In search of employment: Tackling youth homelessness and unemployment

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A B S T R A C T

At a time when homelessness, inequality and poverty plague Canadian society, an organization in Whistler, British Columbia has been working for over 20 years to combat some of the associated issues faced by vulnerable youth. This multi-year research project explored one of the programs offered by the organization with the intent of gaining an understanding of the short- and long-term impact, the future requirements for sustainability and growth, and the alignment of the program to local and regional needs. Through a series of focus groups, qualitative data was collected and, while the focus of the research project fell across the identified program foci of housing, employment, participant experience, and support, this article focuses specifically on the findings related to employment. The five themes that were identified in the data collected included: participants' context, processes to support accountability, contributors to success, challenges, and participants' suggestions for improvement. Across these themes and sub-themes, it was clear that stable employment is a necessary component of a comprehensive program that supports youth as they build resilience and combat homelessness.

1. Introduction

This research focuses on the Work2Live (W2L) program offered by Zero Ceiling (ZC) in Whistler, British Columbia (BC), with an interest in understanding the complexities of youth homelessness in the context of this organization. The W2L program is a comprehensive 12-month program that provides subsidized housing, employment, adventure-based learning, and ongoing professional support. This program is part of an ongoing research study. The purpose of this phase of the W2L research was to gain an understanding of the short- and long-term impact of the W2L experience, future requirements for sustainability and growth, and the alignment of the program to local and regional needs. This research comes from a need for the organization to support continual growth and quality programming, and expand their employment and housing partners. The focus of this phase of the research falls across the identified program foci of housing, employment, participant experience, and support as it examined the transition for vulnerable youth into supportive employment. While the research identified findings across multiple domains, this article focuses specifically on the findings related to employment for young people experiencing homelessness.

The mandate of the ZC program is to reduce youth homelessness and raise the quality of life for young people experiencing homelessness from Vancouver through the Sea to Sky Corridor in Western Canada. To do this, ZC provides housing, employment opportunities, and professional support that empower young people with effective, practical tools to live healthy and independent lives. While there are many services focused on youth homelessness and employment available in urban areas, in the geographic area of this study, support services and programming are minimal and limited by total population size and provincial distribution of resources. In addition, ZC is unique in offering adventure-based learning to complement the provision of stable and affordable housing, employment and support services aimed at providing opportunities for young people to experience mountain life and cultivate healthy, purposeful direction in their lives. ZC has an exclusive partnership with one of the leading employers in Whistler, which enables participants to gain valuable skills, experience, and develop the resources to live independently.

W2L participants range in age from 19 to 24 years old. Young people experiencing homelessness in this age range are encouraged to apply to the program from youth-supporting referral agencies in the Sea to Sky corridor. This is a high-barrier entry program that only accepts applicants who do not have significant ongoing, untreated, and current mental health and addiction issues that require interventions that are unavailable in the Whistler area.

The purported program objectives are as follows:

- That participants develop the necessary life skills to live independent, autonomous healthy lives;
- That participants access employment and independent living in a

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supportive environment;

- That programming is progressive and evolves alongside the needs of participants;
- That participants successfully transition to independence upon graduation, knowing that they can always access support from ZC as needed in the future (Zero Ceiling, n.d.).

Since the W2L program inception, there have been 92 participants, more than 14,000 nights of housing provided, over 68,000 h worked by ZC participants, and in excess of 18,000 h of professional support supplied.

This research reports on the findings related to employment for young people experiencing homelessness. The following research question informed the study: (1) How can the ZC W2L program support youth who have experienced homelessness to gain valuable employability skills and develop the capacity to live independently?

2. From the literature - Employment and homelessness

2.1. National context

Homelessness, inequality and poverty continue to plague Canadian society. While adults also experience homelessness, youth experiences of homeless are distinct and their solutions also need to be tailored to the individualised needs of this group (Gaetz, 2014). Youth are at heightened risk, particularly young people who have had experience with child protection, youth justice, mental health or addictions at some point in their lives or have had disabilities or fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) (Rodrigue, 2016; Brown, 2014). In addition, research has shown youth from certain groups are at even higher risk, including Indigenous youth (Boden, Sanders, Munford, Liebenberg, & McLeod, 2016; Cowichan Housing Association, 2018; Kidd et al., 2016) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Queer, Two Spirit (LGBTQ2S) youth (Abramovich, 2016; Cowichan Housing Association, 2018). There are individual, structural and societal issues that converge to exasperate the risk of homelessness for youth (Baskin, 2007). There are many different approaches to redress a youth's risk of poverty and social inclusion. The ZC organization, and the W2L program offer some unique characteristics, noted in this research. This literature review explores what the research says about risks for youth poverty, social exclusion and homelessness and its intersection with employment prospects. Relevant literature was identified in order to provide context for the issue of youth homelessness and the variety of approaches to tackling it. It was drawn from multiple databases focused on studies across various jurisdictions published between 2007-to 2018, with additional seminal works also included.

