possessed that prevented them from becoming or staying involved in community-based activities and programs. As expressed in the following passages, alumni who tended to be shy or lazy often struggled with involvement:

...I guess if you're really shy...that would be hard. ...I am a little shy, not a lot

shy...so it wasn't too bad for me. But I guess if you were really a quiet person

then...it would probably be hard.

That was kinda one of the reasons to keep me back from a lot of things was

because I was too shy...

If it's very, very important to you and you're not lazy like I could tend to be you'd

find a way to do it anyway. People do that, right?

Interests. Just as alumni identified personal interests as a sustaining factor, they also acknowledged that interests could prevent individuals from becoming or staying involved in certain activities or organizations. Moreover, alumni pointed out that some young people might not be interested in community involvement in general and thus would choose to participate in other types of activities instead. This theme is illustrated below:

...also it has to be kind of interesting to you. It's one thing to go out and do all

this volunteer work but if you're not enjoying it. Like my time at the hospital, I did

it but I can't say that that would be somewhere that I would go back to...and I

know it's necessary but I'm sure there's some people that actually enjoy that.

...now...I coach curling for little kids and...I enjoy that, it's something that I know

and...they're having fun. Whereas working in the hospital...it was necessary, it

was important, but it was also depressing at times.

Lack of confidence. Lacking confidence was seen as a major stumbling block for many young people who wanted to create change within their communities. Alumni

acknowledged the importance of self-confidence to virtually all aspects of involvement, but felt it was particularly critical for youth who wished to implement their own community-based initiatives. As expressed in the following passages, alumni felt that lacking confidence could prevent young people from becoming involved by causing them to doubt their own abilities and contributions as well as by making it difficult for them to effectively communicate their desire to make a difference and/or apply what they have learned from the SC conferences to create change:

> ...confidence. ...even after the conference...I'm sure you see a lot of people that have an increase in confidence but you also see a lot of people that...aren't at that place in life where they are able to...be more confident or to feel more assured about themselves and stuff like that. And if you're not comfortable and you're not confident about what you're doing then it's going to be really hard to stay involved.

> ...at the time I really wasn't equipped with the...right tools to say 'yeah, ok, this is what I learned' and... 'I really want to make a difference in the world and help...change Canada as a country.' I really wasn't equipped with...the self-confidence that it would have needed, and me being such a young age I didn't really have that...to keep going, I suppose.

Lack of capacity. Some alumni mentioned that lacking the knowledge and/or skills necessary to conduct the work or obtain the support of the community were barriers to engagement that many individuals faced, particularly those wishing to develop and implement their own community-based projects or initiatives. That is, the idea of organizing events and/or implementing projects could seem overwhelming; especially to

those who felt they lacked an understanding of how to go about creating community change. Moreover, alumni acknowledged the importance of well-developed communication skills as being a springboard to success, as they believed those who lacked the ability to communicate and sell their experience to others would likely struggle to get the support and/or assistance necessary to bring their ideas to life. This theme is captured in the following passages:

...when you come from a background and you don't know what resources you have...like it seems very basic to...myself and to a lot of people but that's a large part of what we had to do for my [SC] office is that people don't know, 'I want to set up a food drive,' and they had no idea where to start, totally daunting to them. And then there are other people who just understand how the system works and they know, 'ok this is who I have to call first,' and it's just this whole logic that they have, that not everyone has. ...so that's a real barrier. ...when you go back and it's so easy for me to set up something and it would take somebody else a long time, I think that's a huge stumbling block for some people.

...if you weren't good at communicating...it might be hard for you to go back and share your experience with everyone...and I think that really makes a difference if you can sit down with someone and explain to them...this amazing experience and what you want to do with it and...then they would be like, 'oh yeah...for sure,' ...and then they'll want to help you. Whereas...if you can't explain yourself properly and you can't make them understand then maybe they wouldn't...be as willing to help. ...so probably that would make a difference.

<u>Lack of desire, drive, and motivation for action</u>. As previously discussed,
delegates typically found the conference atmosphere to be stimulating and exciting and
many, as they departed from the events, felt inspired and motivated to take action. Once
removed from the conference environment however, alumni reported that it was
challenging to foster and sustain the drive, desire, and motivation for involvement and
thus found it challenging to maintain involvement in SC- and/or community-based
activities. Furthermore, this was an ongoing issue for several interview participants who
reported continuously struggling, as their desire, drive, and motivation for involvement
ebbed and flowed throughout the months and years. This theme is expressed in the
following interview passages:

...when you don't have all the excitement around you, and you're not living

amongst it, it's hard to keep involved and then...I tell you, I've organized

stuff...when I was working [as SC staff] and we bring people back and it was like

pulling teeth to get people to come. ...we'd have a few who would...but it

certainly wasn't very easy.

...when you're at the conference you have all these other people, you're there and

you're really excited about stuff and you really cannot wait to get home and...put

it into motion basically. Then you get home and you don't have everybody else's

excitement with you, you're kind of on your own. ...you kind of lose the motivation

to go or the support kind of...

...I can get in a rut sometimes and...it's easier not to do something than to do

something.

Commitments and priorities. It is not surprising that many alumni reported that their commitments and priorities were critical in determining their level of involvement over the years. Many wished to be more involved, but were unable because school, work, family, and other community involvement activities left them little time for much else. Equally not surprising was that some alumni reported that their priorities also largely determined how they spent their time. Specifically, a few alumni remembered their social lives being their greatest priority as adolescents and young adults, which kept them from seeking out community-based engagement opportunities. One alumnus in particular remembered that as she neared the end of high school she began focusing more on her social life and as a result withdrew from many of the school- and community-based activities that were once so central in her life. The following passages illustrate how commitments and priorities can affect involvement:

I would say time constraints are probably one of the big things. ...in the last couple of years I've been taking a full course load and working and so it's really hard to fit in everything. ...I'm doing a political fundraiser on Friday and I'm just like, 'where am I going to get the time to do this?' ...time, isn't necessarily on my side all the time. But...that's pretty much one of the only things I'd say really stopped me from doing anything. 'Cause if I could I would do a lot more but...I can't.

...since I graduated high school and started my life slowly, I kind of was too busy surviving, making a bit of money to survive and trying to get into the flow of things to actually find the time to...get involved.

...as I got older...hormones took over...committees were not so important...I let

go of a lot of committees and activities that now looking back I shouldn't have,

right? But...back then boys came first and everything else came second, third, and

forth. ...I was president of my student council in grade 12 and...it wasn't a very

good experience for me. It was wasting my time, right? I couldn't wait to get out

and go out and go see my buddies...I couldn't wait. ...that's actually when...I

kind of just lost track of what...used to be important for me and...my social life

became the centre of my life.

Individual circumstances. Interview participants identified an abundance of

personal circumstances that could limit an individuals' availability for involvement at

certain times throughout their lives. The circumstances identified during interviews

ranged from health issues/personal problems, to single parenthood, to geographical

location, to life transitions, such as those associated with growing older or relocating. The

ways in which the aforementioned personal situations could present barriers to

involvement are illustrated in the following quotations from SC alumni:

...it was interesting to meet with these people and just be like we come from the

same city and there's so many people with so many problems. And, a lot of people

aren't always in a position to help, to make a change, because when they come to

the conference a lot of them are still trying to struggle with those issues

themselves.

...sometimes it does have a lot to do with transportation. ...for me now living in

the city...I can pretty much do whatever I want without any big problem. But in

small towns it's really hard if you don't have a chauffeur kind of thing to get from

120

place to place. ...I live seven miles out of the nearest town...and my dad works and so if I want to do something I needed a ride and a lot of the time it just wouldn't work out.

...I think it's pretty realistic not to expect a lot of...really, really long term [commitment from young people] just because, and it's not that people aren't going to be involved, just maybe not with the same organization. Because things change, people move, people change and their interests change...at that age I think more than when you're an adult.

In sum, a diversity of individual-level factors exist that might prevent young people from participating in their communities. Youth might possess certain characteristics, such as shyness, that hold them back or might simply have no interest in getting involved in community-based activities and organizations. Furthermore, they might lack the confidence and/or capacity to get involved and make a difference, or they might refrain from getting involved simply because they lack the desire, drive, or motivation for action. Finally, young people might lack the time to be able to devote themselves to their communities because of other commitments or priorities and/or because their current life circumstances do not permit them to become actively involved.

Social-level factors. Alumni mentioned two main social-level factors that they felt might prevent young people from initiating or sustaining involvement in both community- and SC-based activities. Specifically, they felt that young people might experience difficulty remaining engaged if important individuals within their lives did not support their being actively involved. Moreover, they felt that young people might struggle to remain involved if they lacked other young people within their communities

to collaborate with on implementing projects and initiatives. These two factors are explored in greater detail below.

Social influence. Just as the influence of others was identified as a factor that promoted sustained involvement, so too was it identified as a barrier to involvement. Alumni acknowledged the influence that family, friends, and other important people in their lives could have on the decisions they made and that without their support and encouragement becoming or remaining involved in any sort of activity or organization was often extremely difficult. Moreover, alumni mentioned peer pressure as a potential barrier for some youth, who might shy away from becoming involved for fear of being judged or perceived as "uncool." This theme is expressed in the following passages:

> ...as much as I want to pretend that I don't need to listen to my mom...if she says like, 'oh that's ugly' or 'that's a stupid idea' I am questioning it a lot more. And it's the same with friends or whatever you define as your family. ...I think that if they're not, 'oh this is a good idea' or...if you don't have support...that's it then.

> I think that when you go back to the community...there's so many people pulling you...to do other stuff and...contributing to a social cause isn't always seen as the coolest thing to do.

"Critical Mass." Several alumni identified that being the only—or one of the only—delegate to attend from their community or province made implementing project ideas from the conferences extremely difficult. They described the challenges associated with having to be completely self-motivated and how unrealistic and daunting the thought of taking on such a project by themselves seemed, especially given their other commitments and obligations. What is more, one alumnus learned first hand that even

with multiple delegates from the same area in attendance it could still be difficult to implement a project or initiative if the delegates did not build relationships during the conference. This theme is presented in the following passages:

...there's not a whole lot of people from [my province] who go [to SC conferences], because I don't know if there's a whole lot of people who apply. But you're like the only one who's been there, you're the only one who knows what happened or what it's about and stuff and there's nobody else there. ...I can't wait for someone else to go do it, you're on your own and it really depends on...the person you are, if you want to start it up again or not.

...when I first got back from the conference I didn't necessarily get anymore involved in my community and I think part of that is...I was the only person, I felt, right then and there, like maybe if I had of had someone else or a couple of other people come back with me we would have actually tried to implement a project, where I think me trying to take that on by myself was maybe a little much in my final year of high school.

...the other person that went to the conference from [my city] I didn't know very well and...I think we were the only ones from [the province] that went so it was a little hard to do anything afterwards by ourselves. ... ...it depends how many people you have that went from your own community. 'Cause there was two of us and we kind of went with different circles of people. ...if there's more people in your own community that go or that want to do something then it's a little easier.

In sum, alumni mentioned two main social-level factors that they believed prevented or inhibited young people from achieving sustained engagement. Specifically, they felt that young people might struggle to achieve sustained participation within their communities if they did not have other delegates or young people within their communities that they could collaborate with in creating change within their communities. Further, they felt that young people might be less likely to become or remain actively engaged within their schools and communities if influential people within their lives did not support or encourage their being actively involved.

Systems-level factors. In addition to the aforementioned individual- and social-level barriers, alumni also identified a variety of barriers that exist at the systems level that can also inhibit involvement. Specifically, alumni discussed facing challenges such as lack of support from the community, community politics, negative attitudes and judgement, and limited community resources and they described the detrimental effect such factors could have on youth engagement. These four systems-level barriers will be described in greater detail below.

