

Engagement of “At-Risk” Youth Through Meaningful Leisure

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Many young people today experience marginalization and exclusion. In particular, youth living with challenging conditions such as poverty, homelessness, abusive/addictive behaviors, and mental health issues, often have limited access to opportunities and resources. This paper focuses on the role of leisure as a meaningful way of youth engagement. Specifically, the paper explores how youth-led leisure opportunities can help young people caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, which often magnify inequities and hinder positive developmental outcomes. Through both a critical review of the literature and a reflection on the gaps identified within the examined literature, a conceptual model of mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement is presented for potential use in future research and practice. Described as circular relationships in the model, youth-led meaningful engagement through leisure is proposed to promote positive relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and empowerment. In turn, positive interpersonal relationships are proposed to support meaningful leisure within a safe, open, and non-judgmental space to co-learn. Furthermore, meaningful leisure is proposed to provide an avenue to reinforce positive relationships and learn/discover about self, others, and the world. Importantly, what youth do with leisure, rather than what leisure does to youth, should be emphasized to promote constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure. The former concept (i.e., what youth do with leisure) is more youth-driven than the latter concept (i.e., what leisure does to youth), which is more prescriptive in nature. Overall, this paper suggests that simply because we develop leisure programs for “at-risk/high-risk” young people, the use of a top-down, prescriptive approach can be detrimental to them. Rather than adults always leading engagement activities, it would be more desirable to share with and be guided by youth concerning the leadership and mentoring of engagement activities including both leisure and non-leisure pursuits in youth’s lives. Because of leisure’s unique characteristic of being intrinsically chosen and defined, leisure is a very important tool in a bottom-up, youth-led/guided approach to meaningful engagement of “at-risk/high-risk” youth. Through sharing experiences with youth and learning alongside of them, leisure can provide an avenue for youth to connect positively with their peers and communities, and to promote constructive meaning-making in their lives. These insights have important implications for reframing leisure programs within social services, and improving leisure policy and practice to make these more youth-oriented. Through enacting these youth-oriented changes, pro-

grams can better support and inspire youth's passions for the pursuit of meaningful, fulfilling lives.

KEYWORDS: *Youth, engagement, marginalized, high-risk, development, leisure, recreation*

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Introduction

“We hope for a safer, more positive existence for these young people, but wonder where are the spaces to explore this more positive world on their terms, not the practices of dominant society?” – Brett Lashua and Karen Fox (2006, p. 281).

Young people today face myriad challenges, such as changes in family support structures, combined with unsettled social norms and marginalization by service providers and policy makers (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). Youth having difficulty to cope with the stressors of finding their way in the world experienced through this marginalization often face low motivation, a lack of confidence, and poor self-esteem (Abela & Hankin, 2008; Barrett & Bond, 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2014). Such feelings of alienation often result in behaviors deemed “at risk” or “high risk” by society, including poor school performance, sexual promiscuity, and substance abuse (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). The terms “at-risk” or “high-risk” youth have many definitions; however, within the context of this article, these terms refer to youth who are often socially excluded from accessing opportunities and resources, and who are at high risk and vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, abusive/addictive behaviors, mental health challenges, discrimination, stigma, and/or compromised developmental outcomes (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Cammarota, 2011; Iwasaki et al., 2014).

Not only are “at-risk/high-risk” youth socially marginalized, but they often have limited connections to community support (Cammarota, 2011; Barrett & Bond, 2015). Furthermore, they are often not well engaged in meaningful relationships that provide support and encouragement for what is often a difficult period of development (Iwasaki et al., 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014). Programs for “at-risk/high-risk” youth have traditionally been operated by agency-based mandates, and limited meaningful youth engagement at various service levels results in a disconnected service-delivery model that is difficult for them to navigate (Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). It can be argued that all youth can be considered at risk and that youth across the entire community are in need of services (Witt & Caldwell, 2010). Although we appreciate this inclusive insight, the focus of this paper is on better supporting often marginalized and more disadvantaged/high-risk youth because they are the ones who need greater attention in our community practice.

The purpose of this article is to explore how youth-led leisure opportunities can help young people caught in the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization, which often magnify inequities and hinder positive developmental outcomes. Through both a critical review of the literature and a reflection on the gaps found within the examined literature, a conceptual model of mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement is presented for potential use in future research and practice. The article strives to contribute to the “at-risk” youth and leisure literature by offering new insights and critically conceptualizing the notions of youth engagement and leisure and its relationships.

