

PROMOTING RESILIENCE: INNER-CITY-YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY-SERVING LEISURE

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Positive youth development can play an important role in building healthy communities, and leisure is an ideal context in which to facilitate such development. Accounting for almost 50% of children's time, leisure is an important, although often ignored, context of child and youth development (Caldwell & Baldwin, 2003; Kleiber, 1999). Young people view leisure as a chance to be with friends and to have fun free from external pressures (Caldwell & Baldwin). In addition, leisure allows children and youth to express themselves and to develop competence in various life domains. Interests lead to skills, which lead in turn to commitment, a key component of identity formation (Kleiber; Marcia, 1980). Thus, leisure is an integral context of development, with particular importance for the development of a positive identity. The purpose of this paper is to examine youth participation in community service, and how such participation may be related to resilience among inner-city youth. We suggest that resilience can be fostered through voluntary leisure participation in community serving organizations resulting in psychological empowerment that ultimately benefits youth and their communities.

Resilience

Resilience has been defined as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543). Significant adversity includes many of the stressors commonly experienced by inner-city youth such as chronic poverty or exposure to community violence. According to the risk and resilience model, children and youth who are exposed to multiple risk factors may experience compromised developmental outcomes (Luthar et al.; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). However, there are individual, interpersonal and societal factors that have been shown to promote resilience in children and youth. These include self-esteem, optimism, and good intellectual functioning; support from caring adults and connections to extended family; and socioeconomic advantages such as attending good schools and being involved in prosocial organizations (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

A similar conception of developmental advantages is the Search Institute's developmental assets framework (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). These researchers identified a set of 40 assets that foster positive youth development. These are placed under eight broad categories, four internal asset groups (commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity) and four external asset groups (social support, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, and empowerment). According to Benson et al. these assets have a number of positive outcomes, including resilience in the face of adversity.

Inner-City-Youth Leisure Involvement

The leisure context is ideal for promoting resilience and facilitating developmental assets that are shown to enhance resilience. Specific to developing internal

assets as described by Benson et al. (1998), leisure activities require involvement over time and the acquisition of new skills, that is to say a commitment to learning. In addition to the acquisition of technical skills, leisure affords the acquisition of social skills, or social competencies. Although leisure activities can be antisocial in nature, leisure engagement commonly fosters prosocial values such as fairness, teamwork, or an environmental ethic. Finally, leisure may play an integral role in positive identity formation as individuals self-define in terms of a chosen leisure pursuit.

With respect to external developmental assets (Benson et al., 1998), organized leisure activities typically occur with the assistance and support of community leaders, coaches, or other mentors as part of the general structure. As well, leisure may be a potent contributor to a sense of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1992). Third, organized leisure activities, such as sports, require participants' adherence to rules and conventions, or boundaries and expectations. Finally, social scientists and educators have argued for the need for leisure education for almost a century (Caldwell & Baldwin, 2003), the goal being to teach constructive use of time. Thus, the context of self-determined leisure can foster the developmental assets identified by Benson and his colleagues (1998) and ultimately lead to resilience in at-risk youth. It is suggested that inner-city youth involvement in community serving activities is a leisure context where these assets can be developed. It is essential, however, that the activities performed and the relationships that are fostered are conducive to producing a subjectively perceived leisure experience for it to successfully create a context for building developmental assets and resilience.

Foremost among the factors that contribute to the leisure experience is the perception of freedom (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997; Neulinger, 1974). This freedom entails not only the notion that engagement is freely chosen, but that it is free of the constraints, those things that may prohibit or detract from the leisure experience (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991). It is youth's self-determined willingness to participate in what they perceive to be meaningful community activities that determine whether an experience is a self-satisfying endeavour deserving of long-term commitment. Another defining element of the leisure experience is intrinsic motivation. Insofar as activities and settings are personally meaningful and enjoyed in out of interest, provide opportunities for self-development, and satisfy innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they may be construed as intrinsically motivated (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). This is largely consistent with the tenets of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000); however, innate psychological needs are not the sole origin for feelings of intrinsic motivation. Indeed, any personally important need may be considered intrinsically motivating. By facilitating perceptions of freedom and fostering the satisfaction of salient needs, the possibility that voluntary activities will be perceived as leisure is maximized. This perception has implications for the level of satisfaction derived which in turn has consequences for both personal development and also organizational commitment.