Lack of support and/or recognition from communities. Just as community support was identified as a key sustaining factor, lacking support from community members was seen as a major barrier to achieving sustained and meaningful involvement. Alumni identified many ways communities could demonstrate a lack of support—sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally—that would prevent involvement, particularly in those looking to develop and implement their own community-based projects or initiatives. For example, community members might refuse or be unable to volunteer their time and energy to assist with the implementation of projects, put up intentional

barriers to prevent young people's initiatives from succeeding, be overly negative or harshly critical of young people's project/intervention ideas, and/or fail to recognize young people's contributions or acknowledge their hard work, which youth might find discouraging. One alumnus acknowledged that it often only took the support and encouragement of one key individual to counter a general lack of community support, but that without that key support it could be extremely difficult to continue. Thus, as expressed in the following passages, struggling with a lack of community support can leave youth discouraged, unmotivated, lacking the confidence to continue, and, in extreme cases, burnt out:

> *...if some of the adults weren't as supportive it could be difficult for students, 'cause...if we're organizing a dance...we always have to have an adult present...to supervise and really they didn't do anything but they had to be there. ...if we couldn't have found anyone to volunteer to do that...it took two hours of their time, then we wouldn't have been able to. ...you really do kind of need the support of the adults. So I guess if they weren't so generous then you might have difficulties.*

> *Well support. Whether or not they are going to get a buy-in from the community I think is a big part of it. You know, [if] people think...what you've gone off and done is complete rubbish and you're never going to be able to change anything then, really, why are you going to continue? ...you can only fight the good fight for so long until you get that burn out. ...I've definitely been at that point before and some people can rebound from that, when they've sort of been right at the face of rejection and people telling them that they're worthless...some people can*

rebound from that and see that these people really don't know what they're

talking about and just go on. But there's others whose communities can be

so...negative towards what it is that they are trying to do that they can't go on.

...another reason why I think some people don't get involved 'cause there's no

adult there to help push for them to keep going. So they tend to just lose it because

nobody's encouraging them to.

...I remember being so burnt out...[and putting in all of this] hard work and

feeling like it was for no reason, like...the work that we were doing wasn't being

appreciated. ...I think that's the last thing in my community that I was part of,

completely involved in... ...people didn't seem to...want to help out or didn't care

or, we were in the midst of deciding if we were going to keep the house open or

not and...people weren't showing up for meetings and things like that and that's

kind of just when I said, 'enough is enough.'

One interview participant was struggling with this very issue at the time of the

interview, as her school principal would not allow her to hold an educational workshop

she had created at her school during school hours. She contemplated holding the

workshop outside of school but, not only did her community lack facilities where she

could present her workshop at a reasonable cost (a barrier that is discussed further in this

section), she also felt that the youth in her community would not support her efforts by

attending her workshop. This case example illustrates perfectly how a lack of support

from the community can hinder young people's abilities to implement community-based

initiatives:

...my principal wouldn't want me to have a workshop in the school. ... ...I think

he doesn't want people missing out on class.

...the majority of people [in my community] are youth... And not a whole lot of

them are really interested in spending the day or even like an hour or something

to listen to what somebody else has to say about something...they're just not

interesting in sitting down and having an educational workshop.

<u>Community politics</u>. Community politics was identified as a barrier to

engagement that particularly affected those living in smaller, more remote areas. Politics

can hinder youth engagement in a variety of ways; they may not wish to become active

within their communities because they have had negative experiences with some of the

members of their communities, or they may be purposely excluded from or not informed

about certain potential engagement opportunities. The following passages exemplify this

theme:

...I didn't really necessarily want to stay involved in my own community because

of how much I really disliked a lot of people in it.

...I was from a very small town and there's a lot of politics in small towns

and...one of my teachers was a guidance counsellor who found out about all these

sort of things in your grade 12 year that you could try to do [such as SC

conferences]. And I wasn't told about it [the conference]. ... She did this to my

sisters too. She had, like, this vendetta for my dad...

127

In addition, one alumnus described how the political and economic climate of certain communities might dictate the causes youth can get involved in or the issues they can take a stand against, thus limiting the causes they can take on within their communities:

Well if you're talking about small town... talking about the issue of maybe pollution or something and you're in a small town, maybe with like a major industry that's a polluter and they would be a major employer, so the economics of that I can totally imagine.

Judgement and negative attitudes towards young people. Several alumni felt that people's negative attitudes towards young people were a major barrier to meaningful youth participation. They described how challenging it could be to face the negative perceptions that some—but not all—adults have of young people and how difficult it could be to gain support for their involvement in settings or communities where adults doubt that young people are capable of creating change or contributing meaningfully to society. Moreover, one alumnus indicated that being judged based on their pasts could be a barrier for youth who were seen as being "troubled" but have since turned their lives around, as they might be prohibited from participating in various community-based activities if they have a bad reputation or a criminal record. The damaging impacts that negative attitudes and stereotypes can have on youth engagement are exemplified below:

There's a lot of... adults out there with the attitude that kids don't know anything, that that could be a huge barrier.

...where someone's either not willing to trust you... they're not willing to... donate something to you... they think that you're a punk because you're young and that you're not able to.

...some of the people I met at the conference they have turned their lives around.

Originally they were...labelled delinquents...but they have since turned their lives

around. But it would be difficult for them to do something because a lot of these

community groups want to see background checks and...so if they...label you

as...doing something in your past...they don't realize that maybe you have

changed or rehabilitated... There's just judgement and labels out there...

Limited community resources. Many alumni—particularly those from more

remote areas of Canada—reported having difficulty implementing community-based

projects and initiatives because their communities often lacked the resources necessary to

assist in making their projects a reality. Alumni described how difficult it could be for

youth from certain communities to receive financial support for their projects and

described having difficulties accessing the facilities required to carry out their initiatives.

Moreover, one alumnus expressed how overwhelming it could be to attempt to

implement a project or initiative in a community with few resources and/or community-

based programs to build on, as starting from scratch could be time consuming and trying.

The following statements from alumni illustrate how limited community resources can

present barriers for youth seeking to become engaged in their communities:

...just the fact that it's so rural. ...there's really minimal resources to...build off

of...if you want to implement some kind of activity or some sort of program

there's no baseline to kind of start with you have to create your own baseline,

which is kind of daunting.

...if I needed a grant for money or something like that, I think in terms of young

people trying to implement projects that's not always possible. ...if I had have

wanted to start a program in my community, say like a literacy outreach program

or something like that, I obviously didn't have the funds available, but...my town

wouldn't have had it either. Money.

...here there's not really a whole lot of resources, like if I wanted to hold a

workshop, I can't hold it at school, so I would have to hold it at a community rec

centre, but in order to do that I would have to rent it out, which costs a fair bit of

money.

It should be clear that many barriers exist at the systems level that might prevent

young people from becoming or staying involved within their communities. These factors

include, but are not limited to, lack of support and acknowledgement from community

members, community politics, judgement or negative attitudes towards young people,

and limited community resources. In addition, young people's involvement may be

prevented or hindered because they have no other youth to work with on their projects

and initiatives or because important individuals within their lives may not approve of

and/or support them in being involved. Further, young people's personal characteristics;

interests; confidence; capacity; desire, drive, and motivation for action; commitments and

priorities; and personal circumstances can also present barriers to community

involvement. Finally, fundraising, fear, group dynamics, conference topic/theme,

conference structure and process, and post-conference follow-up can act as barriers that

prevent youth from attending conferences, becoming fully and meaningfully engaged in

conferences, and/or developing and sustaining ongoing relationships with the SC after conferences.

Identifying and acknowledging that said barriers exist are critical first steps to addressing them; thus, the next section presents a series of recommendations on how the SC can overcome some of the abovementioned obstacles and improve conferences so that they better promote and sustain involvement in delegates.

Recommendations

Alumni were able to generate many specific recommendations that the SC could implement in order to remove some of the stumbling blocks that might inhibit future delegates from achieving full and meaningful participation in pre-conference, in-conference, and post-conference phases. Alumni suggestions centred on awareness-raising and advertising, pre- and post-conference communication, facilitator training, conference content, delegate project planning and implementation, and alumni relations.

1) *Raise public awareness* – Many alumni recommended that the SC focus greater attention on increasing public awareness of the organization and their conferences. In the words of one alumnus:

> *...a lot of people that I talk to that have no idea what the Students Commission is. ... So I guess more widespread knowledge of the Students Commission [would help to promote involvement] because you can't apply for something if you've never heard of it.*

In order to raise awareness, alumni suggested having staff and alumni attend schools and community organizations to talk about the SC and SC conferences, not only in larger centres, but in smaller communities as well. Alumni also recommended that, in

order to reach a broader range of young people, the SC should advertise their conferences and events on television and radio stations across the country as well as in settings where they might catch the attention of marginalized youth (such as at youth drop-in centres, cultural organizations, and more). Alumni also felt that the SC was too Ontario-based and felt that the organization could benefit a larger number of youth from across the country if they were to achieve a greater national presence by holding conferences and events in as many locations across the country as possible and opening more SC offices outside Ontario.

2) *Facilitate pre-conference delegate introductions* – Many wished they had been connected with other delegates from their communities and surrounding areas prior to attending the conferences. Introducing delegates in advance could effectively remove or reduce several of the barriers to pre- and post-conference engagement described in the barriers section. For example, having others to turn to for support and motivation would likely make fundraising more appealing and enjoyable for delegates, especially those who must work without direct support and assistance from SC staff.

3) *Set pre-conference expectations* – Some alumni felt that their conference experience could have been improved had they had a better understanding of what would be taking place at the conferences prior to attending. One alumnus in particular felt misled by the conference advertising, while others were unsure of the purposes and objectives of the conferences, even after they had arrived and the program had begun:

> *...maybe I didn't know what I was getting into, right? ...I remember the*
> *description of it [the conference] was that it was a political thing and...so I think*
> *that's the part that interested me, but it wasn't so much that.*

In order to prevent confusion in future conference-goers and also to assist them in deciding whether or not the events truly interest them *before* they attend the conferences, alumni suggested the SC make the purpose and goal of the conferences as clear and transparent as possible in all advertising, hold pre-conference information sessions for young people and their parents in as many locations throughout Canada as possible, and make detailed conference information available to delegates via mail or on the SC website (e.g., provide delegates with an agenda and schedule, a description of the conference process, ideas on what to expect at the conferences, and questions to think about prior to attending).

4) *Issue pre-conference topical briefings* – Many alumni felt that the conference experience could be improved for delegates if they arrived at the events with some background knowledge on the topics and issues being addressed. Thus, in addition to providing delegates with detailed conference attendance details prior to the events, it was suggested that the SC also disseminate information packages with current, accurate session briefing notes pertinent to the key conference themes. Since a large portion of the conference program is dedicated to issue-based discussions, implementing this recommendation could not only promote more active conference participation in all delegates, but it should especially benefit those who might lack the confidence to speak out or share their opinions during discussions for fear of looking "stupid" because they are unfamiliar with the conference topics.

5) *Focus on the quality of conference content* – Concerns were raised as to whether enough consideration was being put into developing the content of conferences, particularly in terms of the conference themes/topics. That is, one alumnus in

particular felt that SC staff were experts in planning and coordinating conferences logistically, but questioned whether these same staff necessarily had the background and/or training to create conference programs adequately addressing complex topics such as health, sexuality, mental health, and more. In the words of the alumnus:

...I'm concerned about content with the Students Commission conferences from a professional standpoint. ...sometimes I don't think that there's enough thought that goes into...the content of the conference as there is that goes into the logistics of the conference. And I think if you're spending more time on logistics you're missing the point of a conference. And I think that that's something I have seen happen over the past little bit. And...that's a huge critique for me to say that...but I truly believe that and this is my problem right now, I don't think they have enough expertise in content on staff...to develop the conferences in the way that they could be.

Ensuring that the issues and topics are being adequately addressed and presented at the events is important in building a solid knowledge base in conference-goers and, as an added benefit, might assist them in implementing conference inspired community-based projects:

...I think you need someone...to make sure that the content is as good as it can be so that people are walking away, not only with the ability to run a project, but to know something about what they're talking about. ... ...it's just giving people the tools so that when they get questioned they can answer appropriately and they don't come up with some nonsense...