Research has shown that leisure can be an effective tool to facilitate meaning-making from a strengths-based perspective, and reduce disaffiliation, marginalization, and other

negative outcomes of being labeled as “at-risk” or “high-risk” youth (Cammarota, 2001; Kelly, Pryor & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007; Klitzing, 2004). Importantly, a youth-led approach can be highly beneficial for youth as recognized by research that incorporates youth-led initiatives through meaningfully engaging and mobilizing the youth themselves (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Cammarota, 2011; Iwasaki, 2015; Iwasaki et al., 2014). Increasingly, research has shown that leisure can provide a meaningful space for this youth-led engagement process (Ersing, 2009; Lashua & Fox, 2006; 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2012).

Challenges With Youth Engagement and Leisure

First, the discussion on “at-risk” youth stretches across several scholarly disciplines. According to Kelly (2001), these discourses are grounded in the notion that youth are “supposed” to transition from a “normal” teenhood to a “normal” adulthood on a seamless continuum. Quite obviously, this theory is problematic when we consider diverse cultural orientations and lived experiences of “at-risk” youth. Societal views of young people who do not develop across the “normal” youth to adult continuum tend to automatically place these individuals in the “at-risk” or “high-risk” category. As a result, there is a growing concern that these youths need to be fixed and treated for their deficits. As a purposeful way to address this concern from a more strengths-based perspective, it is important to first acknowledge and address the notion of youth engagement. According to the Centre of Excellence for Children’s Well-being (2016), youth engagement can be defined as:

The meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself. The kind of activity in which the youth is engaged can be almost anything—sports, the arts, music, volunteer work, politics, social activism—and it can occur in almost any kind of setting (p. 2).

Engaging youth can be either meaningful or meaningless, effective or ineffective, positive or negative, and constructive or destructive, depending on how or in what ways youth are engaged in an activity (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Cammarota, 2011). Indeed, leisure can provide such engagement opportunities (e.g., again, either positive or negative) in a number of different ways in various contexts (e.g., personal, social, spiritual, cultural; Barrett & Bond, 2015; Kelly, Pryor & Outley, 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014). Rather than just seeing youth’s participation in myriad leisure activities from a behavioral perspective per se, it is important to consider the ways in which these leisure activities can be meaningful. These meanings can be personal (e.g., self-identity), spiritual (e.g., harmony, balance), social (e.g., connectedness), and/or cultural (e.g., youth culture) in nature, while leisure can provide opportunities for meaning-making in order to meet a personal need to maintain a purposeful, enriched, and fulfilling life (Armstrong & Manion, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Hegarty & Plucker, 2012; Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Iwasaki et al., 2015; Newman, Tay, & Diener, 2014). Consequently, the notion of youth engagement through leisure should acknowledge the diversity/multiplicity in the ways in which youth are engaged in leisure.

In this article, we are most interested in conceptualizing the role of meaningful leisure in the process of youth engagement. Meaningful leisure can be defined as enriching forms of leisure engagement experienced in a number of different ways personally, socially, spiritually, and/or culturally—for example, through promoting (a) personal and social identity, (b) creativity (e.g., self-expression through creative leisure), (c) connectedness (e.g., connections with people, religion, nature, and culture), (d) harmony and balance, (e) stress-coping and healing, and (f) growth and transformation (e.g., resilience, empowerment) (Heintzman, 2008; Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012; Iwasaki, 2008, 2016; Iwasaki, Coyle, Shank, Messina, & Porter, 2013; Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002; Trussell & Shaw, 2009).

As noted earlier, the disconnect typical in existing service-delivery models often results in an increased experience of exclusion and marginalization and in poor developmental

outcomes for youth who live with at-risk/high-risk conditions (Iwasaki et al., 2014; Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). For example, Theriault's (2014) study of lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgendered, and queer (LBTGQ) youth reported reinforced oppression and power-imbalance experienced by those youths in leisure programming that did not meaningfully engage youth. The lack of or limited youth engagement in both the planning and implementation of programming, along with limited opportunities for meaningful youth engagement, continues to silence the youth, leading to further social isolation and exclusion, and compromised developmental outcomes (Armstrong & Manion, 2013; Theriault, 2014). Indeed, the literature points to significant gaps regarding limited efforts devoted to the use of a youth-guided, bottom-up approach to meaningful engagement for "at-risk/high-risk" youth (Cammarota, 2011; Iwasaki, 2015).