2.2. Making a living

Building on a broad and shared Canadian definition of homelessness, articulated by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (2012), "homelessness describes a range of housing and shelter circumstances, with people being without any shelter at one end, and being insecurely housed at the other"(p.1). Given the diversity of circumstances in which youth may be defined as experiencing homelessness or being at risk of homelessness, they contend with an equally diverse range of experiences in relation to employment or making a living, both within the formal and informal economy. While many programs traditionally focus on providing shelter to tackle homelessness, it is useful to understand the myriad of ways young people can eek out a living and express agency in their lives in order to design effective interventions. Gwadz et al. (2009) focused on a study in New York City where youth experiencing homelessness had limited options and were thus likely to turn to the 'street economy' (including theft, panhandling, drug dealing, prostitution). In this study, 68.8% of participants (between the ages of 15–23) had worked in the formal

economy, 47.5% had worked in the informal economy (as defined as outside the state taxed system) and 81.3% had worked in the street economy (as epitomized with panhandling, drug dealing, sex work). The push and pull factors into this hidden economy included economic need and barriers to the formal economy, and the pull of social control and peer support, active recruitment and tangible benefits.

Homelessness acts as a barrier to both educational and employment opportunities. Youth experiencing homelessness have higher rates of unemployment, but sometimes rely on the informal economy, both legal and illegal (Ferguson, 2013). Employment may also act as a factor in resilience and security as employed youth are more likely to transition out of programs into independence (Brophy-McLean, 2017). Conversely, employment also offers the income necessary to obtain and sustain housing. In a Scottish study, Robinson (2008) found that the lack of a job marred youth's opportunity to secure safe accommodation. Palepu, Hubley, Russel, Gadermann, and Chinni (2012) suggested that employment acts as both an economic stabilizer and positively impacts a sense of identity. Eleven young people in the study reported wanting work or education to keep them occupied. Agencies working with youth highlighted many barriers including lack of confidence, lack of motivation, substance use, mental health issues, lack of childcare, and erratic lifestyles. Brown (2014) found that meeting face-to-face with employers was helpful and provided practical support (e.g. access to a phone). Robinson (2008) found that role models or coaches (Hoven, Ford, Willmot, Hagan, & Siegrist, 2016) were an important motivator for obtaining and sustaining employment and advocates to support young people through barriers were helpful. They noticed that poor experiences in schools could induce trauma or feelings of inadequacy that if left unresolved impeded learning.

2.3. Providing and maintaining employment and education opportunities

Several authors discussed the role services have in building relationships with employers. Community Development Halton (2007) advised program partner with local employers to ensure avenues into sustainable employment. Noble (2012) looked at a private sector engagement project and 42% reported positive outcomes for all placements. Private sector participants explained their motivation for partnering with a community agency and the reasons included wanting to give back to their community, working with an agency with a good reputation, and supporting their businesses (p. 18). The main challenges highlighted included the inherent difficulties of the jobs youth were asked to do, the need for extra support for the youth, and 'general tribulations' they experience in their work. Over half of employers suggested they needed to provide additional support to these youth, particularly in the early stages of employment. Ferguson (2013) explored the role of social enterprises in supporting employment for youth experiencing homelessness and mental health issues. The study noted vocational skills and clinical services led to positive benefits including positive improvements in relationships, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.

From the employment perspective, having good employer/service communication is key, alongside employer understanding of the youth population (Bond, Drake, & Campbell, 2016; Brown, 2014; Ferguson, 2018b), and ensuring work occurs in ordinary workplaces (Frøyland, 2016). In addition, support services should be evidence-based (Canadian Homeless Research Network, 2015; Frøyland, 2016) and designed with the specific population they are working with in mind (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2015; Frøyland, 2016). Some programs have been designed to first focus on housing or on employment skills, but effective programming includes an individualised approach that is cognisant of an individual's complex needs traversing both housing and employment (Ferguson, 2018a; 2018b; Frøyland, 2016).

Aledort, Hsin, Grundberg, and Bolas (2011) studied *transition age youth* (18–25 years old) who were transitioning into adulthood with experience of loss, trauma or the welfare system noting that they had

fewer social connections and personal support systems and were less likely to have life skills such as self-care, job readiness, self-scheduling, laundry, food shopping, and money handling. These made successfully maintaining long-term independence free of government assistance challenging. Curry and Abrams (2015b) found youth aging out of foster care felt pressure to be independent, feeling "bound to standards of independence and self-sufficiency that are often unattainable" (p.150). This was exasperated by their lack of vocational skills, education, and financial support that other youth may have.