6) *Provide project development and implementation training* – Alumni were quick to point out that in order to equip delegates with the skills, abilities, and capacity to implement and develop community-based projects and interventions, they should emerge from conferences not only with a solid foundation in the conference topic, but also with community and intervention development skills and training. In order to achieve this, alumni recommended dedicating a portion of each conference to teaching delegates about the "business side" of projects including how to pitch ideas, set boundaries, and negotiate support within their communities. In addition, alumni felt that delegates would benefit from basic research training as well as discussions exploring roles, responsibilities, and expectations, specifically *"what you can you expect from your community and what they can expect from you."* Such additions to the conference program could go a long way in promoting and sustaining community participation in delegates by helping them feel more confident and capable, and better preparing them for the task of community-based project and intervention implementation.

7) *Enhance facilitator training* – Several alumni were concerned that some of the youth facilitators were inadequately trained and/or prepared to assume their important conference roles. In order to ensure facilitators are well prepared, it was suggested that the SC revamp the pre-conference facilitator training and develop a comprehensive, thorough, and accessible facilitation training manual that youth are expected to read in advance so that they arrive at the conferences prepared to discuss facilitation. Moreover, it was suggested that a portion of the facilitator training session be dedicated to, not only providing accurate information, but also preparing

facilitators to lead discussions on the topics/issues being addressed at the conferences, and that whenever possible facilitators who have some degree of expertise in the conference topic be selected to lead the breakout teams. Taking every step possible to enhance the quality of facilitation at conferences is important considering facilitation can often make or break a group experience. Not only would the more thorough training help the facilitators build important skills that are applicable beyond the conferences, effectively preparing them for their roles would set them up for success and could contribute to making their experience of taking on a leadership role (often for the first time) more positive. Moreover, having better equipped facilitators who are able to address group dynamics issues as they arise, dispel myths, and correct misinformation pertaining to the conference topics would surely help to reduce the barriers that some delegates face in achieving full and meaningful participation during the breakout team sessions, thus likely contributing to making the conference a more positive experience for them as well.

8) *Develop project resource packages* – Many of the alumni interviewed believed that delegates would benefit greatly from having concrete resource packages to take away from the conferences. While many indicated that the production and subsequent presentation of the "final reports" on Parliament Hill was a major highlight, some suggested the format and the content of the reports be altered so as to make the reports more practical and valuable to delegates looking to initiate projects in their home communities after the conferences. In the words of one alumnus:

> *...maybe less importance on this big report at the end and more on tool kits that people can bring back to their community or something. 'Cause the report is*

largely for funders. ...really when it comes down to it...I wonder of how much value the report is to the young person.

>*[Interviewer: But didn't you say the report was something that got you really excited?]*

Yes, having something very concrete in your hand to present and say we did this. But maybe the tone of what that is or the focus of that work is different. I think something that's more functional rather than this is what we did all week. Something like...objectives, future steps, action plan, like more action-oriented...just so it's more usable, rather than just a memory book...

In addition to concrete project action plans, alumni felt it would also be beneficial for delegates who want to participate more actively in their communities to receive an index of youth-friendly organizations they could become involved with as well as suggestions on who, outside of SC staff, they could contact for support with their projects and initiatives. Furthermore, one alumnus suggested that straightforward pre-developed projects be available for delegates who want to become more involved in their communities but are unsure of what kind of project to implement:

>*...it's hard too because you're asking teens to go back and to create the projects...and a lot of times they don't know what they want to work on. ...I think it might be very helpful to have...pre-packaged projects that they could work on...which...may be not as good because it takes away from the priming processes, but it might also simplify things to get them started on the first project...[and for] continuing to build on the skills which they had acquired [at the conferences] it might be helpful. ...a first project they go back and do is*

very... simple and laid out for them so they gain the confidence and then you push

them... a little more. Ok, now you go back and you organize something by

yourself.

Providing young people with concrete tools and resources such as the ones described

above would likely promote community involvement in delegates who wish to

become more active by minimizing the barriers that typically prevent them from

initiating immediate action upon their return from the conferences with the objective

of engaging them while they are still highly motivated and excited and the conference

experience is still fresh in their minds. Moreover, these resources could promote post-

conference community involvement in delegates by simplifying the process of

developing and implementing conference inspired community-based projects and

initiatives and thereby making project implementation seem less daunting and more

appealing.

9) *Consider regionalized project planning* – One alumnus suggested that in order to

facilitate the development and implementation of conference inspired initiatives,

project planning should occur at the provincial/territorial level instead of at the

national level:

... the reality is that if you're organizing a huge group project, especially if you

are just starting to become involved...it's going to make it a lot more difficult to

organize it if you're organizing it with someone from Saskatchewan and someone

from... St. John's and from Toronto. Whereas if you can...get the other people in

your community [together]...and start there... I saw more of those projects kind

of happen...those ideas I saw them happen when they got back or variations on

those ideas. Whereas the big, huge [national projects]...a lot of the time you're

not prepared and you don't have the time to take that on, and...starting small and

then moving to something a little bigger and a little bigger and getting the interest

that way and the involvement that way I think is a lot more manageable.

In order to facilitate post-conference project implementation while still allowing delegates to benefit from participating in breakout teams with youth from across the country, it was suggested that delegates from each province/territory come together on the last day of the conferences to discuss project ideas and develop plans that they can collectively put into action after the conferences. By implementing this particular recommendation the SC could increase the probability of individual success since smaller teams of delegates might achieve some "quick wins" in the local community, which would not only benefit the involved individuals and their community, but also raise the profile of the SC.

10) *Facilitate resource acquisition for delegate projects* – Several alumni believed that, if the SC were going to encourage delegates to develop community-based projects and initiatives, they should assist them as much as possible in securing the resources necessary to bring their projects to life. Some of the resources alumni felt they would have benefited from having access to included basic office supplies; facilities where they could hold meetings, workshops, and events; and funding to cover project-related expenses. While acknowledging that her suggestion was perhaps somewhat unrealistic given the SC's charitable status, one alumnus recommended that the SC set aside a body of funds strictly for financing delegate projects. The alumnus also suggested that the SC make information available to delegates on agencies,

organizations, and/or funding bodies from which they could seek assistance, donations and/or funding; either via the SC website or as part of information/resource packages distributed during the conferences.

11) *Enhance post-conference communication* – A large number of interview participants felt that the SC could promote sustained engagement in delegates through improved post-conference communication, and identified a number of reasons why follow-up should be a top priority. Not only does ongoing communication and support from the SC encourage young people to form lasting relationships with the organization and attend future SC events, it is also a key way that the SC can provide youth with the motivation, assistance, and encouragement they might need in carrying out their community-based projects:

> *...I know a lot of students don't feel they have enough support in doing what they want to do so checking in and kind of re-motivating them I think would be really beneficial.*

Moreover, action is often important to young people and many interviewees thought it was important for SC to maintain ongoing communication with delegates in order to inform them as to what affects, if any, the conferences had (it was obvious that some were still curious to this day if their work at the conferences made a difference):

> *...we presented this information [to government officials], did it have any impact? Did anyone write anything about it? Was it published? I don't even know...I never heard a thing back.*

Finally, several alumni felt that the SC should maintain ongoing communication with delegates simply because it would make them feel good to be remembered:

... follow up with a little letter here and there, a little newsletter...even now. In

receiving a newsletter 12 years ago would have made me feel pretty important,

right? ...that was 12 years ago and they still know that I was part of it and they

haven't forgotten, you know what I mean?

Alumni suggested that an effective way for the SC to improve post-conference

communication with delegates would be to create and distribute simple newsletters

and/or e-mail bulletins advertising current SC projects, events, and engagement

opportunities and featuring alumni updates and success stories. Furthermore,

participants recommended holding provincial retreats and follow-up conferences for

youth who remain actively involved in their communities and maintain ongoing

communication with the SC.

12) *Nurture relationships with alumni* – It was clear from the ways in which many of the

alumni spoke about the SC and SC conferences and their enthusiasm to be

interviewed for this project that many cared very deeply about the SC. Because they

felt so strongly about the organization, it was not surprising that many alumni stated

they would happily volunteer for the SC if ever they were asked. In the words of one

alumnus:

...if someone called me up and said... 'we were thinking of...getting all the people

[from your area] together...for a retreat weekend to talk about life post-Students

Commission...how would you feel about organizing that?' I'd be right up for

it...it's just a matter of asking sometimes. ...when you get to this age of being in

your 20s sometimes you do need to be asked...because time is limited, but if

someone were to suggest it you would make time. I don't know that I would come

up with that right now...on my own, maybe that's sad that I wouldn't have that

initiative to just be like, let's have a reunion.........I think that sometimes the

Students Commission needs to be a little proactive in utilizing their people who

are all across this country. ...we were invested in when we were young, continue

to invest in us now, as skilled people who can lead the next generation of

conference-goers, you know? Use me, you know? ...I'm here, I have the skills,

I've been through the conference experience...why not keep the momentum going

in specific locations, not just Ontario. ...yes, that's where the bulk of the delegates

may be and it may be where the bulk of the staff is, but...if we're all about youth

engagement and supporting that then...be true to your word and engage people in

all parts of the country. ...so I think it's really making use of the people who are

all over the place. The skilled young people that they've put out there...and

remembering them, you know?

Interviewees felt that the SC could accomplish a great deal by capitalizing on

their alumni's eagerness to offer assistance. They suggested that alumni could be

recruited to organize small-scale retreats or reunions in each of the

provinces/territories; become provincial representatives who support delegates and

act as links between delegates and the SC; assist with fundraising initiatives; and

more—the possibilities are endless. Creating meaningful volunteer roles for alumni

would not only sustain their involvement with the SC, it would also help to promote

sustained involvement in conference delegates by providing them with the support,

encouragement, and resources they need—and are asking for—when they return to

their home communities. In well over a decade of holding youth conferences, the SC

has hundreds—if not thousands—of alumni from coast-to-coast, which likely means that they would see considerable returns on any time, energy, and/or resources invested into taking stock of and re-engaging these youth, young adults, and adults.

Thus, while the majority of interview participants felt the conferences were successful, well run, positive, and personally enriching experiences, they felt that improvements could still be made. By implementing the above recommendations the SC can improve the pre-conference experience for delegates, help them to achieve full and meaningful participation in all aspects of the conference program, and promote sustained, active involvement in delegates and alumni with the SC, their communities, their schools, and/or any other activities or organizations that they find meaningful.

Discussion

The majority of alumni interviewed, even those who did not particularly connect with the conference experience, felt that attending SC conferences had positively influenced their lives in some way. Many alumni learned about themselves, realized they had the potential to create change, and grew and developed into more open-minded, less reserved, and more self-accepting beings while attending the conferences. They also developed and refined a host of skills and abilities including, among other things, social/interpersonal skills such as leadership, communication, and group work skills, as well as practical and applied skills such as community and intervention development and research skills. Further, the conferences provided alumni with opportunities to develop friendships and expand their social networks, which allowed them to feel more connected to like-minded youth and helped them become more accepting and understanding of others. Moreover, alumni became more knowledgeable and aware regarding a diversity

of topics and issues that were addressed at the conferences and as a result became concerned and passionate about issues they had not even thought about in the past. Finally, many alumni gained confidence, self-esteem, felt empowered and became motivated to take action as a result of attending SC conferences.

These findings are not unexpected as they are consistent with previous research examining engagement in SC youth conferences (Pancer et al., 2002). Moreover, these findings align with research examining other kinds of engagement such as volunteer/community service, social activism, and extra-curricular activities. That is, previous studies have also demonstrated that young people stand to experience personal growth and identity development (Dworkin et al., 2003; Roker & Eden, 2002; Primavera, 1999; Youniss et al., 1999), develop and refine a host of important skills and build capacity (Finn & Checkoway, 1998), develop strong relationships with peers outside their original social network (Dworkin et al., 2003; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Roker et al., 1998) and experience increased self-esteem (Barber et al., 2001; Cargo et al., 2003; Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Primavera, 1999) as a result of their involvement. That so many parallels exist between the present findings and previous youth engagement research suggests that week-long youth conferences are indeed viable contexts in which to promote meaningful youth engagement (Pancer et al., 2002) and, in terms of outcomes, participating in them can be as beneficial as participating in other types of engagement-promoting activities over longer periods of time.