The result of promoting youth involvement that is subjectively perceived as leisure is two-fold. On the one hand, participation may be maximized as youth come to view their voluntary activity as a meaningful and self-satisfying end in itself, as well a means to the end of community betterment. On the other hand, self-satisfying engagement may foster youths' prolonged engagement in community-serving

organizations, increasing the possibility of continued organization functioning and qualitative improvements within the inner-city context. "Leisure, then, is... the mechanism (the process) around which community change may be constructed. The outcome is the transformation of individuals and their social condition through leisure pursuit and experience" (Reid & van Dreunen, 1996, p. 49).

Key features that enhance the promotion of resilience in youth have been highlighted including the importance of youth's freedom to be self-determined regarding voluntary engagement in leisure activities. Further to this, it is proposed that youth's voluntary involvement with community service organizations provides a context wherein resilience can be cultivated. An important goal of the development of resilience in youth is empowerment.

Psychological Empowerment.

Empowerment is a multifaceted social process that has effects not only at the individual level of analysis, but also at the environmental and community levels. At the individual level, empowerment is a process whereby individuals struggle to reduce personal powerlessness by having increased control over their lives (Lord & Hutchison, 1997; Rappaport, 1987). However, as Zimmerman (1990) noted, "it is important to expand our understanding of empowerment beyond the individual level of analysis" (p. 173). Psychological empowerment includes three components: intrapersonal (e.g., perceived control, self-efficacy), interactional (e.g., problem-solving, decision making), and behavioural (e.g., community and/or organizational involvement) (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz & Checkoway, 1992).

As described here, psychological empowerment fosters people's capacity to implement change in their own lives, their communities, and in society by acting on issues that they define as important. As a result of fostering resilience in inner-city youth by building developmental assets through leisure, children can actively seek and be assisted to meet their basic needs, thus building on existing individual assets or competencies, as well as meeting their needs and those of the community in which they reside. Most significantly, by promoting voluntary engagement that is subjectively perceived as leisure, youth satisfaction and motivation to remain involved may be maximized. Lastly, such continued participation is of distinct relevance to the development of empowerment. As Kiefer (1984) put it: "the longer the participants extend their involvement, the more they come to understand. The more they understand, the more motivated they are to continue to act. The more they continue to act, the more proactive they are able to be. The more proactive they are able to be, the more they further their skill and effect. The more they sense their skill and effect, the more likely they are to continue" (p. 22).

Conclusion

An important focus of this paper has been to connect the theoretical concepts of resilience, leisure, and psychological empowerment, promoting the practical implications of doing so as applied to an inner-city context. The general premise is this: promoting resilience in youth and building protective factors such as those highlighted by Benson (1990), through self-determined and intrinsically rewarding leisure has the potential to

foster psychological empowerment, ultimately benefiting both youth and the communities in which they live.

Support for this premise is as follows. First, the risk and resilience model indicates that being involved in prosocial activities helps to cultivate protective factors that make youth more resilient (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Second, Benson's (1990) research concluded that the more internal and external assets that youth have, the more likely they will be resilient in the face of adversity. The fact that many of these developmental assets parallel the protective factors in the risk and resilience model provides evidence that building developmental assets helps make youth resilient, aiding them to positively adapt to adverse life stressors, such as those often experienced by inner-city youth. Third, leisure provides a context for fostering the eight broad categories of developmental assets.

In addition, the theoretical foundations of leisure, perceived freedom and self-determination, efficacy, and competency are directly aligned with psychosocial empowerment. Research indicates that the intrapersonal components, which are similar to the foundations of leisure, lead to the development of psychological empowerment. Many studies have shown the positive influence that leisure involvement has in building strong self-perceptions, perceived control, self-efficacy, and perceived competence. Therefore, resilience can be fostered within a leisure context, potentially leading to the psychological empowerment of youth and their communities. Freely chosen leisure experiences, as suggested here, provide inner-city youth with a context wherein resiliency and related assets can be fostered. Engagement in community-serving activities that youth see as being intrinsically important in meeting their needs have the potential to achieve individual as well as community-level empowerment and well-being.

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