The Impact of Extracurricular and Mentorship Programs on Youth and Their Communities

A Literature Review

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There is an increasing interest in the effect of extracurricular activities on the positive development of youth during the critical period of adolescence. In the past, there was a focus by major funders on the prevention and reduction of juvenile crime and delinquency, resulting in considerable improvements in adolescent behaviours and health since the late 1980s. Although continued efforts to sustain these improvements in problem areas are needed, youth workers and developmental researchers increasingly recognize that being problem free is not the same as being well prepared for adulthood. The focus of youth policy and practice has shifted to a more holistic view of assisting youth to develop their full potential (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

This approach places youth in community and neighbourhood programs including, among others, mentoring, arts and recreation, volunteer and service activities, and work preparation and transition. When youth are placed at the centre of community life, they can interact with caring adults both within and outside their families, acquire a sense of identity and security, and learn the skills, values, expectations, behavioural norms, and principles necessary for healthy adulthood (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Organized, constructive pursuits provide youth with opportunities to develop specific skills, become part of a community, belong to a valued group, develop a network of peer and adult social support, and overcome challenges. These attributes are predicted to

promote school participation and achievement, further academic and occupational success, and prevent the development of risky behaviours (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003).

Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) reviewed 48 well-evaluated programs for youth aged 10-18 years that produced positive outcomes. They determined that the program features most likely to influence positive development in youth were program goals, program atmosphere, and program activities. Their findings indicate that the program goals linked with positive youth development consist of more than just developing specific competencies in youth, they include more expansive developmental goals such as promoting confidence, character, and connections. The program atmosphere is one of support, empowerment, and hope where programs seek to increase the confidence of youth in their future outlook, their attributes, and their connections to others. The program activities that are connected to positive youth development provide youth with an opportunity to develop skills, partake in real and difficult tasks, and expand their horizons.

In a longitudinal study of 695 boys and girls assessed annually from childhood through high school, and at ages 20 and 24 years, Mahoney (2000) identified at the beginning of the study four clusters of pupils who were reasonably similar in relation to academic performance and behaviour. Mahoney found that pupils in the multiple-risk cluster were more likely than those in other clusters to exhibit antisocial patterns over the long term. However, participation in extracurricular school activities over one or more years was correlated with lower rates of early school dropout and arrest for crimes

among those boys and girls identified as high risk. The reduction in antisocial patterns was conditional upon whether or not the person's social support group also attended the extracurricular school activities.

In analyses of results for 1259 tenth-grade respondents who completed a survey about activity involvement, participating in prosocial activities (attending church and/or volunteering and community service) was associated with a significantly higher Grade 12 GPA, even after controlling for intellectual ability, gender, and mother's educational status (Eccles et al., 2003). Participation in prosocial activities also predicted reduced rates of drug and alcohol use in subsequent surveys of the respondents at Grade 12 and at ages 21-22. Participation in the performing arts (drama, school band and/or dance) at the tenth grade was significantly associated with a higher Grade 12 GPA, even more so for boys than for girls. Similarly, participation in the performing arts at the tenth grade predicted lower levels and lower rates of increase of drug and alcohol use for boys at each of Grades 10 and 12. It also predicted higher educational attainment for men by ages 25-26, but not for women.

Zaff, Moore, Papillo, and Williams (2003) analyzed data collected from an eighth-grade cohort of 8,599 adolescents at Grades 8, 10, 12 (or equivalent), and 2 years post-secondary. They found that students who participated consistently in extracurricular activities during the secondary school years had substantively and significantly more positive outcomes as early adults, even after controlling for individual, demographic, family process, and family background differences. Those students who
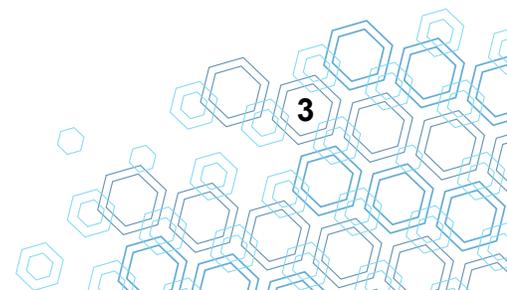
participated regularly were approximately 50% more likely to vote, to attend college, and to volunteer than those who participated occasionally in extracurricular activities.

One program approach recognized as more promising in encouraging positive youth development involves adults mentoring youth (Jekielek, Moore, & Hair, 2002). The authors reviewed the program evaluations of ten mentoring programs. For those five programs that used exacting experimental methodology in their program evaluations, Jekielek et al. found evidence that mentoring can promote positive development in at-risk youth. Mentoring contributes to youth development through positive role models, supervision, and warm relationships with caring adults. For many of the stringently evaluated programs, mentoring is only one part of a comprehensive intervention that contributes to positive youth development. Other program components also have a positive impact on youth development, such as community service, life skills training, academic tutoring, and financial assistance for post-secondary education.