Of particular interest for the present study are the involvement-related outcomes that alumni experienced, as one of the ultimate goals of SC conferences is to encourage delegates to become involved above and beyond the week-long events (e.g., in their

schools and communities). Specifically, some alumni attributed positive changes in their levels of involvement to their attendance at SC conferences, as they were inspired to develop and implement school- and community-based projects and initiatives, become involved in public speaking, and more. Moreover, some alumni reported shifting the focus of their community work after the events, as the conferences sparked in them an interest in taking on new causes. Furthermore, several alumni reported that the conferences motivated them to become more involved in the projects, activities, groups, and/or organizations they were involved with prior to attending the conferences. Finally, some reported experiencing changes in their approach, attitude, and/or underlying motivation for involvement, as they became more interested in engaging and helping others and less concerned about how they themselves benefited as a result of their involvement. That alumni experienced the abovementioned involvement-related outcomes indicates that SC conferences are meeting their objective of promoting sustained involvement in some—but certainly not all—conference delegates. These findings are hardly unexpected considering one half of interviewees were selected to participate because they had become or remained highly engaged after attending the conferences. However, they are still noteworthy as they indicate that, despite being short in duration, week-long events such as youth conferences can be viable and effective means of promoting sustained involvement in young people by helping them come to value active participation, helping others, and making a difference.

Having established that youth conferences can promote sustained engagement many questions still remain. What is it about the conference experience that contributed to alumni's sustained involvement, not only in the conferences, but also in activities

above and beyond the conferences themselves? Moreover, what other factors (e.g.,

individual-level, social-level, systems-level) contributed to alumni's sustained

involvement in their schools, communities, and other places where they live and work? In

order to answer these important questions, alumni were asked to describe the factors that

they felt contributed to their sustained post-conference involvement.

Alumni identified a diversity of factors related to the SC and SC conferences as

well as many individual-, social-, and systems-level factors that they felt promoted their

sustained post-conference involvement. Four of these factors seemed particularly

important and were thus chosen out of the list alumni generated to form a model of

sustained engagement (see Figure 5). These four factors are 1) the nature of the activities

and tasks (i.e., that they are interesting and meaningful); 2) feeling motivated, confident,

and empowered; 3) building capacity and knowledge; and 4) having adequate support and

being recognized for their hard work. These factors were chosen, not only because they

were particularly prominent themes, but also because they lend themselves particularly

well to practical recommendations. The four features of the proposed model for sustained

engagement will now be discussed in turn and, whenever possible, alumni's insights into

what it was about their experiences (either with the SC or in the community) that were

particularly effective in cultivating each sustaining factor will be discussed.

Nature of the activities and tasks. The present study suggests that the nature of the

activities and tasks that young people participate in might largely determine whether or

not they choose to remain involved (also see Cargo et al., 2003; Pancer & Pratt, 1999).

Specifically, the interviews suggest that young people are most likely to stay involved in

activities and tasks that they find meaningful, that is to say, that they think matter and feel
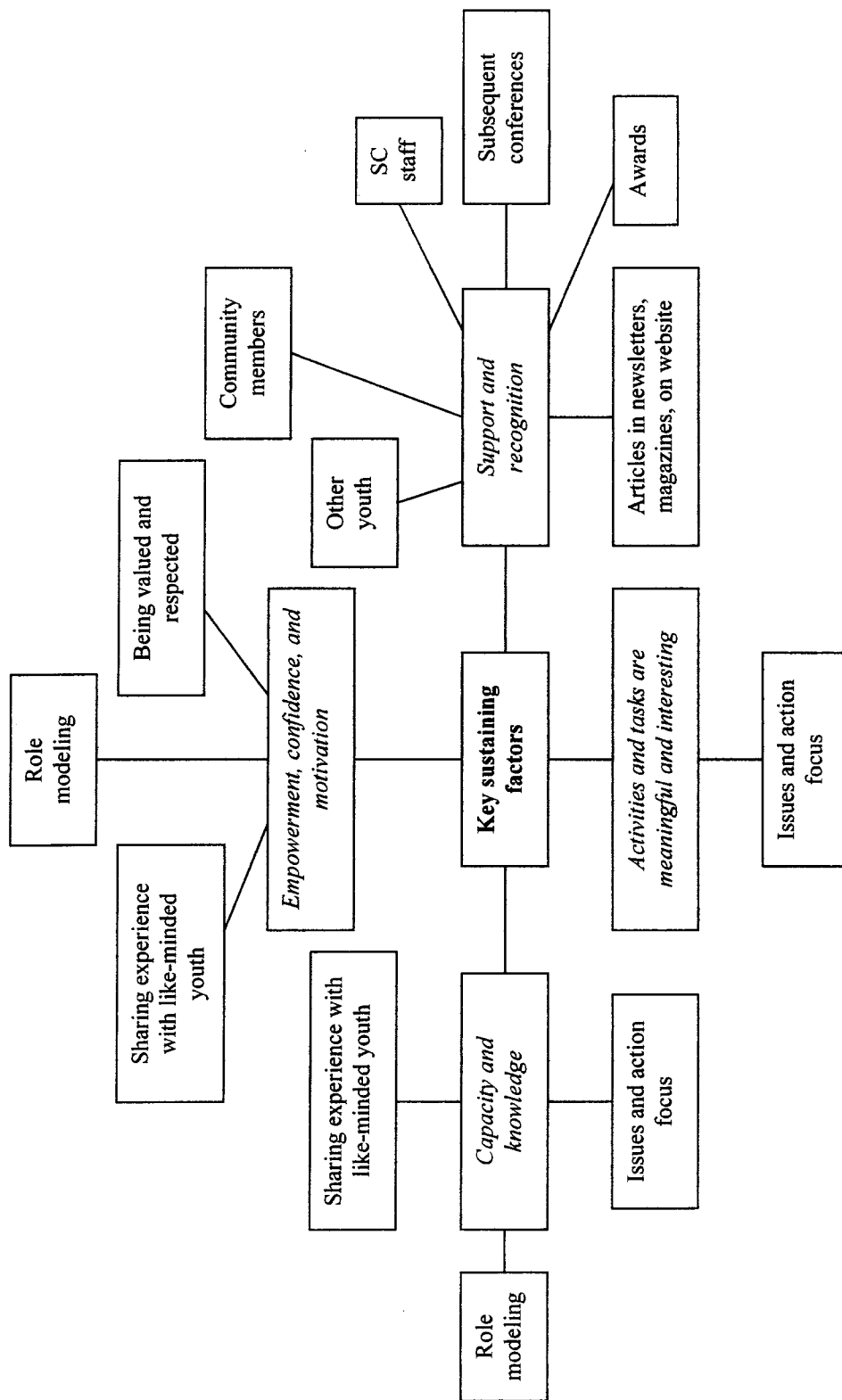
146

Figure 5: Proposed model of sustained engagement and the critical components and/or processes of the conferences and/or other community-based activities in which participants were involved that appeared to be particularly effective in cultivating these sustaining factors.

are important (Nakamura, 2001). Moreover, the interviews suggest that young people are more likely to stay involved in activities that align with their interests, that they feel are relevant to themselves and/or their communities, and that make them feel as though they are helping others and making a difference.

Given these findings, the challenge becomes how to create interesting, relevant, and meaningful experiences for young people, as, not only will "youth…gravitate to those opportunities that seem most relevant to themselves and their communities" (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 219) but, according to the alumni interviewed, they will also stay involved in those types of activities as well. The conference topics appeared to be a large part of what made the events such meaningful experiences for some. Alumni described the topics as being *"applicable to either myself or my community"* and, as such, felt it was important to be discussing them, especially considering these were issues that they often did not get the chance to discuss anywhere else. That alumni generally found the discussions to be so relevant and meaningful could be due to the fact that conference organizers not only provided youth with opportunities to choose the conference topics, but also actively involved young people in conference planning. Thus, by gathering youth input and involving young people directly, the SC likely increased the chances that delegates would be able to connect with the issues and also that the topics were being addressed in a way that was relevant and meaningful to them. What is more, the action focus of the events also seemed to contribute to making the experiences more meaningful for young people, as it not only helped to make some alumni feel as though

148

they were making a difference, but it also helped them to feel that *"there was a purpose, a means to an end"*.

Feeling motivated, confident, and empowered. Alumni identified three somewhat related outcomes they experienced as a result of attending the conferences—motivation, empowerment, and confidence—that they felt were important in contributing to their sustained involvement. For example, in discussing her in-conference experiences, one alumnus described how attending the conferences made her, not only want to become actively involved in her community (motivation), but also realize that she was capable of making a difference (confidence, empowerment). Consequently, she was inspired to take action within her community and, upon experiencing initial success with her project, felt as though *"I could do anything"* (confidence, empowerment). She explained that the additional increase in confidence and empowerment that she experienced as a result of being successful helped to further sustain her involvement in two ways: she became even more motivated—and thus inspired to become even more involved in her community— and she became less concerned about what others might think of her for being so actively involved.

So what was it about the conferences that helped alumni to become more confident, motivated, and empowered? Having opportunities to meet, connect with, and learn from other like-minded youth who were actively involved in their communities appeared to be extremely important in contributing to these positive outcomes for several alumni. Many described becoming so energized and inspired from hearing other young people's stories and learning about all the *"fun"* projects and initiatives that they were undertaking in their schools and communities that they felt motivated to continue on with

the work they were already doing and/or become more actively involved. Moreover, meeting young people who had experienced success as a result of their active involvement seemed to help many alumni realize that they themselves also possessed the potential to do the same. It appears that coming to the realization that they were indeed capable of contributing to their communities and making a difference helped not only to enhance their confidence, but also contributed to making them feel more empowered. This is consistent with past research that suggests that being exposed to individuals with whom they feel they share similar experiences can help young people recognize that they too have the same potential as these individuals, which can in turn inspire them to examine their own goals and aspirations (Tjas, Nelsen, & Taylor, 1996). Thus, positive interactions with successful peers can encourage sustained engagement in young people by helping them to become energized and excited about community involvement and also by inspiring them to realize their own potential, which helps contribute to making them more confident, empowered, and motivated for action.

These positive peer interactions were just one of the aspects of conferences that appeared to contribute to making alumni feel empowered; the conference environment being another significant aspect. That is, alumni reported finding being *"taken seriously"*, respected for their opinions, and having opportunities to have a voice and be heard, not only by other young people, but by adults as well, all to be particularly empowering experiences. Moreover, these kinds of experiences appeared to help build alumni's confidence as well. According to several alumni, participating in the conferences helped them to realize that there were indeed individuals out there—such as the conference organizers—who supported youth voice and were interested in providing

young people with opportunities to make a difference. This was a particularly powerful experience for one alumnus, as she reported that coming to this realization helped to instil within her the confidence to go into her community without worrying that others might reject her ideas simply because of her age, because it helped her to see that there were people within the community who would support her and respect her contributions. Thus, these findings suggest that respecting and valuing young people and providing them with opportunities to have a voice can be very empowering experiences for young people that can help to build their confidence in ways that can contribute to sustained engagement.

Knowledge and capacity building. The present findings suggest that building knowledge and capacity are important sustaining factors for young people. The importance of building capacity and knowledge to sustained involvement came through in the way that alumni described applying the *"lessons"* from the conference—that is to say, the skills and abilities they developed and refined as a result of attending the events—into their schools and communities. For example, several alumni applied the community and intervention development skills and abilities they developed and refined while attending the conferences while implementing initiatives in their home communities, such as creating a school-based anti-poverty group, running an after-school program for inner city children, helping to open a new SC office, and more. Moreover, alumni reported that other skills they developed and refined including public speaking and leadership skills helped them to go on to become more actively involved in their communities and schools.

In addition to the skills and abilities that alumni developed and refined as a result of attending the conferences, the knowledge they gained also appeared to be important in

promoting sustained involvement. For example, one alumnus—who was already quite actively engaged prior to attending the conferences—was inspired to become increasingly involved in her community after attending the conferences because she gained health-related knowledge that helped her realize how *"serious"* some of the issues the members of her community were facing really were. Moreover, another alumnus learned a great deal about mental health as a result of attending SC conferences and, at the time of the interview, was developing an educational workshop so that she could share what she had learned with other youth in her community.