2.4. Supporting success out of homelessness and tackling barriers

They also face barriers to housing, employment, education, support services, and maintaining support networks. Russell, Hubley, Palepu, Chinni, and Gadermann (2012) highlighted six areas that needed redress as identified by people (aged 15–73) who had experienced homelessness: (1) health/health care; (2) living conditions; (3) financial situation; (4) employment situation; (5) relationships, and (6) recreational and leisure activities. Palepu et al. (2012) also noted that *hard-to-house* Canadians highlight health as not only critical to quality of life, including access to health care and services that address physical and mental health and substance abuse, but also access to healthy food. Palepu et al. (2012) reported that their participants diet lacked protein and vegetables but was rich in carbohydrates and fat. The ability to ensure a healthy diet is also linked to having money to pay for nutritious food.

Brown (2014) and Noble (2012) analyzed two-tiered employment programs in four provinces and found youth experienced common barriers to employment, including financial barriers (e.g. ability to pay for phone or gas), as well as specific challenges that required support, such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder.

In Norway, Paulsen and Berg (2016) found that youth want the opportunity to make their own choices and decisions, but that they sometimes need guidance, information and support. Youth noted the tension between wanting autonomy and independence, and needing support during the transition into independence. Supporting youth towards independence required both formal and informal support including economic guidance, practical and financial support, secure housing, emotional support, and affirmational guidance to support good decision-making choices (p. 128). Through secondary analysis, Bond et al. (2016) found that 109 unemployed youth (under 30) that had completed Independent Placement and Support (IPS) had significantly better employment outcomes, including having logged more hours of work, more weeks of work and longer employment tenure. Ferguson (2018b) noted one success factor of this model was its long term and integrated approach that focused on developing internal assets to reduce high-risk behaviours and grow social competencies, such as planning and decision-making to exercise responsibility and restraint (p. 219). Linked to this, Frøyland (2016) noted that IPS has the ability to support youth to find 'ordinary' jobs by providing them a sense of purpose, as well as working on developing interests, building skills and job mastery, and tackling social inclusion through long-term support. Frøyland (2016) found that vulnerable youth may need specific and practical support to sustain employment including encouraging them to wake up in the morning in order to be on time and to support transport to work, as well as teaching the normative and behavioural values of the particular workplace (p. 260). Supporting youth in care with employment opportunities "means offering well-defined approaches to helping them participate in the competitive labor market, helping them find meaningful jobs, and providing ongoing support from a team of professionals" (p.11). The authors noted most programs lack the last step of providing "job shadowing, internships or actual obtainment of employment" (p. 11).

While there are many factors to consider for success, it is also important to explore the barriers to success. An Australian study focused on 10 homeless youth and 20 workers (Black et al., 2018) and found that a core barrier to successful transitions was the lack of follow up of referrals, often due to staff resource shortages and knowledge gaps. Further, young

people felt marred when they had to retell their story or lacked understanding of the various professional roles or were treated unkindly by support people. Young people felt less likely to 'fall through the cracks' when staff were respectful, friendly, supportive, communicating openly, and making the young person feel cared for" (p. 11). Noble (2018) noted one challenge raised by staff, was that the time taken to secure housing for youth takes time away from them to build relationships with youth. Holtschneider (2016a) suggested a critical impediment was staff turnover, which impeded trust and relationship building abilities.

2.5. Summary

Upon reviewing the literature, it would appear that the majority of studies were informed by a micro-level understanding of homelessness and focused on individual program-focused outcomes. Like many of the studies explored in the literature review, the W2L research is a case of innovative micro-level programming that focuses on services working with youth experiencing homelessness. While in the broader literature, the four pillars of housing, employment, support and outdoor-based programming exist; there is a scarcity of literature that covers all four areas in one program in Western Canada. The constraints that are put on ZC and the W2L program due to geography, limited employer choice, and lack of social supports create innovative programming that could be of benefit to other organizations operating in complex situations. An area for additional research is to contextualize micro-level programming within a macro level understanding of homelessness or the systemic issues that promote youth homelessness or unemployment.

3. Methodology

The W2L research was conducted at the request of ZC during the fall of 2018 and is also part of a multi-year research project being undertaken by the research team. The three research team members have different disciplinary training, which prompted a reflection on individual and shared biases that informed the approach to this research study.

Adopting a qualitative case-study research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), this study sought to draw on the inherent knowledge of key stakeholders of ZC. Ethical research processes were adhered to as outlined in the Tri-Council Policy on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

Participants for the study were recruited using a convenience sampling technique. All W2L current program participants, and all W2L program graduates whose contact details are in the ZC database were invited to participate in this research. The current housing and employment partner was invited to identify potential participants from various units that interact with directly with W2L participants. Potential future employers and housing providers were chosen and invited to participate by ZC.

Six face-to-face focus groups were held between August and October 2018 representing the stakeholder groups outlined in Table 1. The same two members of the research team conducted all focus groups. All focus groups were transcribed in situ ensuring opportunities for member checking which improved the accuracy of transcription and quality of the data. The focus group protocol for the W2L current participants and graduates included questions on the following areas: (1) demographic information; (2) personal context (historical, present and goals); (3) strengths, challenges, and areas for opportunity for themselves and the W2L program. All participants were provided with the opportunity for counselling and support following their focus group participation.