The importance of youth engagement was accurately addressed by Gyamfi, Keens-Douglas, and Medin's (2007) research on youth involvement in systems of care. They found that communities do not consistently involve their youth community members in planning, delivery, and evaluation of community services. Within this given context of community-based mental health care, the youths' involvement ranged from adult-initiated, youth-guided, or youth-directed (Gyamfi et al., 2007). At the greatest level of engagement, the youth were heavily involved in decision making and goal setting for programming where adults foster and empower the youth using a strength-based approach. Zeldin, Camino, and Calvert (2007) concluded that if youth above the age of 15 are given the opportunity to be engaged in governance decisions, they can be active contributors to policy decisions. However, because of frequent isolation from important decisions and engagement with adults in these settings, the youth historically have not been given meaningful chances/opportunities to be active community contributors (Zeldin et al., 2007). Further, within the context of community governance, Zeldin and colleagues discussed the use of a positive youth development model as a tool for meaningfully engaging youth in governance decisions. The results point to the importance of engaging youth in key decisions that contribute to building their communities, and of helping them feel more connected and valued.

Moreover, the idea of youth-led leisure engagement as a way to promote meaningful leisure experiences and related benefits among youth (especially for "high-risk/at-risk" youth) is missing even in Caldwell's (2016) recent chapter on youth and leisure. It is important to reiterate that we are concerned with the power and authority of decision-making and accountability in creating a program or doing research—if a professional or researcher ultimately decides what to do, this is called "top-down," whereas if youths are the ones who contribute to such decision-making and eventually own such decision and its consequences, that is called "bottom-up" (Sampson, 2014). In reality, however, we cannot ignore the complexity in top-down versus bottom-up approaches because youth-adult relationships should be considered, for example, through adults' involvement in supporting and empowering youth. More about such complexity in youth-adult relationships and different levels of engagement by youth and adults is described later in this literature review section.

"Top-Down" Leisure Literature—Where Does It Fit In?

Historically, the leisure literature that has addressed "at-risk" young people has tended to focus on dealing with problems/deficits such as delinquency and deviant behaviors, for example, through after-school truancy programs (Theriault, 2014). The use of deficit-based, structured leisure programming is not uncommon when attempting to engage "at-risk" youth. Yet, traditional leisure spaces that do not adequately acknowledge the youth's lived experiences and voices have been avenues to reinforce oppression and stigma (Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Theriault, 2014).

According to Caldwell and Smith (2006), "with proper adult guidance and supervision, and with the opportunity for sustained engagement in high-yield activities, positive experiences are more likely to accrue" (p. 404). On the other hand, there has been some discussion on youth's active role in the development, planning, and implementation

of a leisure/recreation activity or program (e.g., Ellis & Caldwell, 2005). Related to these roles of youth and adults, another issue concerns structured versus unstructured settings or contexts. Specifically, the question arises then, although leisure choices may be unstructured, if it is youth-led and provides meaningfulness, is it still detrimental to their community involvement and youth development? According to Larson (2000), unstructured leisure activities do not seem to adequately provide an opportunity for “at-risk” young people to exercise concentration, face challenge, and exert effort over time—these are arguably not the key components of leisure engagement. Consequently, the literature points to prescriptive top-down leisure intervention efforts as an important contributor to helping at-risk youth, although these efforts no longer always see youth as problems to be fixed from a deficit-based perspective (Caldwell et al., 2012; Green, Kleiber, & Tarrant, 2000; Morgan, Sibthorp, & Wells, 2014; Skalko, Williams, & Cooper, 2008).

Public recreation departments are also quick to point to the positive impacts of their programs for “at-risk” youth (Green et al., 2000). Many still view these programs as simply “band-aid” approaches that are superficial and diversionary in nature (Caldwell, 2008; Green et al., 2000; McClelland & Giles, 2014). If the top-down leisure programs are viewed as a “band-aid” approach to solving the youth’s marginalization, the importance of collaboration and power-sharing with the youth and providing them with an opportunity to engage in the planning and implementation of the programs is evident. As reported by Caldwell and Smith (2006), the Time Wise program was first developed for combating substance abuse issues in youth—using a top-down, prescriptive approach, the program taught the youth skills about using their leisure time in a constructive, positive way. The authors reflected on their findings, highlighting what appeared to be a shift in paradigm from their initial objectives of the program, including high levels of interest and low levels of boredom that resulted in increased property damage among the youth. It is entirely possible that the youth who engaged in property damage were experiencing leisure as supported by some scholars who point to “deviant” or “purple” leisure, including property damage as a sensation-seeking activity or new adventure (Galloway, 2006; Rojek, 1999). This discussion, however, raises the question about what deviance, crime, and delinquency are, and who in fact defines these terms. This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but in Caldwell and Smith’s (2006) study, the terms *delinquency* and *deviance* were defined by the researchers. Yet, through their reflection they realized that perhaps these activities, according to the youth, were not at all deviant or a form of delinquency. This reflection by Caldwell and Smith highlights the importance of allowing “at-risk” youth to both define the terms being used from their perspectives, as well as to meaningfully engage them in the planning and implementation of leisure programming.