The importance of skills, knowledge, and capacity in sustaining engagement were not only evident in alumni's descriptions of their post-conference involvement; they were also prominent themes in their recommendations on how SC conferences could be improved in order to promote sustained engagement in delegates. That is, many alumni felt very strongly that by equipping young people with accurate knowledge and providing increased skills training, youth would be more likely to stay actively involved after the conferences, particularly in terms of developing and implementing their own community-based projects. Thus, the present findings suggest that many young people believe that building knowledge, skills, and capacity is important in sustaining youth engagement.

It must be noted, however, that in most alumni, building skills, knowledge, and capacity was important specifically in terms of sustaining their involvement in developing and implementing projects after the conferences. Thus, it remains unclear as to whether building knowledge, skills, and capacity is important only for sustained engagement related to these kinds of activities (e.g., social action-type projects and/or community development-type work), or if it is also an important factor in contributing to

152

sustaining other kinds of involvement (e.g., volunteer/community service and extra-curricular activities). However, since past research has found that young people report staying involved in volunteer activities that allow them to develop useful skills and learn something important (Pancer & Pratt, 1999) it can be construed that knowledge and capacity building might also be important sustaining factors for other kinds of involvement as well.

Alumni identified three main ways the conferences promoted either knowledge and/or capacity building. First, the panel presentations and issue-based discussions allowed them to share information as well as their personal stories and experiences, which helped to promote learning and knowledge generation, not only regarding the conference topics, but also regarding diversity, life outside their communities, and much more. Second, alumni built capacity by taking on important conference roles; they worked in the media room, facilitated breakout team sessions, and participated in panel discussions, among other things. Finally, alumni built capacity while developing community-based interventions and/or toolkits, drawing up the conference final reports, and presenting their recommendations on Parliament Hill. That the approach taken by the SC was particularly effective in building knowledge and capacity may suggest that young people value and, as such, respond particularly well to opportunities that allow them to share experiential knowledge (i.e., "information and wisdom gained from the lived experience" Schubert & Borkman, 1994, p. 228) and engage in experience-based learning (for further discussion see Andresen, Boud, & Cohen, 2000), particularly while collaborating with others in order to perform worthwhile and meaningful tasks.

Support and acknowledgement. The present findings suggest that support is an important determinant of whether or not young people will achieve sustained engagement. The alumni interviews drew attention to three main reasons why support is so crucial to sustained involvement. First, several alumni felt that they would have been better able to achieve sustained engagement had they had more support in accessing resources such as facilities to hold meetings and workshops, basic office supplies, and funding for their projects and initiatives. Second, several alumni felt that they would have been less likely to have remained involved after attending the conferences had SC staff not been there to support and assist them in mobilizing other youth from their communities, organizing meetings, and implementing projects. Finally, alumni highlighted a diversity of barriers that involved young people can face, which support and reassurance from a caring individual could potentially help them overcome, such as prejudgement and negative attitudes towards young people (also see Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Zeldin et al., 2001), community politics, lack of confidence (also see Fitzpatrick et al., 2000), and/or waning motivation.

Support from other young people was mentioned by a few alumni as being a factor that helped to sustain their involvement primarily by helping to keep them motivated, but also in providing assistance in carrying out initiatives. While they felt that support from other young people was important in sustaining their involvement, it seemed clear that alumni felt that support from caring adults was critical, as demonstrated by the following alumni quotation: *"you always need...an adult there for your support."* Indeed, many alumni discussed how they would have struggled to stay involved without support from key adult allies from the community at large, the SC, or other youth-

154

friendly organizations. They described adult support as being crucial in allowing them to carry out their community initiatives (e.g., one alumnus would not have been able to hold dances for the youth in her community if adults from her community had not volunteered to chaperone) and helping them and other youth in their communities become mobilized and organized. Adults also helped by encouraging them to take ownership over their projects and by letting them know they believed in them. Alumni's experiences demonstrate that adults are often in unique positions to provide young people with the kinds of support they require. This is not only because various rules and regulations might make it impossible for young people to do things alone (e.g., needing adult chaperones for dances) but also because they "have knowledge, experience, and social capital that they can bring to relationships, resources that often are not available to youth" (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005, p. 8). Indeed the literature suggests that by working in partnership with supportive adults, young people gain, among other things, assistance, information and knowledge, capacity and skills, access to key community contacts, and insight into the "adult world" (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2005), many of which, according to the alumni interviewed, have helped or would have helped them achieve sustained community involvement.

Given that support from adults is such a key sustaining factor for young people, the challenge for adult allies becomes how to provide adequate support to the young people who live within their communities and participate in their programs. One strategy that was particularly effective for the alumni in the present study was when allies (either from their communities or the SC) made them feel appreciated (also see Pancer & Pratt, 1999) by acknowledging and recognizing their contributions. Being recognized and

155

having their work acknowledged is a powerful way to help sustain involvement in young

people as it not only shows them that their work is supported and provides them with

encouragement (Jarrett et al., 2005), but also because it can make them feel good about

themselves and what they have accomplished (National Service-Learning Clearing

House, 2005), which, as alumni noted, can help to keep them motivated to stay involved.

Some alumni received recognition from their communities through formal awards

or in newspaper articles highlighting their work and contributions. Similarly, the SC

recognized and acknowledged young people's contributions to their communities by

sharing their successes and accomplishments with others via newsletters, their youth

publication TG Magazine, and their website. Further, the SC provided young people with

positive reinforcement for their hard work by inviting them to attend future conferences

to share their expertise with their peers. Moreover, informal recognition, such as verbal

praise (e.g., complimenting their work, saying thank you) or offering a small token of

appreciation, can also be effective (National Service-learning Clearinghouse, 2005;

Jarrett et al., 2005). Whether done formally or informally, recognizing youth in a way

that they value or that aligns with their interests or reasons for involvement will be most

effective in making them feel supported, providing them with encouragement, making

them feel good about themselves, and motivating them to stay involved (National

Service-learning Clearinghouse, 2005).

To summarize, the proposed model suggests that participating in tasks that they

find to be meaningful, interesting, and relevant; having experiences that help them feel

motivated, empowered, and more confident; having the opportunity to build knowledge,

skills, and capacity; and having their efforts supported and recognized all contribute to

sustained involvement in young people. However, just as when present these factors can promote sustained involvement, if they are absent they can inhibit involvement or detract from the overall experience. The ways in which these factors, when absent, can inhibit engagement will now be discussed, starting with the nature of the activities and tasks; followed by lack or motivation and confidence; then lack of knowledge and capacity; and, finally, lack of support and/or acknowledgement.

Nature of the activities and tasks. Alumni expressed that whether or not the young people found the activity in which they were participating interesting and relevant would largely affect their overall experience and would likely prevent or inhibit their involvement in that activity. One alumnus' SC conference experience exemplifies this point particularly well. It was quite apparent from his interview that his overall conference experience was primarily negative and, while he struggled with several aspects of the events, one of the main issues he brought up was the topic being addressed. He applied for the event thinking that it was about politics—something that deeply interested him—but was extremely disappointed when he arrived to find they would be discussing social issues instead—subject matter that hardly appealed to him. He also struggled continuously throughout the week of the conference because he was never really sure of what the *"point"* was.

This example reinforces two important points. First, it highlights that young people's interest in a given activity or task can largely determine whether or not they are able to achieve full and meaningful participation in said activity. Moreover, this example illustrates that when an activity, task, or event is not perceived as meaningful or purposeful and/or when the purpose is unclear, young people might also struggle to

become meaningfully involved, a finding which aligns with Cargo et al.'s (2003) finding that young people are likely to remain involved in activities that they feel are "going somewhere". This suggests the importance of making the purpose of activities and events clear and apparent from the beginning. This could not only help them to see the activity or task as purposeful and meaningful, but it might also help them to be better able to decide if the activity or task aligns with their interests from the outset, thus mitigating the risk of young people having negative experiences.

Lack of motivation and confidence. Many alumni reported struggling to find the motivation, drive, and/or desire to stay involved in their schools, communities, and/or other places where they live and work, and their struggles suggest several important things. First, in order to sustain or increase involvement in young people, it is important to ensure that something about their involvement experience motivates them to continue. This point is exemplified by one alumnus in particular who, in explaining why she did not go on to implement a project in her home community after the conference, said: *"[The conference] just didn't motivate me... It didn't motivate me to go out and conquer the world either, you know what I mean?"* Second, motivation can be fleeting; it can ebb and flow over the course of someone's life. For example, many of the alumni who recalled being so excited, energized, and inspired by the conferences that they were eager to return home communities to put their plans into action, also recalled struggling to maintain this motivation once removed from the positive conference environment and *"reality"* set in. Maintaining one's motivation to participate is not simply a concern directly after events such as youth conferences, however. It appears that maintaining the drive, desire, and motivation to participate in meaningful ways was something several

158

alumni reported struggling with constantly, as they described times when they felt that they should have or could have been more actively involved in their communities but that they *"get in a rut...and it's easier not to do something than to do something."* That many alumni seemed to constantly struggle with motivation, and that lack of motivation can act as a barrier to sustained involvement, suggests that developing strategies to attempt to keep individual's drive, desire, and motivation to participate elevated should be at the forefront of the minds of the allies who are hoping to keep them involved over time.

Lacking confidence can make individuals critical of themselves and unsure of their capabilities; insecure, nervous, uncomfortable, and uptight; struggle when communicating and interacting with others; and avoid some tasks (Norman & Hyland, 2003). Given that many of these factors, such as feeling capable and comfortable and being able to communicate effectively, can be key to successful engagement experiences—particularly for those who are considering social action, community development-type work, and the like—it is not surprising that alumni identified lack of confidence as a significant barrier to engagement. Moreover, alumni interviews seem to suggest that lack of confidence might hold young people back from taking the risks (e.g., putting themselves "out there") that active involvement can often require. That is, alumni interviews suggest that some young people might be concerned that community members will discount their abilities and/or ideas simply because they are young or that other young people will think they are "uncool" for participating actively in their communities or schools (also see Cargo et al., 2003). Thus, without the confidence in themselves and their work young people may struggle to become and remain actively involved in settings such as their schools and communities.

Lack of knowledge and capacity. None of the alumni interviewed reported having any personal experiences where their lack of capacity and/or knowledge prevented them from becoming or staying involved in their communities. However, in reflecting on their experiences working with young people as SC staff and/or what it was that helped them achieve success, they mentioned several ways that lack of capacity and knowledge could inhibit involvement in young people, particularly those attempting community development-type work and/or project creation and implementation. They acknowledged that carrying out this kind of work requires certain knowledge and skill sets that some young people simply do not possess, which can make the thought of attempting the work seem extremely daunting. Specifically, they talked about how a lack of understanding of how "the system" works—e.g., being unsure of how to go about developing and implementing an initiative or who to contact—as being a large potential stumbling block for many youth. They also described how having inadequate communication skills could act as a major barrier for young people. Specifically, one alumnus noted that if young people struggle to communicate what it is they want to do within their communities and/or what they need in order to accomplish their goals, it could be extremely difficult for them to succeed in securing the necessary community buy-in and/or support to make their projects happen. Thus, just as building knowledge, skills, and capacity in young people can promote their sustained involvement, lacking the necessary skills, knowledge, and capacity can make community involvement seem daunting, if not impossible, and can interfere with young people's abilities to secure the kind of community support they need in order to become and stay actively involved in their schools and communities.

Lack of support and/or recognition. Two of the alumni's personal stories are powerful examples of how detrimental a lack of support and/or appreciation can be for involved youth. At the time of the interview, one alumnus was struggling to present an educational workshop to the youth in her community. Her principal would not allow her to present her workshop during school hours and, not only did she lack the resources to hold the workshop in the local community centre, she also doubted that the young people in her community would support her efforts by attending her workshop on their own. Another alumnus described being extremely active and committed to her community's "youth house" for several years when she was an adolescent. However, as time went on she became so frustrated and burnt out because, not only were the other volunteers not as dedicated as she was, she also felt that her work was not being appreciated, and as a result she eventually ended up quitting. *"[T]hat's the last thing in my community that I was part of, completely involved in..."* she recalled.

