

School Report:

Giving Disadvantaged Adolescents Skills to Flourish

The Helmsman Project – School Executive Summary

The Helmsman Project (THP) offers students a three-month program that integrates developmental coaching with two outdoor adventure experiences. The primary program elements include challenging individual and group activities in an experiential learning framework, and program facilitation and support through developmental coaching. From 2013 to 2018, the Institute for Positive Psychology (IPPE) at the Australian Catholic University and THP partnered to undertake a research project to investigate the effectiveness of this program on students' personal and social development. Eleven schools across Western Sydney took part in this research project. Some of these schools participated in an alternative program based solely on developmental coaching and skill development, without the outdoor adventure experiences. In 2019, the outcomes of this research were documented in a PhD thesis written by Wendy Gwyn entitled: *Giving disadvantaged adolescents skills to flourish: Random-control-trial intervention integrating developmental coaching with outdoor adventure education.*

Australian Research Council Project (LP140100041): Project Team

Dr Wendy G. Gwyn

Professor Herb Marsh

Dr Jiesi Guo

Dr Theresa Dicke

Professor Phil Parker

Dr Michael Cavanagh

Dr HeeRa Heaser

Sioau-Mai See

Linda Riek

Kim Larochelle

Dr Charmaine O'Brien

Dr Travis Kemp

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Their willingness to give up valuable



time to share their experiences honestly resulted in important learnings.

The research results found that students who participated in the THP program experienced short-term positive effects related to hope, positive global self-beliefs, open thinking, wellbeing, social effectiveness, aspects of self-regulation, certain life effectiveness skills, and a reduction in negative behaviours and beliefs associated with motivation and engagement. While the data did not find many of these effects to maintain three months after program completion, the research results indicated there were some additional positive effects on participants' cooperative teamwork, behaviours associated with motivation and engagement, and certain aspects of self-concept. Interviews conducted with past program participants highlighted longer-term effects across a range of positive outcomes, including self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, hope, and resilience. Interview participants also evidenced a broadening of their perspectives and improvement in their general wellbeing. There is an indication in the interview data that for some participants, the positive program outcomes occurred only with further experiences that prompted reflection on the program learnings and provided further opportunity to apply those learnings. Consequently, some program effects may take time.

One of the research findings suggests that for some of the outcomes, the effects may be greater for students who start the program with lower levels of that outcome. For such outcomes, the THP program may be able to offer compensatory benefits to these students. This finding reinforces the need for such programs to be as readily available to disadvantaged students as they are to other students.

While the alternative program also demonstrated some positive effects, the effects were not as strong as for the primary THP program, suggesting that the outdoor adventure experiences may play an important role. However, the results do not lend themselves to a clear answer on this question.

The interview data indicates that students make meaning of their program experiences in distinct ways; different from each other and also different from the adults who design and implement the program. Beyond individual differences in meaning-making capacity, the interviews revealed that differences in program delivery, group dynamics, and post-program experiences also may influence program outcomes. In general, the research found an effective balance of challenge and support to be an essential element of program success, and a student's capacity for meaning making to be relevant to that balancing process. The research also suggests that there is an important role for developmentally-trained coaches in providing an effective scaffold that both manages program challenges and stimulates developmental growth. The diagram on the next page summarises these relationships.

Taking into account these findings, THP has integrated more structure into the community project phase of their program and incorporated post-program debriefing sessions to further support the ongoing development and transfer of program outcomes.

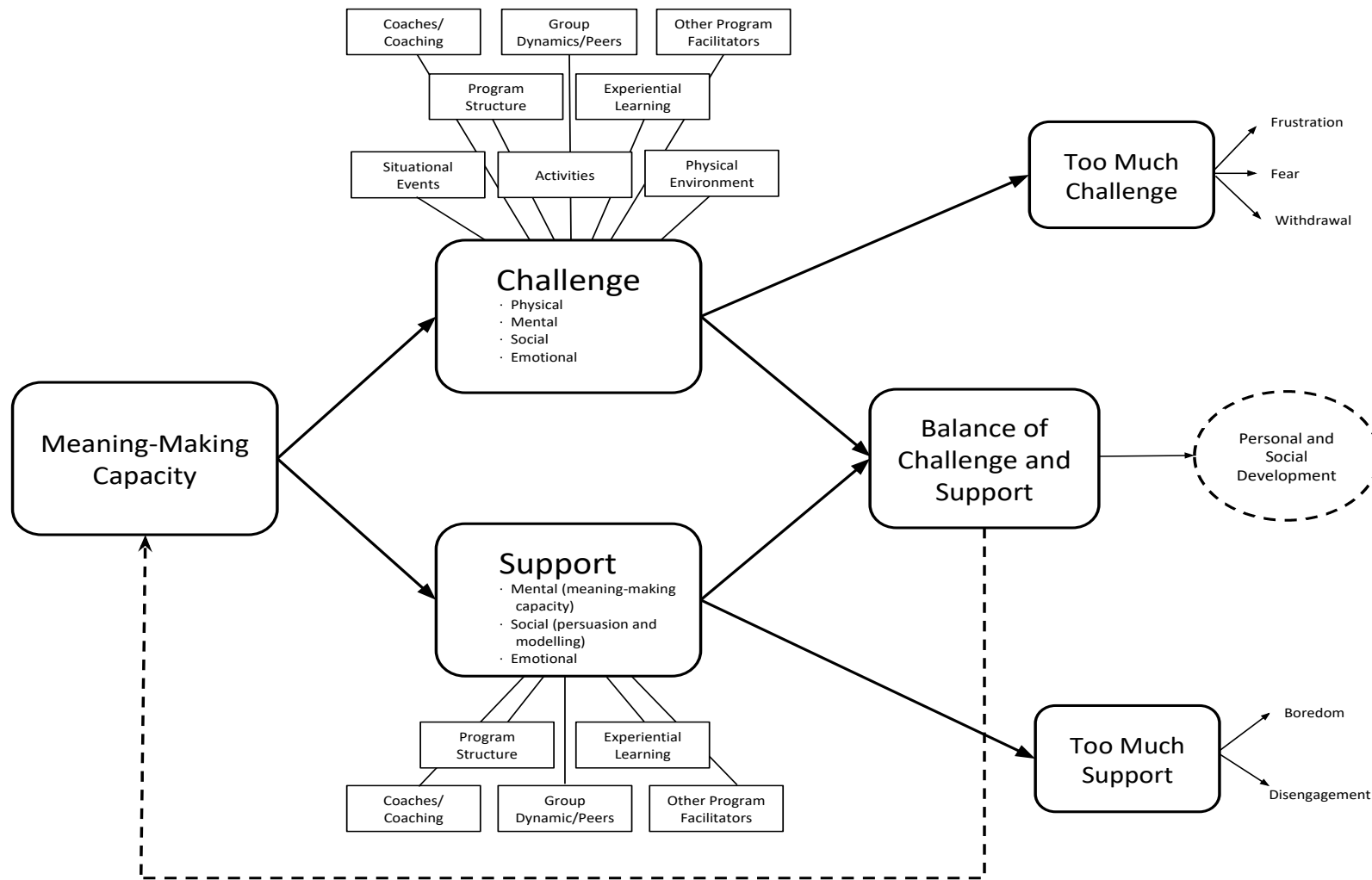


Diagram reflecting the relationship between primary program elements, participant meaning-making capacity, and program outcomes.