Jekielek et al. (2002) found youth who participated in mentoring programs missed fewer unexcused times from school, had more positive behaviours and attitudes at school, and had an improved chance of going to college. Furthermore, youth participating in programs that included mentorship had less drug and alcohol use when compared to non-participants. This was especially true for minority youth. Mentored youth experienced improved parental relationships, more positive attitudes toward assisting others and toward older adults, and more peer support emotionally.

de Anda (2001) conducted a qualitative evaluation of the first year of a mentoring program involving 18 at-risk youth from a small Los Angeles county city estimated to

have 7000 gang members across 31 active gangs. During the previous school year, the small school district had experienced 55 expulsions and 1,394 suspensions related to violent behaviour. The secondary-school students, from a low income environment with high violence and youth crime rates, were paired with firefighter mentors. Pre- and post-interviews were conducted to determine the subjective views of the 18 participating students. The findings indicate that, overall, the students' perceived outcomes met their expectations going into the program. Most students reported having a mentor with whom they could communicate and having developed a relationship with their mentor that was valued. A number of the students hinted at significant positive changes in their goals, perspectives and values as being more oriented toward achievement and prosocial activity. The youth indicated they were overwhelmingly positive about the mentorship program, reporting they experienced concrete, as well as interpersonal and emotional benefits. By the post-interview, there were a number of concrete outcomes for the at-risk students. Eight had graduated from secondary school, with four being accepted to four-year state colleges and two enrolled in two-year college programs at least part time. Ten youth were continuing in secondary school in the autumn. Fifteen of the students had finished a two-week job preparation course and six had already secured employment.

de Anda (2001) describes four case examples of the mentored at-risk students who experienced significant developmental growth and prosocial changes. One example, an 18-year-old Latina student, a hard-core gang member whose parents were former gang members, was frequently truant from school and was far behind in the

necessary credits to graduate. She cared little for school, had been shot, perpetrated violence against others, and was known for having a nasty attitude and quick temper. This student participated in the mentorship program and de Anda describes the results as dramatic and exceptional. The student bonded well with her mentor. She received intensive and concrete help, including transportation, and consistent monitoring from her mentor while she attended evening and weekend classes in order to complete her graduation requirements. She subsequently graduated on schedule, completed a medical assistant program, and was attending college full time.

Larson (2000) argues that initiative is essential for the evolvement of other elements of positive youth development, such as leadership, creativity, civic participation, and altruism. He suggests that his findings of boredom among Western adolescents indicate that their daily school and unstructured leisure experiences do not provide opportunities for the development of initiative. Larson states that for initiative to develop, three elements are critical and need to be experienced at the same time: motivation from within to do an activity and be invested in it, concerted engagement, and concentration of effort over time to accomplish a goal. He states that participation by youth in structured voluntary activities (e.g., participation in organizations, arts, hobbies, and sports) provides an especially-suited context in which initiative develops.

The five most common barriers to participation in extracurricular activities for kindergarten to Grade 12 students are identified as lack of interest or boredom, a wish to hang around with friends, safety and transportation, the necessity or desire to work, and family obligations (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004). Using a collaborative

approach with the community, Sanderson and Richards (2010) conducted a survey of 416 students aged 9-14 years and 225 parents in a low-income urban community in the midwest U.S. about the need for extracurricular programs, program preferences, and barriers to participation. In this community, gangs were actively involved in the demarcation of boundaries and the recruitment of students. Sanderson and Richards state that voluntary extracurricular programs must offer safety, transportation, and activities that interest and motivate youth if they are to have adequate attendance and a superior level of engagement. They found significant differences between what youth and parents (independently surveyed) wanted in extracurricular programming. The top five programs endorsed by all youth were field trips (63.3%), sports teams (51.8%), dance (46.7%), computers (44.3%), and music (43.3%). The top five activities supported by parents were computers (71.4%), tutoring (57.1%), music (36.6%), arts and crafts (30.4%), and mentoring (34.2%). The survey also identified motivation for youth attending extracurricular programming. Across all youth, the opportunity to do something fun (62.5%) and to learn about new things (58.6%) were the top two reasons endorsed for participation in extracurricular programs. The youth also identified being able to acquire new friends (32.3%) and being with their friends (37.0%) as among the top five reasons to participate in extracurricular programming.

Engagement is a key component of youth participation (Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005) and is necessary for the development of initiative (Larson, 2000). Young adolescents identify being motivated by the opportunity to do something fun, to learn about new things, to acquire new friends and to be with their friends. Being able to

participate in activities involving dance, music, mentoring, and computers were among

the top five activities selected by both youth and parents as desirable for extracurricular

youth participation (Sanderson & Richards, 2010).

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