These examples reinforce several important points. The former example highlights that lack of support from both adults and youth can both be detrimental to sustained involvement but in different ways. That is, while unsupportive adults can inhibit involvement by acting as "gatekeepers" to resources and involvement opportunities (Roker & Eden, 2002), unsupportive youth can also inhibit other young people's involvement by not participating in and/or supporting their initiatives (and as the abovementioned example demonstrates, simply perceiving that their peers will not support their efforts can affect whether or not young people carry out their initiatives). Furthermore, this example reinforces a point made earlier that young people often lack access to resources, as this alumnus could not have afforded to rent out space in her

community even if she wanted to. The latter example helps to raise the important point that involvement is not always a positive experience for young people. Young people can indeed experience negative outcomes such as stress (Fredricks et al., 2002) and burn out as a result of their participation, particularly when they lack support, feel unappreciated, have too many demands on their time (Fredricks et al., 2002; Jacobs & Chase, 1989) or become "over engaged", or have some similar type of negative experience. These alumni examples provide further evidence that support is critical to sustaining young people's involvement, and highlight some of the barriers that are particularly difficult for young people to overcome, such as adult "gatekeepers", limited resources, lack of encouragement, and/or feeling unappreciated.

Implications for practice

That young people report staying involved in activities and tasks that they find meaningful, relevant, interesting, and that allow them to feel as though they are helping others and making a difference suggests that concerted efforts should go into planning the types of activities and tasks that are available for engaged youth. The present study suggests that one way to do this is to engage young people in tasks and activities that have specific purposes, however this purpose should be clear and be made known to young people from the outset, so that they can decide whether or not it fits with their interests. Another potential way to ensure that the activities and tasks are as relevant and meaningful as possible for youth participants is to involve them in directly in the planning, as young people can provide valuable insight as to how to make these activities more appealing to young people. Moreover, allies might consider continually "checking in" and engaging in dialogue with young people to ensure that they are having positive

experiences, that the experiences are meeting their needs, and to get their feedback on how the experiences can be improved.

The present findings suggest that building knowledge and capacity in young people may contribute to their sustained involvement. In order to build the kind of knowledge, skills, and capacity that might promote sustained involvement, my study suggests that young people value and respond particularly well to opportunities that allow them to share experiential knowledge and engage in experience-based learning, particularly while interacting with others and performing worthwhile and meaningful tasks. Moreover, the present study suggests that there may be added benefits to creating opportunities for young people to facilitate these types of learning processes. Specifically, providing young people with opportunities to take on these and other types of leadership roles can help them to build capacity, and interacting with successful, experienced peer facilitators can be a meaningful experience for many young people that can help to enhance their confidence, motivate and empower them, all of which can contribute to sustained involvement. For example, in order to teach young people about social action, interested young people might gather to create and implement their own social action project under the guidance of a young, experienced social activist, and then be encouraged to build on their experiences to take further action. However, this does not mean that adult support is not a necessary and/or critical component of success or that young people do not value research-based knowledge. On the contrary, the present study suggests that support from adults is a crucial, and alumni recommendations suggest that one important role that adults can play is to help supplement young people's experiential knowledge with current and accurate research-based information and relevant

background knowledge. Thus, not only will young people develop the knowledge and capacity that may contribute to their sustained engagement, they will have access to the kinds of support that may also facilitate their involvement.

Adult support is not only important in helping young people build knowledge and capacity; my findings suggest that adult allies should consider the important role they play in helping to connect engaged youth to the resources they may require. One potential way that allies can accomplish this is by developing strong community ties and building strategic partnerships and working relationships with funding bodies and community-based organizations, agencies, and groups. Developing these kinds of strategic partnerships and relationships has the potential to benefit youth by allowing allies to connect young people with individuals and organizations within their communities that can provide any resources and/or support that they, as allies, cannot. This could be an especially effective strategy for organizations that hope to facilitate sustained involvement and resource acquisition in young people who attend large-scale events such as national youth conferences, particularly when these organizations struggle to assist young people from various communities across the country access the resources they need to stay involved.

Furthermore, the present study suggests that adult allies can help to sustain young people's involvement by recognizing and acknowledging their efforts and actively demonstrating that their contributions are appreciated. As previously mentioned, there are a variety of ways, both formal and informal, to recognize young people's accomplishments, but choosing a form of recognition that the young person finds meaningful will likely be the most effective approach (National Service-learning

Clearinghouse, 2005). My findings indicate that one particularly powerful strategy is to provide young people with increased opportunities to take on meaningful leadership roles, as this demonstrates to the young person that his or her contributions are appreciated, provides him or her with opportunities to further develop and refine important skills and build capacity, and also promotes sustained engagement by involving the young person more actively in the organization, project, or activity. Recognition is not simply beneficial as a way for allies to support and encourage young people, however, it can also help to keep young people motivated, which, the present study suggests, is also an important sustaining factor. But given that my study found that motivation is often something individuals report struggling with throughout their lives, allies might consider making conscious efforts to actively acknowledge young people's efforts on a continuous basis, even if just with verbal praise, in order to help keep them motivated and feeling good about themselves and their contributions.

While adult allies clearly have much to offer young people in terms of support, the present study also suggests there is value in encouraging young people to support one another. SC conferences and other youth-based initiatives that make use of positive youth role models and mentors (e.g., Dan, 1992) demonstrate not only that youth are capable of effectively supporting one another, but that interacting with their successful peers can be extremely motivating and inspiring for youth. Thus, allies looking to maximize support for engaged young people might consider assisting and encouraging them in developing and maintaining strong formal support networks with other youth from their communities by forming "committees" that meet regularly, creating Internet-based mailing lists, or finding some other creative ways of helping to keep them connected. Having a strong

support network of engaged youth in place could benefit young people by providing them with continued access to positive role models and mentors that could help them stay committed, energized, and motivated for action. Moreover, such networks could also be useful in helping to reduce some of the potential barriers to involvement that emerged in the present study. For example, youth could turn to their peers in the network for support and assistance with anything from fundraising initiatives, to developing and implementing projects, to problem solving, and more, which would decrease the likelihood that they would become intimidated and/or discouraged by the idea of having to work alone. Further, these kinds of networks could be useful in sustaining involvement in young people after they have attended large-scale events such as national youth conferences, as they could help to ease the post-event transition back into the "real world" that can be so difficult for some young people. That is, if young people were connected to these networks immediately after experiencing motivating events such as youth conferences, these networks could provide young people with a venue in which they could become immediately involved so that they could channel their excitement and energy into meaningful involvement before it drops off and they lose their drive, desire, or motivation for action.

Creating a formal support network of engaged youth might not always be a viable, or even desirable, option. In the case of large-scale, national events such as youth conferences, it would be very difficult for organizers to assist in creating, coordinating, and supporting formal support networks in so many communities across the country. This does not mean, however, that these types of events cannot facilitate and encourage young people in supporting one another. For example, several alumni indicated that the informal

support they received from the friends they made at the conferences was invaluable in helping to keep them inspired and motivated for years after the conferences. This suggests that even simple measures such as making contact information available after the events and/or encouraging youth to keep in touch through event-sponsored message boards, Internet forums, and/or mailing lists could facilitate the development of support networks among youth. In addition, organizers might consider ensuring that multiple youth from each community attend the events so that everyone, regardless of where they live, has at least one other person from their community to turn to for support and assistance with their community work. The experience of one of the alumni interviewed suggests that when employing this strategy, organizers might consider taking steps to ensure that these young people meet and develop relationships before and/or during the events. This is because, with hundreds of youth participants in attendance, it is quite possible that they might not otherwise meet and, if they have not developed a relationship before they return to their home communities, they might not feel comfortable turning to one another for support and/or assistance.

The implications for practice featured in this section are just some examples of the many ways in which the key themes emerging from the present study can be applied by youth serving professionals to promote engagement in the young people they are working with. Although these findings must still be examined in other engagement settings, I believe that this research has highlighted some key elements that can act as the building blocks for sound youth programs and activities regardless of the setting or context in which they occur. That there may be certain essential processes and/or components of programs/activities that are necessary in order to foster engagement in

young people, regardless of the type of activity/program or the context in which it occurs,

is supported by other research released by the Centre of Excellence for Youth

Engagement, particularly a program scan of 78 different youth-serving organizations

(Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2001; also see Pancer et al., 2002).

Moreover, this notion is supported by other published research examining

volunteer/community service, youth empowerment programs, and more (e.g., Cargo et

al., 2003; Pancer & Pratt, 1999). Thus, I believe this suggests that the key to successful

engagement activities and programs is not only *what* youth-serving practitioners do but,

more importantly, *how* they go about doing it.

Limitations

The present research is not without its limitations. Because of the nature of the

present research (i.e., a qualitative investigation with a relatively small sample size) the

findings reflect only the experiences of the alumni interviewed and therefore cannot be

generalized beyond these participants or assumed to be representative of the experiences

of all SC conference-goers.

Another limitation of the present study is that it relied solely on participants'

subjective and retrospective accounts of their experiences. Collecting these kinds of data

can be problematic as individuals have a tendency not only to forget but also to

reinterpret events in light of their current circumstances (Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langle,

& Silva, 1994).

A further limitation of the present study is that it is possible that interviewees

exaggerated the positive outcomes they experienced as a result of attending SC

conferences in order to benefit the organization as many of the participants had clearly

established strong relationships with the SC and its staff and cared deeply about the organization. Moreover, it is possible that the positive aspects of SC conferences were exaggerated and the less positive aspects of the conferences downplayed, as few interview participants had truly negative conference experiences.

A final limitation of the present research is that a single researcher conducted data coding and analysis and neither triangulation or member checking was employed in order to verify the trustworthiness of the data and/or emergent themes. In order to address this concern, my advisor reviewed the codes and themes in order to check for assumptions and biases, and when there were disagreements, decisions were arrived at by consensus.

Future directions

In order to confirm the validity of the findings, the present study should be replicated with greater measures taken to verify the trustworthiness of the data (e.g., inter-rater reliability during data coding, triangulation of data collection, member-checking). In addition, it would be useful to compliment the present research using quantitative methods and a larger, more representative sample to see if the findings hold true. Moreover, it would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study so that the changes alumni experience over time can be documented in a way that does not rely on their retrospective accounts of past events. Replicating and extending the present study in these ways would be beneficial in helping to confirm the validity of the proposed model as well as extend it, as it acknowledged that the factors identified in the present study are by no means an exhaustive list of the factors that help to promote sustained involvement.

To further extend and confirm the validity of the proposed model, it should be tested in other types of engagement settings to see if it is relevant and applicable.

Moreover, while the present research on SC conferences suggests some key strategies that can be used to produce these types of sustaining factors, further research examining engagement in other settings would be useful in helping to uncover other viable ways of producing these sustaining factors.

Given that few individuals who had truly negative experiences participated in the present study, it is suggested that future research continue to examine the experiences of young people who have negative engagement experiences. This is particularly important information to gather, as these individuals have the potential to offer important insight into the kinds of factors that can inhibit and detract from engagement, which can be valuable information for anyone hoping to sustain involvement in young people. Because, as I found with the present study, it can be difficult to recruit individuals who have withdrawn from activities or had negative engagement experiences—especially for hour-long telephone interviews—future researchers should consider using creative methods and techniques to tap into barriers.

The present research provides evidence that SC youth conferences affect young people in a host of positive ways, but what remains unclear is if the impacts of conferences are felt anywhere else. That is, if some young people are indeed becoming more involved as a result of attending conferences—particularly in terms of developing and implementing conference inspired school- and community-based interventions— what are the effects of this on delegates' friends, families, schools, and communities? Moreover, a large part of the SC conference program revolves around the presentation day on Parliament Hill, where the conference final reports are presented to government officials, but do these presentations impact government decision-making and policy and,

if so, to what effect? Future research should be undertaken to examine these important questions.