Although young people do indeed face challenges, such as educational failure and drug abuse, they are neither inherent to their existence, nor unproblematically and internally adopted from their environments (Cammarota, 2011). It is too simple to state that young people have problems because they come from a “bad” neighborhood, where as in many cases, systematic inequities and structures have resulted in failed attempts at service delivery for “at-risk” youth (Mutere et al., 2014). Because of the youth’s social context, learning behaviours that are maladaptive in nature are possible. These harmful behaviours are often learned from family and peer culture, but are socially constructed (Cammarota, 2011). Indeed, many of these problems spawn from negative or unhealthy social, economic, and political conditions that shape the context in which they live (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014). Cammarota (2011) discussed that although young people do have the strength and ability to possibly overcome these challenges, it is unfair to assume that possibilities are automatically apart of who the youth are. “At-risk” youth can acquire unique leisure skills, such as artistic creativity, but these possibilities must be harnessed and enacted by providing them with a positive, constructive space to be nurtured (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Cammarota, 2011). However, when we strictly focus on deficits of the youth using a prescriptive top-down approach, we are not providing the youth with the opportunity to nurture, harness, and work with their

inner talents and strengths (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014).

Role of Leisure as a Meaningful Way of Youth Engagement

Increasingly, the importance of positive and meaningful youth engagement is emphasized in the literature that addresses a bottom-up approach to leisure programming for youth (Barrett & Bond, 2015; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010). For example, McClelland and Giles (2014) conducted semi-structured interviews with youth who identified themselves as living on the streets to learn about those street-involved youths' social lives and behaviors. Although McClelland and Giles did not facilitate or develop a leisure program using youth engagement, their findings point to the importance of listening to youth voices and sharing their experiences to empower them. These findings challenged two of the dominant discourses around street-involved youth — (a) street-involved youth are socially isolated, largely in part to participation in substance abuse and (b) the street-involved youth are disaffiliated with the mainstream society. Specifically, through listening to the youth and allowing them to share their stories and experiences, the results emphasized the use of unstructured leisure activities as a method to create close bonds among those involved in these activities (McClelland & Giles, 2014). Those unstructured leisure activities ranged from casual pick-up sports games in city parks and artistic forms of leisure, to going for coffee, playing billiards, watching movies, playing chess and card games, dating, reading, listening to music, and being active in social activist groups. McClelland and Giles summarized,

The results complicate our understanding of leisure as an avenue to connect street-involved individuals to the mainstream community, as well as how forms of leisure may unite street-involved individuals with one another. Regardless of the type of unstructured leisure in which the youth engaged, these activities were used by the youth to seek out and form crucial connections with others in order to survive very trying life circumstances. (p. 135)

Accordingly, through meaningful leisure engagement, it would be possible to assist “at-risk” youth to connect with the mainstream society, as well as with a community outside the mainstream society (e.g., youth subculture). Through offering spaces where youth can spend self-directed leisure time and socialize in a safe and welcoming milieu is an avenue through which this meaningful engagement can occur. Also, through encouraging “at-risk” youth to join social activist groups that align with their beliefs and values (as reported in McClelland & Giles, 2014) can be seen as a leisure-related tool to engage the youth in a cause that is meaningful to them.

In addition, research has shown the use of cultural arts and social media as an effective tool for meaningful youth-led engagement (Ersing, 2009; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; Mutere et al., 2014). In particular, the use of peer to peer mentorship to facilitate these leisure activities has been found to be beneficial for “at-risk” youth as demonstrated by a quote from a street-involved youth in Mutere et al.'s (2014) study:

I like to write raps. I like to draw. I'm really talented at it. Marijuana doesn't stop me from that. Those are things that I know I have a gift in. It's like everyone else... electronics, computers, whatever the case may be... A mentor can help them get past that problem and help them go somewhere in life... 'Cause that's what most people feel like they don't have... no life-meaning. You can't just directly say 'no.' You have to explain to them and encourage them to do better now (p. 282).

Helping “at-risk” young people become engaged with a meaningful, constructive activity in their community is an important component to youth development by providing them with safe, accessible, and enjoyable outlets to practice and demonstrate their skills and talents (McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014). Besides cultural arts and social media, Iwasaki et al. (2014) indicated the use of a talent show or art exhibit as a

youth-engagement tool to get youth involved in their communities and to build meaningful relationships. With the use of youth-led engagement through leisure, youth can be empowered by involving them in decision making and navigating their own journey (i.e., bottom-up approach), for example, through promoting meaningful civic engagement and community connection (Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010).

