Essential ingredients of life-skills programs aiming to enhance transitions to adulthood for youth with disabilities

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Overview

- **10 mins**: Introduction to transition services and life-skills programs for youth with disabilities
- **15 mins**: Overview and synthesis of findings from team’s program of research in transitions and life-skills programs
- **15 mins**: Application of current evidence-base to clinical practice
- **20 mins**: Interactive discussion between attendees and presenters

Transition for youth with disabilities

- Youth with disabilities lag behind typically developing peers in skills needed for smooth transition to adulthood (Stevens et al, 1996; King et al, 2005)
- E.g. Issues regarding employment, schooling, independent living, & relationships
- A lack of life skills is an important contributing factor (Stewart et al, 2001; White, 1997)

What are life skills?

"The abilities for adaptive and positive behaviors that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life" (WHO, 2003, p.3)
Life skills programs

- Formal curriculum
  - Group education sessions
  - 1:1 support
  - Peer mentorship
  - Role-playing
  - Coaching
- Real-world learning
- Novel environment away from home
- Level of immersion varies

Three Children’s Centres in Ontario, Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Youth Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Independence Program</td>
<td>Holland Bloorview</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
<td>12-15 youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving On: Teen Independence Program</td>
<td>Ryerson University, Toronto</td>
<td>Wk. 1 – 4 days</td>
<td>12-15 youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Living Program</td>
<td>Mohawk College, Hamilton</td>
<td>Wk. 2 – 5 days and 4 overnights</td>
<td>14-18 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sheridan College, Oakville</td>
<td>11 days</td>
<td>16-19 years</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peel/Halton</td>
<td>11 days</td>
<td>14 youth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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What do we know about residential, immersive life skills (RILS) programs?

- Guided by varied theoretical perspectives, including experiential learning, social learning theory, and self-determination
- Proven short-term positive changes related to self-concept, self-determination, life preparedness, etc.
- Tantalizing indications that the 'magic' occurs after youth return home

Key issues

1. What opportunities are provided by RILS programs?
2. What strategies are most highly used by those delivering these programs?
3. What are the experiences and perceptions of youth prior to, during, and following participation? Of their parents?
4. What changes in outcomes are observed?
Retrospective studies
(Kingsnorth et al, 2015)

Who was involved?
130 youth attending the 3 programs (past graduates)

What was found?
High percentages of youth attributed acquisition and consolidation of life skills to participating in these programs
Youth reported being engaged in meaningful social relationships, taking responsibility for managing their own lives, and experiencing choice and independence in decision making

What does this mean?
The findings support the view that important life outcomes for youth with disabilities include self-determination and self-efficacy

Interview study with youth
(McPherson et al, under review)

Who was involved?
14 alumni participated in interviews, describing life outcomes & views of the important factors involved in program delivery

What was found?
Strategies that had facilitated youths’ learning experiences included support from peers and “trial and error” learning
For many, attending the program was a “turning point” through which they developed a sense of personal identity and self-worth

What does this mean?
The findings indicate the need to examine RILS opportunities & youth experiences, and the importance of the peer context

Interview study with service providers
(King et al, 2014, 2015)

Who was involved?
37 service providers from 3 programs provided perceptions of key program design features, approaches, and strategies

What was found?
They employed a variety of approaches to enhance learning, including encouraging problem solving, allowing youth to deal with the consequences of their actions, using group dynamics to enhance learning, encouraging self-reflection, and providing opportunities for youth to make choices

What does it mean?
The findings indicate the nature of the strategies used by service providers to bring about positive youth experiences and outcomes

Prospective study at TIP
(King et al, under review)

Who was involved?
Four youth and their parents were interviewed before and after the program, and then 3 months later. Five youth and parents completed standardized measures.

What was found?
Positive youth changes in self-efficacy, autonomy, psychological empowerment, self-realization, and self-determination. RILS programs triggered the journey to a wider world, as well as changing parental behavior and expectations of their teens

What does this mean?
The findings indicate how RILS programs provide experiences that lead to youth empowerment and changes in parents’ expectations and behavior
Current study
**Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada**

**Opportunities**
To determine the opportunities provided for particular types of youth experiences
To determine the extent to which service providers use specific learning strategies to promote the acquisition of core skills, knowledge, and behaviors

**Experiences**
To determine the experiences of youth and parents before, during, and after the program, including in-the-moment experiences of youth

**Outcomes**
To assess change and/or maintenance between pre, post, and 3- and 12-month follow-up measures of youth’s higher-order life skills (i.e., self-determination and self-efficacy)

Key learnings

- Repeated learning opportunities in supportive environment → positive learning experiences, skill development and increased confidence
- Skills can be acquired faster during the RILS programs, supporting the use of immersive environments
- RILS programs can act as a ‘turning point’ for many youth, fostered by real-world learning, calculated risk taking, goal setting, social learning and believing in youths’ capabilities

Applications to clinical practice

- Program design
  - Location, duration, structure, providing real-world opportunities
- Program delivery
  - Experiential model, opportunities for success and failure
- Service provider strategies
  - A checklist of intervention techniques
  - Novice Vs expert service providers

Service Providers Strategies – Checklist (SPS-C)

The checklist contains 24 items grouped in 5 categories:
1. Teaching / Learning Techniques (e.g. verbal cues)
2. Cognitive Strategies (e.g. Questioning)
3. Handling / Physical Assistance (e.g. Physical assistance)
4. Socially-Mediated Strategies (e.g. engaging youth)
5. Non-Intrusive Strategies (not providing assistance)
SPS-C (cont.)

- Good content validity, high inter-rater reliability, and clinically relevant
- Facilitative, coaching-orientated strategies most common
- Use and non-use of strategies reflected the intent of the program
- Opportunity for orienting new staff members and providing feedback to service providers in all types of life skills programs
- Potential to increase our understanding of strategies used by service providers

Ontario Independence Program Research (OIPR)

www.oipr.ca

References

- King, G et al. (under review) Residential Immersive Life Skills Programs for Youth with Physical Disabilities: A Pilot Study of Program Opportunities, Provider Strategies, and Youth Experiences. Developmental Neurorehabilitation

References (cont.)

- McPherson, AC et al (under review) "Ready to take on the world": Experiences and understandings of independence after attending residential immersive life skills programs for youth with physical disabilities. Developmental Neurorehabilitation.