In conclusion, the results of the present study support past research that suggests that week-long youth conferences are viable contexts in which to promote meaningful youth engagement, and they also suggest that youth conferences can be effective means of promoting sustained involvement in young people. Moreover, this thesis has extended the youth engagement literature by elucidating some of the factors that promote sustained involvement in young people, which is a significant contribution as research in this area to date has been limited, and, as such, there is a lack of theory to explain sustained engagement. The present thesis addressed this gap in the literature by proposing a model of sustained engagement that is based on the real life experiences of Canadian youth. This model suggests that when young people are presented with opportunities to participate in activities, tasks, and/or programs that are meaningful and relevant; when they become motivated, confident, and empowered and are provided with opportunities to develop and refine important skills, knowledge, and capacity as a result of their participation; and when they are supported and their efforts and contributions are recognized, there is an increased likelihood that they will be able to overcome many of the barriers to participation that they may face and ultimately achieve sustained engagement. Because the salient themes identified and discussed in this paper are symbiotic in that they clearly strengthen and support one another, I believe that youth serving professionals wishing to significantly enhance their youth engagement results should consider these factors and develop a holistic, integrated approach to supporting involved youth.

Appendix A
Participant recruitment script

Hello, can I please speak to (insert potential participant's name)?

Hi (insert potential participant's name), my name is (insert name here) and I work for the (Students Commission/WLU). I'm contacting you because you have attended a Students Commission youth conference and there is a student from Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario named Marla Pender who is doing a research project on youth conferences and who is really interested in having you as a participant in her study. She is conducting hour long interviews with individuals who have attended Students Commission conferences and she is interested in talking to you about your experiences before, during, and after the Students Commission conference you attended, as well as learning how you came to attend the conference, how the conference has affected your life, and about your involvement in activities other than the conference (like community service, extra curricular activities, and stuff like that).

You should know that you are under no obligation to participate in this research project, and if you do not want us to release your contact information to Marla, then we won't. You should also know that if you do allow us to release your contact information to Marla it does not necessarily mean that you are agreeing to participate in her study. If you allow us to give Marla your phone number, she will contact you and will tell you more about the study, and then you can decided whether or not you would like to participate in her study. You should also know that if you decided to participate in her study, your participation in the interview is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can end the conversation any time you want. If you decide not to participate at all or if you end the interview early you should know that there will be no penalty to you at all, and it will not affect your involvement/relationship with the Students Commission in any way.

Are you interested in letting me give Marla your phone number so that she can call you and tell you more about her study?

Thank you, have a nice day!

Appendix B
Telephone interview consent script

Hello, my name is Marla Pender. I'm a student at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario and I am doing a research project on youth conferences for my M.A. thesis and I'm working under the supervision of Dr. Mark Pancer. The reason I'm calling you is because you attended a Students Commission youth conference and I'm really interested in talking to you about your experiences before, during, and after the conference. I'm particularly interested in learning how you came to attend the conference, how the conference has affected your life, and about your involvement in activities other than the youth conference (like community service, extra curricular activities, and stuff like that). If you're interested in discussing this with me, I would like to invite you to participate in a telephone interview that will take about 60 minutes or so. We can schedule the interview at a time that's convenient for you if now isn't a good time.

Your participation will help me figure out what promotes and prevents involvement in young people after they have attended youth conferences. Your input will help the Students Commission (and other youth conference organizers) improve their conferences. It also has the potential to help other youth-serving professionals gain a better understanding how to promote prolonged involvement in young people, regardless of the activity. The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal; however some individuals may find discussing the conference and/or their involvement in the community to be sensitive issues. If this is the case, you can skip any questions you don't want to answer, and you are free to end your participation in the study at any time. Also, if you feel the need to discuss your feelings after the interview, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Mark Pancer, at 519-884-0710 ext. 3149.

You should know that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can end the conversation any time you want. If you decide not to participate at all or if you end the interview early you should know that there will be no penalty to you at all, and it will not affect your involvement/relationship with the Students Commission in any way. If you do withdraw your data will be destroyed and will not be used in my study.

If you choose to participate you should know that your responses will be kept strictly confidential. I will be interviewing 20 individuals and when I write up or present the findings of this study I will only describe general themes that come out in the interviews and your name and/or any other identifying information will not be associated with the study, the data, or direct quotes under any circumstances. Only my thesis advisor (Dr. Mark Pancer) and I will ever have access to the interview information, and the information will be kept in my locked apartment until I am done analyzing it, and after that it will be kept in a secure location at Wilfrid Laurier University. After the project is completed the data will be destroyed. The information from the interviews will be summarized in my Masters thesis and may be published in academic journals and/or presented at academic conferences. The information may also be used by the Students Commission and other youth conference organizers in order to improve their conferences.

I would like to tape record this interview to help me with the data analysis; is that ok with you? The reason I would like to tape the interview is that I would like to be able

173

to capture all of the important things you have to say, and use direct quotes to illustrate my findings when I'm writing up this study. I want to reassure you though, that when I use direct quotes, I will make sure I do it in a way that will not give out any identifying information about you, so you won't have to worry about someone finding out what you said. Also, if you are interested I can send you a copy of the interview once it has been transcribed.

And just so you know, this study has received ethics approval from Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board, and you can contact Bill Marr, the Chair of the Research Ethics Board if you have any questions about the ethics of this project (I can give you the phone number if you would like).
Do you have any questions or concerns about this study at all? Are you interested in participating in a telephone interview? Are you willing to have this interview tape-recorded?

Before we begin, I just want to let you know that if you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this research project, you can contact me at (519) 884-0710 ext. 2990, my advisor Dr. Mark Pancer at (519) 884-0710, ext. 3149, or the Chair of the WLU Research Ethics Board, Dr. Bill Marr, at (519) 884-0710 ext. 2468.

Appendix C
Consent form

Wilfrid Laurier University Information letter
Examining the factors that promote, sustain, and prevent engagement in young people who
attend youth conferences

<u>Researcher</u>: Marla Pender, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University (phone: 519-884-0710 ext. 2990).

<u>Supervisor</u>: Dr. Mark Pancer, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University (phone: 519-884-0710 ext. 3149).

<u>Purpose & procedure of project</u>: I am doing a research project on youth conferences. You have been selected to participate in my study because you have attended a Students Commission youth conference in the past and I'm really interested in talking to you about your experiences before, during, and after the conference. I'm particularly interested in learning how you came to attend the conference, how the conference has affected your life, and about your involvement in activities other than youth conferences (like community service, extra curricular activities, and so on). If you're interested in discussing this with me, I would like to invite you to participate in an interview that will take about 60 minutes.

<u>Potential benefits</u>: Your participation will help me figure out what promotes and prevents involvement in young people after they have attended youth conferences. Your input will help the Students Commission (and other youth conference organizers) improve their conferences. It also has the potential to help other youth-serving professionals gain a better understanding how to promote prolonged involvement in young people, regardless of the activity.

<u>Potential risks</u>: The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal; however some individuals may find discussing the conference and/or their involvement in the community to be sensitive issues. If this is the case, you can skip any questions you don't want to answer and you are free to end your participation in the study at any time. Also, if you feel the need to discuss your feelings after the interview, you may contact my supervisor, Dr. Mark Pancer, at 519-884-0710 ext. 3149.

<u>Anonymity and confidentiality</u>: You should know that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can end the conversation any time you want. If you decide not to participate at all or if you end the interview early you should know that there will be no penalty to you at all, and it will not affect your involvement/relationship with the Students Commission in any way. If you do withdraw your data will be destroyed and will not be used in my study.

If you choose to participate you should know that your responses will be kept strictly confidential. I will be interviewing 20 individuals and when I write up or present the findings of this study I will only describe general themes that come out in the interviews and your name and/or any other identifying information will not be associated with the study, the data, or direct quotes under any circumstances. Only my thesis advisor (Dr. Mark Pancer) and I will ever have access to the interview data, and the data will be kept in my locked apartment until I am done analyzing it, and after that it will be kept in a secure location at Wilfrid Laurier University. After the project is completed the data will be destroyed. The information from the interviews will be summarized in my Masters thesis, and may be published in academic journals and/or presented at

academic conferences. The information may also be used by the Students Commission and other youth conference organizers in order to improve their conferences.

      I would like to tape record this interview to help me with the data analysis. The reason I would like to tape the interview is that I would like to be able to capture all of the important things you have to say, and use direct quotes to illustrate my findings when I'm writing up this study. I want to reassure you that when I use direct quotes, I will make sure I do it in a way that will not give out any identifying information about you, so you won't have to worry about someone figuring out what you said. Also, if you are interested I can send you a copy of the interview once it has been transcribed.

I _____ have read and understood this information letter and agree to participate in the interview. I understand that my participation in this interview is voluntary and I can withdraw from the study or refuse to answer questions at any time without penalty. I have received a copy of this form for my records.

I give permission for the interview to be tape recorded (circle one)   yes   no

_____   _____   _____

Your signature   Date   Researcher

I would like a copy of the interview transcript sent to me (circle one)   yes   no

If yes, please provide contact information

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D
Interview guide

Objective: To gain relevant background information
When did you attend your first Students Commission (SC) conference?
How old were you when you attended your first SC conference?
How old are you now?
What was the theme of the conference?
Have you attended any other SC conferences?
- If so, when?
- If so, what was/were the theme(s) of the conference(s)?

I am interested in learning a little bit about each of my participants to help make the data I collect as rich as possible. If you don't mind, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about yourself?
- What are you doing right now (in terms of current life activities)?
    Probe: Are you going to school?
    Probe: Are you working?
    Probe: What else do you do with your time?
- What's important to you?

Objective: To determine initiating factors of engagement
How did you find out about the SC conference?
How did you come to attend the SC conference?

Objective: To determine if/how youth conferences produce engagement
What was it like at the conference(s)? Tell me what you remember about the conference(s) you attended.
    Probe: How did it feel being at the conference(s)?
Was there something about the conference in particular that got you excited/involved?
- If yes, what was it?
Was there something about the conference in particular that you didn't like or that turned you off?
- If yes, what was it?

Objective: To determine if/how youth conferences affect young people's lives
What kinds of activities were you involved in before you attended the conference(s)?
What kinds of activities were you involved in after you attended the conference(s)?
- If they became involved in different activities after the conference: Did going to the conference(s) play a role in your involvement in any of the activities you just listed?
- If so, how?

What were you like before you attended the conference(s)?
What were you like after you attended the conference(s)?
- If they say they were different after the conference: Did going to the conference(s) play a role in any of the changes you just mentioned?

Did attending the SC conference(s) affect your life? [if they already indicated that the conference impacted their life: Is there any other way attending the SC conference(s) has impacted your life?]
- If yes, how did it affect your life?
- If no, why not?
    o How could the conference be changed so that it could have more of an impact?
Was there anything that happened to you at the conference(s) that you didn't expect?

- If yes, what was it? Tell me about it.

Objective: To determine what factors sustain engagement in young people after attending a conference

Tell me what it was like for you after the conference.

> *Probe:* How did it feel being at home after the conference?

One of the purposes of SC conferences is to encourage young people to get involved activities that are meaningful to them when they return home after conferences (i.e., implementing the projects they created at the conference in their home communities, volunteer/community service, school involvement, youth organizations, and any other meaningful activity). Have you become/stayed involved in the kinds of activities promoted by the SC since attending the conference?

- If so, what kinds of involvement have you had over the years? Tell me all the different ways you've been involved since the conference.
- What kept you involved?

> *Probe:* Did your attendance at the conference play a role in your getting involved?
>
> *Probe:* Was it something about the conference that made you want to stay involved?
>
> *Probe:* Was it something about you (or something that happened to you) that made you want to stay involved?
>
> *Probe:* Was it something about your community that made you want to stay involved?

Would you say you have become more involved since the conference?

- If yes, what got you more involved?

Objective: To determine what factors prevent young people from getting/staying involved after attending a youth conference

What kept you from getting more involved after attending the SC conference(s) (if anything)?