In order to provide a constructive meaningful engagement, however, it is not entirely impossible to provide a hybrid approach to youth engagement, by combining both a bottom-up approach and a top-down approach to youth engagement, considering potential benefits of using this hybrid approach. Some research evidence alludes to the importance of an adult's role in facilitating meaningful dialogues or activities in a safe and secure space to share and be open to the youth stories and interests being appreciated and mobilized (Caldwell & Smith, 2006; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Morgan et al., 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010). Those caring adults can be seen as youth allies, as long as mutual respect, co-learning, and meaningful engagement are involved.

More than 15 years ago, Shier (2001) discussed the use of Hart's (1992) 'ladder of participation' and offered an alternative model of participation where there are five levels of participation within the concept of youth engagement: (1) Children are listened to, (2) Children are supported in expressing their views, (3) Children's views are taken into account, (4) Children are involved in decision-making processes, and (5) Children share power and responsibility for decision-making. According to Shier, at each level of youth participation/engagement, organizations may have varying opportunities of commitment. Specifically, Shier noted three stages of commitment within this model: (a) openings, (b) opportunities, and (c) obligations that allow organizations to fit in at each of the five levels of participation. However, what Shier's model does not discuss is how power and decision making between adults and youth may shift across a continuum, as pointed out by Kirby and Gibbs (2006). That is, at each level of planning and decision-making, there are some roles that adults may play, even in youth-led initiatives. In particular, Kirby and Gibbs discussed the importance of describing how the youth participants make the decisions and take actions, while considering the roles of adults. Specifically, Kirby and Gibbs described that Shier's model of participation misses the importance of adult fluidity throughout the process of supporting the youth at different times in a proactive manner to address their unique needs. For example, Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects that involve youth-led initiatives may require an ethics approval through a housing institution. The completion and submission of such tasks and decision making can be led by the facilitating adult, while appreciating youth's insights. Consequently, considering potential benefits of using a flexible hybrid approach is necessary rather than strictly dichotomizing between top-down (adult-led) and bottom-up (youth-led) approaches.

Exemplary Leisure Program that Addresses Youth-Led Engagement

To further demonstrate a more detailed example of a bottom-up approach to youth engagement through a leisure pursuit and programming, the following is a highlight of a particular program based on urban First Nations youth's experiences with rap music and Hip-Hop culture.

As described by Travis (2013), rap music was born of an environment that is historically both oppressive and innovative. A key goal of the new paradigm of rap music and Hip-Hop culture includes facilitating empowerment for both individuals and communities (Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; Travis, 2013). This paradigm shift includes a transition from a focus on the "me" to an emphasis on the collective "we" (Travis, 2013). Reported in their 2006 and 2007 papers, Lashua and Fox engaged urban First Nations youth in the "Beat of Boyle Street," a music remix program designed and developed by young people through listening to and building on their stories and lived experiences. Put quite elegantly by Lashua and Fox (2007), "too often researchers have ignored the lived experiences of young people, focusing on what popular culture does to young people rather than what young people make and do with it" (p. 145).

Through youth-led creation of rap lyrics that often discuss young people's experiences with violence, substance abuse, poverty, and other youth's life issues, Lashua and Fox (2007) were able to provide an avenue for the youth to express their inner creativity. This research and leisure program engaged young people in ways that were celebratory and validating. This particular youth-engagement leisure program is of importance because it originated from the interest and involvement of the "at-risk" young people in a popular cultural pursuit, and worked on their strengths, skills, and talents contextualized within their everyday lives (Lashua & Fox, 2007). The Beat of Boyle Street provided the researchers (and also practitioners) with an opportunity to learn and be engaged with young people about leisure, popular culture, and youth identity and empowerment. Within this type of youth-led leisure programming, researchers and practitioners respectfully incorporate youth views/voices, talents (e.g., creativity), and lived experiences by appreciating personal (e.g., identities), social (e.g., connectedness), and cultural (e.g., ethnic) meanings attached to these insights and experiences.