The focus group protocol for the current employers, potential future employers and potential housing providers included questions on the following areas: (1) characteristics of a W2L participant; (2) strengths, challenges, and areas for opportunity for W2L program; (3) value for the organization in partnering with ZC and the W2L program; (4) supports provided and required. Focus group participants represented a variety of cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity perspectives.

Table 1
Data collection across ZC stakeholder groups.

Data type	N =	Stakeholder group
Focus Groups	3	Current employers*
	6	Potential employers*
	7	Housing representatives
	5	Current W2L Participants
	3	Graduates of ZC W2L
	2	Co-Directors of ZC W2L program

* Given the limited number of current employers, to protect the anonymity of research participants, current or potential employers are labeled 'Employers' when quotes are provided throughout this paper.

Using an iterative process, the data collected was manually coded by the three researchers. Each researcher working alone noted the themes that emerged from the data. These initial themes were reviewed, and areas of congruence and misalignment were identified and discussed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Triangulation was achieved through secondary inductive coding with all three researchers together, and the following five themes emerged: (1) Participants' Context; (2) Processes to Support Accountability; (3) Contributors to Success; (4) Challenges; and (5) Participants' Suggestions for Improvement.

4. Findings

The findings represent a broad range of perspectives from stakeholders, but they do not represent the views of all stakeholders. The findings have been organized into sub-themes, which fall under the five main themes identified above. This data covers a breadth of perspectives from all of the stakeholder groups and is not meant to be representative of all participants. It is rather an illustration of the types of comments that emerged from the data. The findings listed here focus specifically on the elements of the themes relates to employment.

4.1. Theme 1 - Participants' context

The first theme covered various perspectives on the participants, where they have come from, how they have been referred to the program, the qualities they exhibit and brought to Whistler. One of the main areas covered was the qualities that participants demonstrated. This was commonly provided by the employers.

4.1.1. Participant qualities
Employers and housing representatives discussed a kind of passion, drive, goal orientation and inner strength of the W2L program participants that was not necessarily present in other populations working in Whistler. An employer noted that W2L participants had a quality that other young workers did not, suggesting "they want to make it work which is not something you see in our seasonal employees" (Employer). In speaking to the depth of commitment, one suggested, "once they start, they are driven to please the group and they respond better to recognition than most people do" (Employer). "There is a desire to make the other people in ZC proud of them. They have someone in their life who cares about what they do in life, many times for the first time, and they don't want to let them down" (Employer).

In responding to some potential criticism about W2L participants displacing local employees, an employer rejected this notion and noted, "most people are coming in at ground level… they are just as qualified as the rest of people that have shown up" (Employer). Another suggested that the young people were not displacing other workers, "they are like anyone else, they are part of the community and fulfilling a job… working and socializing … just like any other 19 year old kid that comes here to work" (Housing).

Some employers noted that they felt that W2L participants might be more likely to stay within the community. In terms of work, some focus group participants noted that some W2L participants initially lacked the confidence to be in front service jobs, preferring to work in roles not directly with the public, but others highlighted the specific benefits that W2L participants brought to the community and employers, including the benefits that come with providing mentorship opportunities. One employer said, "it brings a lot to our team in their mentorship roles and it makes our people better and our organization better" (Employer).

In terms of the qualities employers were looking for and who would be successful, employers suggested that attitude was critical, "they need to want to do it and have the right attitude and the right appreciation for the opportunity and then it is a huge win-win" (Employer). Employers suggested that young people who were outgoing, friendly, service-oriented participants with drive and commitment transitioned more easily. In working with young people, employers noted that certain things could be taught, but not everything could, "we can easily cater to different personalities and how different people work but we need them to want to be here" (Employer).

4.2. Theme 2 - processes to support accountability

Several of the participants' comments clustered around the notion of processes that supported ZC, either with the aim of describing an existing process or in advocating for an improvement to a process. These grouped around accountability, consequences, consistency, and expectations.

4.2.1. Accountability
Accountability for viable and sustainable employment options linked to housing was raised by all stakeholders with respect to the larger community of Whistler and the supporters of the program. Participants and graduates spoke to the need to be ready to engage with this program, to grow and develop and take ownership of their actions and decisions in a supported manner. As noted by a W2L Graduate, W2L attracted people who were working through challenging circumstances, but they shared a sense of responsibility for improving their lives,

"it gives you the opportunity for self growth that maybe you haven't had because you are always being pushed in a direction – when you get here, some people aren't ready for the freedom. There is time to spend on yourself here that you haven't had in another life and you are very much able to separate yourself and discover who you are by choosing what you do. You can choose to discover your own path and you are given the keys to a lot of places in Whistler" (W2L Graduate).

4.2.2. Consequences
The value, appreciation and importance of consequences for participants while in the program was mentioned by all stakeholder groups. The need to "have the consequence/action connection" (Employer) and an "understanding that there was a job to be done and consequences have been equal for all" (Employer) was expressed. A need for better alignment between W2L consequences and employer consequences was identified as an area requiring additional discussion and support.