> *Probe:* Did your attendance at the conference prevent you from getting more involved?
>
> *Probe:* Was it something about the conference that prevented you from getting more involved?
>
> *Probe:* Was it something about you (or something that happened to you) that prevented you from getting more involved?
>
> *Probe:* Was it something about your community that prevented you from getting more involved?
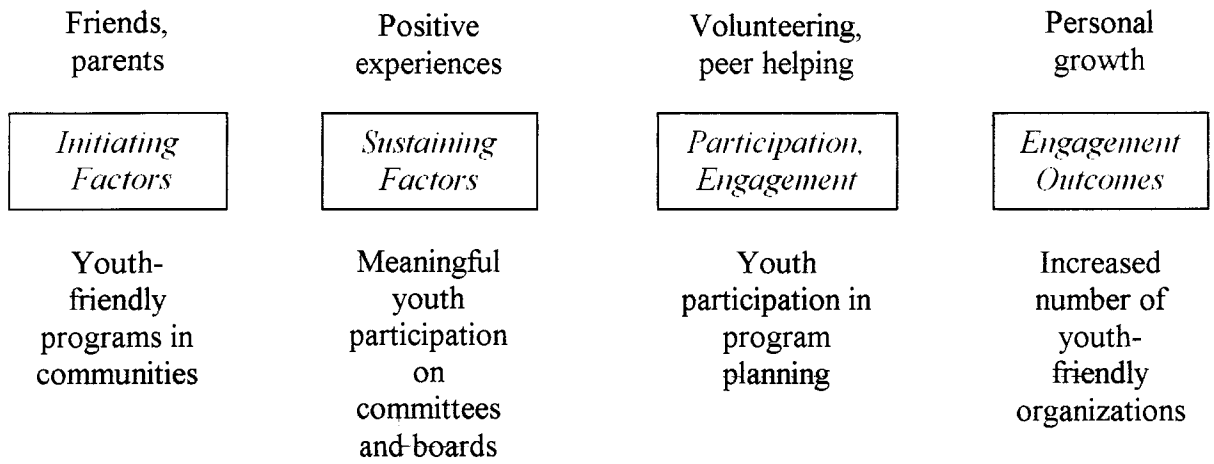
Objective: To determine how conferences can be improved/changed so that it is easier for young people to get/stay involved after the conference is over

What can the SC do to help keep young people involved after they attend a conference (if they want to stay involved)?

How can SC conferences be improved/changed so that it is easier for young people to get/stay involved after the conference is over?

Individual- and Social-level

Friends, parents	Positive experiences	Volunteering, peer helping	Personal growth
Initiating Factors	*Sustaining Factors*	*Participation, Engagement*	*Engagement Outcomes*
Youth-friendly programs in communities	Meaningful youth participation on committees and boards	Youth participation in program planning	Increased number of youth-friendly organizations

Systems-level

Figure 1: Conceptual model of youth engagement (Pancer et al., 2002)

References

Agnew, R., & Petersen, D. M. (1989). Leisure and delinquency. *Social Problems, 36*, 332-350.

Allen, J.P., Philliber, S., Herrling, S., & Kupermine, G.P. (1997). Preventing teen pregnancy and academic failure: Experimental evaluation of a developmentally based approach. *Child Development, 64*, 729-742.

Anderson, J.C. & Moore, L.F. (1978). The motivation to volunteer. *Journal of Voluntary Action Research, 7*, 51-60.

Anderson-Butcher, D., Newsome, W.S., Ferrari, T.M. (2003). Participation in boys and girls clubs and relationships to youth outcomes. *Journal of Community Psychology, 31*, 39-55.

Andresen, L., Boud, D., & Cohen, R. (2000). Experience-based learning. In G. Foley (Ed.) *Understanding Adult Education and Training* (pp. 225-239). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Barber, B.L., Eccles, J.S., & Stone, M.R. (2001). Whatever happened to the jock, the brain, and the princess? Young adult pathways linked to adolescent activity involvement and social identity. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 16*, 429-455.

Bell, J.W. (1967). A comparison of dropouts and nondropouts on participation in school activities. *The Journal of Educational Research, 60*, 248-251.

Brown, S.D., Pancer, S.M., Henderson, A., & Ellis-Hale, K. (in press). The impact of high school mandatory service programs on subsequent volunteering and civic engagement. *Imagine Canada.*

Camino, L. & Zeldin, S. (2002). From periphery to centre: Pathways for youth civic

engagement in the day-to-day life of communities. *Applied Developmental Science,*

6, 213-220.

Cargo, M., Grams, G.D., Ottoson, J.M., Ward, P., & Green, L.W. (2003). Empowerment

as fostering positive youth development and citizenship. *American Journal of*

Health Behaviour, 27, S66-S79.

Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (2004). *What is youth engagement?*

Toronto: Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement.

Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (2003). *A conceptual model of youth*

engagement. Toronto: Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement.

Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (2001). *Analysis of youth engagement*

program scan. Available online at www.tgmag.ca/centres.

Checkoway, B. (1998). Involving youth in neighborhood development. *Children and*

Youth Services Review, 20, 765-795.

Checkoway, B., & Richards-Schuster, K. (2003). Youth participation in community

evaluation research. *American Journal of Evaluation, 24,* 21-33.

Conrad, D., & Hedin, D. (1982). The impact of experiential education on adolescent

development. *Child and Youth Services, 4,* 57-76.

Dan, D. (1992). The use of "alumni" in treatment for driving under the influence (DUI)

clients. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly, 9,* 77-83.

Dworkin, J.B., Larson, R., & Hansen, D. (2003). Adolescents' accounts of growth

experiences in youth activities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32,* 17-26.

Eccles, J.S. & Barber, B.L. (1999). Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kind of engagement matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research, 14*, 10-43.

Eden, K. & Roker, D. (2001). A longitudinal study of young people's involvement in social action. Paper presented at the Biannual Meeting of the Society of Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, MN.

Finn, J. & Checkoway, B. (1998). Young people as competent community builders: A challenge to social work. *Social Work, 43*, 335-345.

Fitzpatrick, S., Hastings, A., & Kintrea, K. (2000). Youth involvement in urban regeneration: Hard lessons, future directions. *Policy & Politics, 28*, 493-509.

Fredricks, J.A., Alfred-Liro, C.J., Hruda, L.Z., Eccles, J.S., Patrick, H., & Ryan, A.M. (2002). A qualitative exploration of adolescents' commitment to athletics and the arts. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 17*, 68-97.

Hamilton, S.F. & Fenzel, M.L. (1988). The impact of volunteer experience on adolescent social development: Evidence of program effects. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 3*, 65-80.

Harper, G.W. & Carver, L.J. (1999). "Out-of-the-Mainstream" Youth as Partners in Collaborative Research: Exploring the Benefits and Challenges. *Health Education & Behavior, 26*, 250-265.

Henry, B., Moffitt, T. E., Caspi, A., Langle, J., & Silva P. A. (1994). On the 'remembrance of things past': a longitudinal evaluation of the retrospective method. *Psychological Assessment, 6*, 92–101.

Horton Smith, D. (1994). Determinants of voluntary association participation and volunteering: A literature review. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 23*, 243-263.

Jacobs, L.C. and Chase, C.I. (1989). Student participation in and attitudes toward high school activities: Findings from a national study. *The High School Journal, 72*, 175-191.

Jarrett, R.L., Sullivan, P.J., & Watkins, N.D. (2005). Developing social capital through participation in organized youth programs: Qualitative insights from three programs. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*, 41-55.

Komro, K.A., Perry, C.L., Murray, D.M., Veblen-Mortenson, S., Williams, C.L. & Anstine, P.S. (1996). Peer-planned social activities for preventing alcohol use among young adolescents. *Journal of School Health, 66*, 328-334.

Loiselle, L.D. (2002). "It's not what we do but how we do it": Process evaluation of a national youth engagement conference. Unpublished thesis.

Mahoney, J.L. (2000). School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns. *Child Development, 71*, 502-516.

Mahoney, J.L. & Cairns, R.H. (1997). Do extracurricular activities protect against early school dropout? *Development Psychology, 33*, 241-253.

Mahoney, J.L. & Stattin, H. (2000). Leisure activities and adolescent antisocial behavior: The role of structure and social context. *Journal of Adolescence, 23*, 113-127.

Mahoney, J.L., Schweder, A.E. & Stattin, H. (2002). Structured after-school activities as a moderator of depressed mood for adolescents with detached relations to their parents. *Journal of Community Psychology, 30*, 69-86.

McNeal, Jr., R.B. (1995). Extracurricular activities and high school dropouts. *Sociology of Education, 68*, 62-81.

Matysik, G. (2000). Involving adolescents in participatory research. *Community Youth Development Journal, 1*, 15-19.

Nakamura, J. (2001). The nature of vital engagement in adulthood. *New Directions for Child and Adult Development, 93*, 5-18.

National Service-learning Clearing House (2005). *Recognition in Service-learning.* Available online at http://www.servicelearning.org.

Norman, M., & Hyland, T. (2003). The role of confidence in lifelong learning. *Educational Studies, 29*, 261-272.

O'Donnell, L., Stueve, A., San Doval, A., Duran, R., Atnafou, R., Haber, D., Johnson, N., Murray, H., Grant, U., Juhn, G., Tang, J., Bass, J., & Piessens, P. (1999). Violence prevention and young adolescents' participation in community youth service. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 24*, 28-37.

Pancer, S.M & Pratt, M.W. (1999). Social and family determinants of community service involvement in Canadian youth. In M. Yates and J. Youniss (Eds.) *Roots of civic identity: International perspectives on community service and activism in youth* (pp. 32-55). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pancer, M., Rose-Krasnor, L., & Loiselle, L. (2002). Youth conferences as a context for engagement, In B. Kirshner, J.L. O'Donoghue, & M. McLaughlin (Eds.) Youth participation: Improving institutions and communities. *New directions for youth development: Theory practice research* (pp. 47-64). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods.* London: Sage Publications.

Primavera, J. (1999). The unintended consequences of volunteerism: Positive outcomes for those who serve. *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community, 18,* 125-140.

Roker, D. & Eden, K. (2002). A longitudinal study of young people's involvement in social action. End of awards report to the ESRC.

Roker, D., Player, K., & Coleman, J. (1998). Challenging the image: The involvement of young people with disabilities in volunteering and campaigning. *Disability & Society, 13,* 725-741.

Schubert, M.A. & Borkman, T. (1994). Identifying the experiential knowledge development within a self-help group. In T.J. Powell (Ed.) Understanding the self-help organization: Frameworks and findings (pp. 227-246). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Snyder, M. & Omoto, A.M. (1992). Who helps and why? The psychology of AIDS volunteerism. In S. Spacapan & S. Oskamp (Eds.) *Helping and being helped: Naturalistic studies* (pp. 213-239). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Steinberg, L., Lamborn, S. D., Dornbusch, S. M., & Darling, N. (1992). Impact of parenting practices on adolescent achievement: Authoritative parenting, school involvement, and encouragement to succeed. *Child Development, 63,* 1266-1281.

Tashman, N., Weist, M.D., Nabors, L.A., & Shafer, M.E. (1998). Involvement in

    meaningful activities and self-reported aggression and delinquency among inner-

    city teenagers. *Journal of Clinical Psychology in Medical Settings, 5,* 239-248.

Tiny Giant/The Students Commission (2005). www.tgmag.ca [online rescource].

Tjas, K., Nelsen, E.A., & Taylor, M. (1997). Successful alumni as role models for high

    school youth. *The High School Journal, 80,* 103-110.

Youniss, J., McLellan, J.A., Su, Y., & Yates, M. (1999). The Role of community service

    in identity development: Normative, unconventional, and deviant orientations.

    Journal of Adolescent Research, 14, 248-261.

Youth Impact (2002). Youth evaluating programs for youth: Stories of Youth Impact, In

    B. Kirshner, J.L. O'Donoghue, & M. McLaughlin (Eds.) *Youth participation:*

    Improving institutions and communities. New directions for youth development:

    Theory practice research (pp. 101-117). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Zeldin, S. Larson, R., Camino, L. & O'Connor, C. (2005). Intergenerational relationships

    and partnerships in community programs: Purpose, practice, and directions for

    research. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33,* 1-10.

Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A., Topitzes, D. & Lorens, M. B. (2001). Bringing young people to

    the table: Effects on adults and youth organizations. *Community Youth Development*

    Journal, 2, 20-27.