Conceptual Mechanisms Involving Leisure and Youth Engagement

The above review of the literature sets a stage to present a conceptual model shown in Figure 1 that visually illustrates proposed mechanisms involving leisure and youth engagement. Specifically, these proposed mechanisms are supported by the reviewed literature that addresses youth-led engagement and leisure pursuits and programming, and describe the potential benefits of using a youth-led, bottom-up approach to engaging "at-risk" youth through meaningful leisure. Overall, the cyclical nature of the model shows the reciprocal relationships between both the components of and benefits from youth-led engagement and leisure. The ability of youth-led engagement through leisure to provide opportunities to build positive relationships among youth and adults and co-learn from each other is at the forefront of the conceptual model.

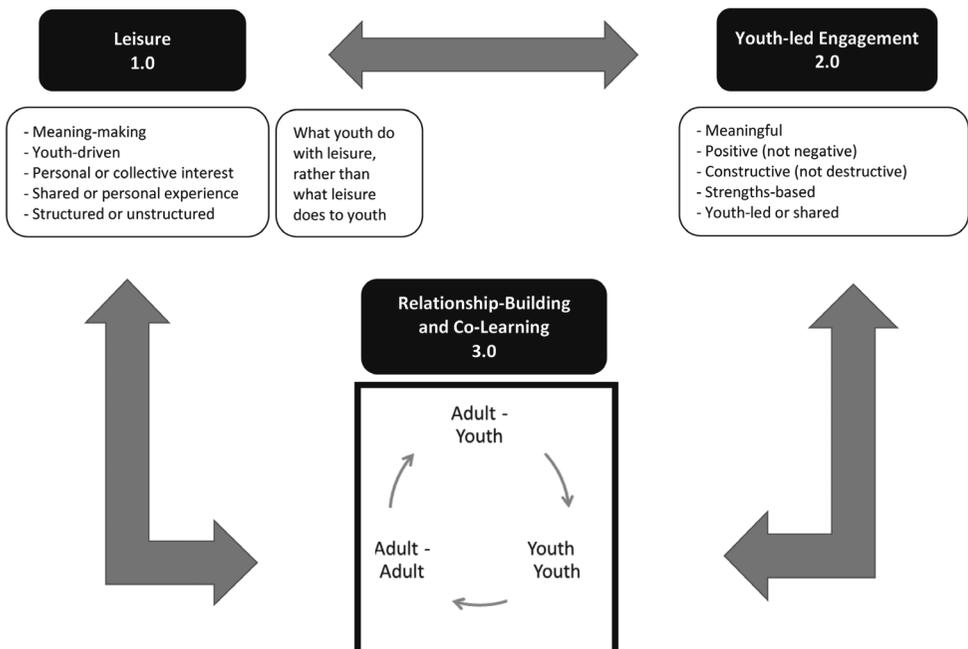


Figure 1. Conceptual Mechanisms Involving Leisure and Youth Engagement

Components of the Proposed Model

Specifically, three key concepts in the model include (a) leisure, (b) youth-led engagement, and (c) relationship-building and co-learning. Each of these concepts is described as follows, in line with an illustration of the proposed model (Figure 1). First, leisure (labelled 1.0 in Figure) can be either personal or shared experience to reflect personal or collective interest, which can take place in a structured (e.g., program) or unstructured (e.g., spontaneous) setting. A key feature of leisure for “at-risk” youth proposed in this model includes the use of a youth-driven approach to meaning-making, which refers to the process by which a person gains meanings from an activity. It has been documented that meanings or a meaning system represent a broader, more holistic concept to one’s core values and inspiration for life than personal behaviours and experiences per se (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Frankl, 1985; Hicks & Routledge, 2013). Accordingly, meaning-focused leisure practice can help practitioners conceptualize leisure more than just from an activity/behavioral or experience-based perspective. Rather, this approach enables practitioners to focus on the meanings that leisure activities can promote, which are appealing and important to their clients (Iwasaki, 2016).

Secondly, as another component of the proposed model, youth-led engagement (labelled 2.0 in Figure) provides youth with opportunities to promote meaning-making in life and experience a positive, constructive involvement from a strengths-based perspective. Youth-led engagement allows the youth to work alongside other youth/peers and adults towards an end goal (e.g., positive youth development) in a more youth-guided way, as opposed to a top-down manner (e.g., being told what to do in a prescriptive way). This youth-guided way may welcome adults’ roles in co-facilitating meaningful dialogues or activities in a safe and secure space as youth allies, as long as mutual respect, co-learning, and meaningful engagement are involved, as noted earlier.

Through this youth-oriented interaction with their peers and adults, in a manner often unfamiliar to them, the youth are witnessed to an environment that fosters reciprocity and power sharing where their stories can be heard and acknowledged respectfully. The ability for youth to lead their own engagement allows the opportunity for them to build their skills in communication, team-work, and leadership (i.e., capacity-building). All of these skills cherished in a leisure domain are indeed transferable to other facets of their lives and communities (e.g., school, work, and family; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Iwasaki, 2015; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010).