4.2.3. Consistency
The requirement for consistency in program and participant expectations was a common theme across stakeholder groups. Working together with W2L staff to have a consistent understanding of the program scope, intent, and the related expectations of employers was raised by employment focus groups. As an example, the need for a pre-employment meeting with ZC was raised where internal communication/problem solving could be put in place and consistency emphasised (Employer). Working to understand and inform the performance-based consequences and determine the guidelines around consistent application of them was raised by current and potential employers.

"I don't know that we have all sat down as a [employer] team to make sure that with the ZC participants we are applying rules equally to all ZC people. We need to get to this point where we sit down with the different departments – do a pre season review to make sure we are all clear on how to approach this (and have ZC and [employer] employee experience involved) to develop ground rules and expectations" (Employer).

There was recognition that the need for consistency with respect to expected behaviour and conduct was a challenge with non-ZC staff and employees as well, and an agreement that the support provided from ZC staff was consistent and valuable. According to the management, "organisational structures and reporting structures have changed over years, with new positions and new roles. Relationships that have helped sustain ZC need to be re-established or nourished to continue support" (Management team). One participant suggested that this is increasingly challenging.

4.2.4. Expectations

Discussing and setting expectations for employers with respect to discipline, participant consequences, communication, and overall goal of the program were raised. The need to avoid a double standard but support and create space for shared understanding and growth around what it means to be employed, surfaced in the potential employers' discussion.

"It strikes me that there is probably a line where we want to treat that person like we would any other employee, and there is this little element there that is known and there is support in place (we don't have that with our other employees) so there is an element of special treatment – we are going to work a bit harder and bit different to help set that person up for success knowing that they are part of a bigger program but not to the point where it is detrimental where a double standard is applied" (Employer).

Benefits of being a participant in the program were identified as "the housing, the benefits, the training" (Employer), but equally it was understood that this should not mean they receive special treatment that allows them to show up late, although some leniency was granted. Employee codes of conduct and employee handbooks were highlighted as the documents that "outline the expectations so ZC employees" (Employer) can understand these and reinforce the message to participants.

Strategies to improve expectation management for participants with respect to employment and housing requirements, as well as continued employment, were identified as being areas that it would be "helpful if ZC could reinforce … that the high performers are getting summer jobs, [there] needs [to be] a consistent message" (Employer).

The support required for participants in order to meet the work-related performance expectations required by employers was raised by graduates as a key component of the program and one that could be strengthened as some participants "have had friends who have been in this program before who have never had a job before, that is a shock for the system; understanding bosses and what it means to suddenly work 40 h/week…" (W2L Graduate). In addition, the need to be thoughtful in terms of the employee role and the placement of W2L participants in an employer's organization due to the stressful nature of front-line roles was identified as an area requiring consideration and communication with the W2L program. "If we really care about theses kids we are going to have to start them in a place where their comfort level and trust can be built before we put them out in the front lines….we need to make sure they are prepared for this role "(Employer).

4.3. Theme 3 – Contributors to success

The third theme developed was contributors to success; with comments relating to both the program organization and structure, as well as the program participants. The related elements of communication, community, diversity, loyalty, relationships, and trust all stood out as critical components that enabled the W2L program to provide an environment in which participants could grow and learn.

4.3.1. Communication

One participant from the employer group identified a potential time-saving solution to some of the communication issues, "I think there is an opportunity of a career fair for [ZC] to get together and discuss what the opportunities are with employers. It would be less time for organizations" (Employer).

4.3.2. Community

The theme of community was discussed at several levels, with employers observing the benefits to the Whistler community that were possible given the diverse perspectives provided by the W2L participants, "to have a variety of people from different backgrounds in guest relations is an amazing thing … if you can get them to open up and share their perspective it helps you in your leadership style [and] increases awareness" (Employer). Other community members also talked about the mutual benefits of hiring the W2L participants, "I get asked all the time … what do we give back … it is a responsibility in terms of community and the benefit is that we are helping people in our community and we fill all our roles" (Employer). The perception was that the W2L participants were a good fit for Whistler, they were positive contributors, and the community was stronger because of exposure to alternative viewpoints, "they are looking at the world in a different way, and once [the W2L participant] was comfortable with his peers at work and started sharing his experiences, you would even see them take a different perspective" (Employer).

4.4. Diversity

Several focus group participants discussed the benefits associated with having a diverse workforce, "they bring different experiences than the others, it is so refreshing to have that in the mix as they are looking at the world in a different way" (Employer). Employers also noted that the diversity offered them the opportunity to stretch and grow in their mentorship roles. "It was really good to learn how to deal with different people differently" (Employer) and it impacted how employers viewed aspects of their role, "I have seen different people with different situations and backgrounds come through and it was really good to learn how to deal with different people differently" (Employer).