In Figure 1, another key component, namely, relationship building and co-learning (labelled 3.0 in Figure), are direct descendants of both the leisure and the youth-led engagement components as described above. In turn, positive relationships and co-learning are assumed to lead to meaningful engagement with leisure pursuits. This relationship-building and co-learning process involves both youth and adults, which can be formed as adult-youth, youth-youth, or adult-adult relationships. While recognizing power issues that involve both youth and adults, the basic premise of this model includes mutual respect, power-sharing, and empowerment in a non-hierarchical way. Rather than adults always leading engagement activities, it would be more desirable to share with and be guided by youth concerning the leadership and mentoring of engagement activities including both leisure and non-leisure pursuits in youth’s lives.

Nonetheless, caring adult supervision to foster supportive and safe relationships can lead to the development of an environment where youth are capable to have positive, constructive experiences and promote meaning-making through their leisure pursuits. Adult guidance and support within the relationship building component of the model points to the importance of having positive role models, including an opportunity to intervene if needed. Importantly, within a youth-to-youth relationship, co-learning and supporting with each other are key concepts, including the essential contribution of youth’s role models to inspiring and mentoring other youth as peers (i.e., peer mentorship).

In addition, the development of meaningful relationships among youth and adults (e.g., family members) is important for them through finding similar or congruent leisure

interests. Research has shown that leisure activities offer the opportunity to engage socially with people who have similar interests, foster a sense of worth, and build positive social networks (Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010). Also, Caldwell (2016) discusses the importance of social leisure activities among youth to develop empathy and strong relationships with peers and adults alike, by facilitating both differentiation (e.g., respect for differences) and integration (e.g., mutual learning and co-participation). Furthermore, leisure helps build resilience when youth are invited to share what leisure and resilience mean to them as shown by Brooks, Daschuk, Poudrier, and Almond's (2015) study with First Nations youth, drawing on their artistic productions of 'Thug Life' and hip-hop. Building positive adult-youth and youth-youth relationships seems to assist in reducing sense of stigmatization and stress by creating a safe, secure, and meaningful environment for youth's leisure engagement (Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Theriault, 2014).

Interrelationships and Mechanisms

Described as circular relationships in the model, youth-led meaningful engagement through leisure is proposed to promote constructive relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and empowerment. In turn, positive interpersonal relationships are proposed to support meaningful leisure within a safe, open, and non-judgmental space to co-learn. Furthermore, meaningful leisure is proposed to provide an avenue to reinforce positive relationships and learn/discover about self, others, and the world. Importantly, what youth do with leisure, rather than what leisure does to youth, should be emphasized to promote constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure (Brooks et al., 2015; Lashua & Fox, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014). The former concept (i.e., what youth do with leisure) is more youth-driven than the latter concept (i.e., what leisure does to youth), which is more prescriptive in nature.

Structured, top-down leisure programs are common, and the reviewed literature did point to positive developmental outcomes as a result of top-down leisure programming. However, there are certainly repercussions of conducting programs that are prescriptive in nature by focusing on fixing at-risk youth's deficits (again, from a perspective of what leisure does to youth; Barrett & Bond, 2015; Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; McClelland & Giles, 2014). Rather, it is important to proactively engage youth by respectfully listening to what the youth's lived experiences are, and by emphasizing what role youth's voices play both in sharing these experiences and perspectives with peer youth and adults, and in mobilizing youth into actions for changes. As emphasized by Witt and Caldwell (2010), "adolescents do not need adults to do thing 'to' or 'for' them, rather adolescents need to be involved in the learning and growing process—they need to have opportunities to 'develop themselves,' and they need adults to serve as enablers in this process" (p. 3).

Purposefully, a bottom-up approach highlights the importance of taking a youth-led/guided approach to youth engagement. Shown by the reviewed literature, there are many potential benefits of youth-led engagement strategies both through meaningful leisure pursuits and through engaging the youth in research projects. For many "at-risk" youth, they have tended to spend much of their lives being told what they ought to do, and what the "right" way to live is. One key component of bottom-up youth engagement, particularly when speaking about leisure practice, is the notion of power-sharing. The literature that focuses on structured, top-down leisure programming often mentions adult supervision and prescribed youth development. On the other hand, the youth-led engagement research suggests the importance of sharing power with youth and allowing the youth to work alongside the adults in a mutually respectful way that can promote empowerment, positive relationship-building, and meaningful community involvement (Brooks et al., 2015; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Lashua & Fox, 2006, 2007; McClelland & Giles, 2014; Mutere et al., 2014; Travis, 2013; Wang, 2010).