The W2L participants were thought to contribute to an enhanced work environment; they made it necessary for managers to understand how to work with employees from a variety of backgrounds; one employer observed that it, "benefits to you as an employer – me personally to see most of these people succeed and it makes you want to be a better leader and a better manager". "I have learned to adapt my leadership style, so for me personally it has helped me grow. And then seeing some of the people I have been able to move up over a few years and you see the spark in their eyes, it is amazing" (Employer). Related to this was the requirement for additional management training, "[managers] need to understand the Indigenous people and the employers need to provide training in order to fully understand the minority group" (Employer). One participant noted how diversity provided motivation for managers to adjust their approach to leadership, "I have learned to adapt my leadership style, so for me personally it has helped me grow" (Employer).

In addition, given the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of their lives, several participants noted that they brought diversity to both the work pool and the Whistler community. Several participants noted that it was a "good community program" because it brought a variety of people from different backgrounds to the town "the ski industry is not particularly diverse so it is really interesting to have the ZC participants involved, and if you can get them to open up and share

their perspective it does help you in your leadership style, it increases awareness" (Employer).

4.4.1. Relationships

The focus group participants provided a variety of perspectives about relationships. Employers noted the significance of building meaningful connections with W2L participants:

"I am an advocate to build the one on one relationship and really enforce that with ZC participants that it is not just [ZC program staff] that they can go talk to; they are with me 40 h a week and their job is a big part of their lives through this program and they need to be able to communicate and know that they can talk with me" (Employer).

4.4.2. Trust

Employers, both current and prospective, noted the importance of trust in employee-employer relationships:

"I wish sometimes that as a manager we were allowed to know a bit more about their background because sometimes you start mismanaging a person because you don't know enough of their background and they have not yet built the trust yet for them to share it" (Employer).

Employers were aware that it was not always easy for employees to understand that the employer has W2L participants' best interests in mind, "trust is key – trusting that the employer that has their best interest in mind. We work with First Nation and Metis all the time and we understand that many of them do not have trust" (Employer). For employers who place significance on teamwork, trust plays an additional role in the ability of employees to work cohesively, "people need to work independently … sometimes that is harder as it comes based on the trust that is built, they need to be able to work independently and trust that the team will support them" (Employer).

4.5. Theme 4 – Challenges

While many of the participants across all groups highlighted contributions to the success of ZC, several challenges were also highlighted. These were grouped around challenges to the program, challenges related to the location and challenges inherent in working with young people.

4.5.1. Support

Some participants noted that there were some specific needs that were not being fulfilled in terms of support for participants. For instance, one suggested, "front line jobs are very stressful, and guests come with unrealistic expectations… [so] we need some support on the back end because our managers need some training" (Employer). Another suggested "If you are late you are written up etc. and this gives you false hope and perspective, [there's a] disconnect between ZC program and the employer" (W2L Graduate).

Some participants also noted the stress put on employers to support W2L participants, illustrating the need for supporting employers as well. One employer expressed exasperation. "We were getting to the point of "is this worth it" because it was almost too much work for all of us – such consistent coaching, calling, etc. You almost need a [Employer] support person for ZC participants" (Employer).

4.5.2. Transportation

Several participants discussed a dearth of transportation and that this limited their ability to seek housing outside central Whistler. While this is tangential to employment, it had a direct impact on the young people's ability to reach their employment.

4.5.3. Housing and employment

The W2L program in this particular locale interlinked housing and employment. This came with obvious benefits, but also some issues, as raised by employers, graduates and current participants. While participants expressed gratitude for the housing that was offered given the high cost of housing in Whistler, they also raised some limitations. "It would be a big benefit if the job wasn't tied in with the mountain" (W2L Graduate). One suggested "if they lose their job then they lose their housing and that is a stressful point in their life" (Housing). Another limitation that was raised was that failing at work also jeopardised their housing, making it feel like a precarious situation.

"Right now, they are at the mercy of [the employer] which is great because they have been generous and the transition in ownership seems to be okay but at some point, you do not know when this will evaporate. It would give longevity and security to the program if they had independent housing and move the skills sets out into the community" (Housing).

Employment was also limited and did not offer a range of options for participants to grow into. This is an area that may be able to be further developed as one person suggested "we do have a lot of options, but we don't communicate that well to ZC participants" (Employer).

4.6. Theme 5 – Participants' suggestions for improvement

The last major theme that was developed incorporated a variety of topics that resulted in some forward-thinking potential solutions. Employers, program participants, graduates and housing representatives' problem solved about some key issues related to employment, and discussed a number of challenges, as well as some mitigating strategies.

4.6.1. Employment

Future employment was discussed by current program participants and graduates, who specifically focussed on potential opportunities for the W2L participants after graduation. A participant said that they, "wanted to start teaching kids and ZC has a deal with Whistler and you can get your snowboard instructor really cheap and so that has been a great help" (Current Participant), and another noted that they had been, "cooking, … working in kitchens for a while now" (Current Participant).

There were suggestions from graduates for making the employment options more expansive by uncoupling employment from housing as it could be a challenge for them to work in Whistler after graduation from the W2L program, "[Employment] is all kind of connected – it puts you in an awkward position when it all is one – housing; ski pass and job all connected – I don't think that it should be" (W2L Graduate). The challenges of having the work and housing so closely linked were also discussed by a graduate who observed that, "it would be a big benefit if the job wasn't tied in with the mountain. It holds a heavy fist over your head and it is the catch – you want to grow but you need to have a job" (W2L Graduate). Another graduate noted that it sometimes put pressure on them to keep a job they otherwise would have left, "so I weighed my options but if my housing wasn't tied to the job I would have quit … now I have a boss that is out to get me" (W2L Graduate).

In addition, employers discussed the desire to work with other Whistler businesses to train W2L participants, thereby creating a more flexible workforce. "I would also welcome more cross pollination with organizations so that if we have internship abilities, we work together to allow them to take part in the internship and have some flexibility in their work elsewhere" (Employer). A member of the management team suggested that "there is a need to diversify and increase the employers pool".

4.6.2. Goals

The goals expressed by participants were linked to employment.

Potential employers noted the importance of having goals and ambition, "drive and will to continue and succeed – desire to have a career, versus coming in for a season and then transitioning out. For tourism it opens a whole new world to them" (Employer), as well as other beneficial attributes such as being, "self motivated, reliable … it is about attitude, … because we have the tools to give them the skills" (Employer). Conversely, graduates noted that the program focused on entry level jobs which limited the post-graduate ability to hold a job with a living wage:

> "[an employer] provides an entry-level job … [that] is great if you have never had a job before but if you are trying to reach your full potential and trying to make more than minimum wage, especially this town, you are cut off. Stop focusing on entry-level jobs" (W2L Graduate)

5. Analysis and recommendations

Building on the data, and consistent with the literature, the following considerations for programming were developed by the research team. The four considerations - communication, partnerships, support, and success measures - relate to programs that support employment options for young people at risk of homelessness. While the findings of this research and the supporting literature relate specifically to the W2L program, there will be several recommendations that are relevant in broader contexts.

5.1. Communication

In the case of ZC, though the organization has a communication process in place, there is room to improve some of the communication between partners in the community; this aspect of communication was identified in comments regarding pre-employment, and in the comments that related to issues with W2L participants and how they are supported, which is different from other employees. Like many not-for-profit social programs, staff resources are limited and identifying the most critical aspects of service provision is critical (e.g. Bond et al., 2016; Brown, 2014; Ferguson, 2018b). Building on the support of community partners offers potential for efficiencies and this requires careful and diligent communication with partners (Black et al., 2018; Community Development Halton, 2007; Curry & Abrams, 2015a; Frøyland, 2016). In the W2L program, some participants suggested that there needed to be more open dialogue about employment opportunities existing in the community. Some participants identified the need for ZC to communicate with participants and graduates in the program with regard to expectations about support pre, during, and post program, which could assist in managing overall workload for ZC employees and employers.

In addition, recommendations for communication extended to ensuring a better understanding of the employer expectations. Clear communication of those expectations by ZC to W2L participants could assist in streamlining the daily process and ensuring that both positive and negative feedback is shared, valued, and acted on as supported by Noble (2018). These also speak to communicating the types of participant characteristics that referral agencies may want to foster.

In thinking about communication for programming that supports young people, the following areas should be considered:

- Share employment opportunities for program participants (pre-, during, and post-program);
- Outline employer expectations;
- Define program expectations for participants;
- Establish continuing communications with participants and graduates;

- Share success employment success stories with referral agencies;
- Celebrate the unique perspectives and diverse experiences that young people in the program can bring;
- Ensure clear communication with referral agencies on characteristics of a successful participant.

5.2. Partnerships

ZC is blessed with an environment that allows for strong community and employer support and partnerships for the W2L program. This may not exist for other organizations offering similar programming. Leveraging this advantage, ZC should continue to build relationships and expand its existing network of potential employers who are willing and interested in being a part of the W2L program; in addition, ZC will need to continue to cultivate their relationship with the existing employer. Working in partnership with employers, ZC could create an introduction to ZC, as well as an employer orientation package that includes program expectations, supports provided, and feedback mechanisms. This is supported by the literature, which points to the importance of strong and resilient partnerships between and amongst employment, housing, and support service providers as they work together to provide programming and address gaps in services (Community Development Halton, 2007; Noble, 2012). As an example, ZC could create a survey for employers to gather feedback on an annual basis for process improvement.

When working with employer partners, as well as when building new partnerships, organizations may benefit from considering the following:

- Build relationships with, and networks of, potential employers;
- Create a program introduction and orientation package;
- Create an annual survey of employers in order to gather feedback;
- Work with partners to foster common socialization expectations for participants;
- Explore separating housing from employment where possible;
- Establish process for a scheduled check in with employment partners;
- Identify community-based social enterprise that could complement the program.