The proposed conceptual model would be of benefit to practitioners interested in incorporating meaningful youth-led engagement through leisure into their practices. The parsimony of information presented in the model allows the practitioners to easily incorporate the key components of both youth-led engagement and leisure to begin on building positive relationships and co-learning opportunities into their programming. The arrows indicating directional, circular relationships among the model components would be useful for the practitioners to use as reflecting points. For example, these reflections can involve beginning to think about ways in which a program space allows for youth to participate in the programming and planning of ideas, and how this collaborative process can lead to positive relationships between the youth and adults involved. These can be done through co-developing a space that is safe, trust/respectful, and non-judgemental from a strengths-based perspective. Furthermore, this conceptual model is intended to provide a literature-informed visual representation for the role of youth-led engagement through leisure and its proposed mechanisms since there is the need for future research in this area. The components and its interrelationships described in the model highlight the importance of better understanding the benefits and power of constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure.

Applying the Model to Practice

The components and its interrelationships as described in Figure 1 provide a visual representation of the model supported by the reviewed literature. As noted above, this model and its explanation provided in this paper can be incorporated into practice. Below, we offer a hypothetical example of how a leisure-related practitioner may begin incorporating this conceptual model into leisure service delivery. Such example is intended to illustrate how a practitioner could use the model to design a new program or refine an existing program to better serve youth.

Often a recreation practitioner is in charge of developing and facilitating a drop-in program for “at-risk” youth in an urban city centre. One group of the practitioner’s clientele is homeless youth who experience difficulty finding employment and safe housing, creating healthy relationships, and finding meaning in their lives. The practitioner has realized that for the most part, their programming involves simple drop-in programs, for example, through sports and occasional guest speakers. Yet, more importantly, the practitioner has recently realized the importance of engaging the youth in a programming that involves the bottom-up approach so that the programs offered do not merely provide diversion, but rather facilitate opportunities for engagement, meaning-making, development, and empowerment. Using the model, the practitioner can begin incorporating bottom-up programming, youth engagement, and meaning-making opportunities to her/his role by:

- Involving the youth in the development and facilitation of leisure opportunities.
 - This could include youth-led initiatives such as a talent show by engaging youth in sharing ideas and talents, planning and decision making, and promoting sense of empowerment in a safe, open, and nonjudgmental space.
 - These youth-led leisure initiatives can involve a wide range of leisure activities that have an element of youth engagement to meaningfully meet the needs of diverse youth populations.
- Educating staff and youth about the importance of building positive relationships that involve co-learning and power sharing.
 - This could include the youth-guided development of a co-operative program where roles are shared, and the use of strengths-based approaches where everyone is encouraged to reinforce positive relationships and to learn/discover about self, others, and the world.

- Using the model as a key reflection point as the practitioner and organization begin thinking about how a youth-led, bottom-up approach would fit well into their programming.
 - Examples include reflection on how staff interact with the youth, how the programming offers opportunities for youth to be engaged respectfully, and how relationship-building, co-learning, power-sharing, and meaning-making are reinforced, modeled, and incorporated into programming.
 - Such reflection should include the emphasis on what youth do with leisure (i.e., youth-driven), rather than what leisure does to youth (i.e., prescriptive in nature, being told what to do), to promote constructive youth-led engagement through meaningful leisure.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that simply because we develop leisure programs for “at-risk/high-risk” young people, the use of a top-down, prescriptive approach can be detrimental to them. Certainly, the above-given review of literature is not exhaustive of all “at-risk” youth literature that discusses leisure as an engagement tool; however, it does point to leisure’s unique role in engaging youth in a meaningful way. It is suggested then, that because of leisure’s unique characteristic of being intrinsically chosen and defined, leisure can be an important tool in a bottom-up, youth-led/guided approach to meaningful engagement of “at-risk” youth. Through sharing experiences with youth and learning alongside of them, leisure can provide an avenue for youth to connect positively with their peers and communities, and to promote constructive meaning-making in their lives. These insights have important implications for reframing leisure programs within social services, and improving leisure policy and practice to make these more youth-oriented. Through enacting these youth-oriented changes, programs can better support and inspire youth’s passions for the pursuit of meaningful, fulfilling lives. Finally, future research should address the specifics of meaning-making processes among “at-risk” youth in specific leisure contexts. In particular, research should examine the role of youth-adult relationships using the bottom-up, youth-led approach in meaning making through a wide range of leisure opportunities.

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