5.3. Support

Despite the already significant support and training provided by ZC staff, there are additional practices that could be implemented to improve the outcomes for the youth taking part in the W2L program. The literature identified training potential opportunities that would be beneficial to youth including employment readiness (Dewar & Goodman, 2014). Research participants identified areas where the youth could benefit from workshops designed to strengthen W2L participants' knowledge and skills in obtaining employment in the future, as well as how to keep existing employment; for example, conflict management and time management training. Interestingly, this was consistent with the literature (e.g. Community Development Halton, 2007; Dewar & Goodman, 2014; Henwood, Redline, & Rice, 2018). In support of this, there needs to be documented processes and procedures that set the expectations for both ZC employees and the W2L participants, identifying the extent and types of support that are available to youth. Having clear expectations and a range of supports was also identified in the literature as being components of a holistic program (Russell et al., 2012).

When thinking about supports required to ensure the sustainable employment of young people at risk of homelessness, organizations may benefit from considering the following:

- Assess existing training practices and identify gaps and overlaps (employer(s)/partnerships);
- Establish a more formalized support structure so that it is clear what is included in support from the program provider to the program participants.

5.4. Success measures

Tracking and measuring success of programs that offer a variety of supports is challenging. Like many programs identified in the literature review, while ZC uses a variety of informal and formal tools that document and track the participants progress as they move through the W2L program, it would be beneficial for the organization to re-examine the historical data gathered, the use of that data, and to identify current data requirements. It would also be useful to build in more processes that look to the local, national and international trends as highlighted in reviews of literature like the one in this paper. Given the opportunities that young people have to rely on the informal economy (Ferguson, 2013; Gwadz et al., 2009), ZC could highlight the engagement with the formal economic system as a measure of success. This would allow ZC to develop a structured approach to data collection, and for the organization to establish baselines that would enable clear identification of progression in various aspects of programming.

In addition, there is an opportunity for staff to engage in professional development and to take part in networks that could support their individual growth. This could result in, staff developing even greater expertise, and increasing their ability to provide effective and supportive relationships, and enhancing their ability to develop relevant and meaningful programs for vulnerable youth (Altena, Beijersbergen, & Wolf, 2014; Black et al., 2018; Boden et al., 2016; Community Development Halton, 2007).

In striving for continuous improvement in programs focused on youth employment, organizations should consider the following strategies:

- Contemplate using various indicators or tools to track participant efficacy;
- Capture the unique value-add that young people bring to employers and to the community;
- Review literature on outcomes measurement and identify appropriate criteria for program (such as resilience, self-esteem, employment readiness, etc.);
- Review the goal of the program and identify specific outcomes that participants should meet upon completion;
- Ensure programming is designed to support these outcomes;
- Track participant achievement against outcomes;
- Develop a tracking mechanism to identify participants capabilities when entering the program and again when they have completed the program.

6. Concluding thoughts

For organizations looking to deepen their thinking about finding sustainable employment opportunities for young people at risk of homelessness, the ZC W2L program offers some relevant and poignant considerations. While there are some specific elements that are unique to the Whistler area and to the W2L program, many of the core components are resonate with the literature and are transferable to other situations and contexts.

This research illustrated the importance of applying multiple perspectives to better understand the avenues into, and out of, homelessness for young people. While this paper specifically focused on employment to highlight this area of programming, successful programs use holistic approaches that explore individualised plans to draw on housing, employment, and support services (Ferguson, 2018a, 2018b; Frøyland, 2016; Gaetz, 2017; Giffords, Alonso, & Bell, 2007;

Making the Shift, 2018). ZC's additional focus on nature-based outdoor activities to augment their program sets the organization apart.

An interesting and unique element that was raised during this research was reciprocity. Participants emphasized the importance of employers, communities, and programs recognising the strengths young people bring to their employers and to their community. This requires valuing their unique skills, talents and experiences of young people, while also supporting them and their employers to ensure that they have the right fit and the right support to foster their success. The research illustrated the importance of clarity and consistency of the support available, and the expectations of the young person, the program, and the employer.

In looking at the ZC W2L program, it is useful to note that Whistler offered some unique advantages and challenges. The program is blessed with strong community and employer support mechanisms, as well as a beautiful natural environment that allows participants to engage in adventure and outdoor activities like skiing and mountain biking. Whistler also engenders specific challenges such as the high cost of living, the limited number of jobs and the lack of affordable housing, as well as access to an unhealthy party-lifestyle.

Overall, this research highlighted a program that offers an important and rich opportunity for young people at risk of homeless to participate in, and showcase how, supported employment helps solidify young people's pathway out of homelessness along with other program supports. Employment is an important, yet sometimes overlooked, aspect of assisting vulnerable youth in moving to independence.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Jo Axe: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing. **Elizabeth Childs:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - review & editing. **Kathleen Manion:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing - review & editing.

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