

Educating for Leisure: Expanding Understanding of Leisure as an Avenue to Health and Wellness

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Leisure - what we choose do in our unobligated, non-work time - has repeatedly been found to positively contribute to various dimensions of wellness and health (Payne & Orsega-Smith, 2010). Not all individuals, however, are aware of why leisure is an essential part of life, make time to pursue leisure, or choose leisure pursuits that are beneficial to their health and wellness. Scholars argue that the reason for this, in part, is the lack of attention to educating people for leisure (Sivan, 2007). Within the Faculty of Kinesiology, I teach a 3000-level course titled “Leisure Education: Theory and Practice,” which aims to expand students’ understanding of the relationship between leisure and well-being and to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and tools to educate others for leisure, in a variety of contexts.

Leisure education is “a total developmental process through which individuals develop an understanding of leisure, self in relation to leisure, and the relationship among leisure, their own lifestyle, and society” (Mundy, 1998, p. 5). The process usually involves:

- leisure awareness - understanding what leisure is, the personal and social outcomes that can be achieved

through leisure participation, and the leisure resources that exist in one's community;

- self-awareness - exploring/assessing personal values and attitudes related to leisure, motivations for and barriers to leisure participation, and appropriateness of leisure choices in relation to one's life and society;
- skill development - utilizing decision making, problem solving, and behavioural change skills to access personally satisfying leisure and achieve leisure goals; and
- personal planning - setting goals and objectives related to leisure and determining action steps to achieve those goals.

As one moves through life stages or circumstances in one's life shift, so does the self in relation to leisure and the relationship between leisure and one's lifestyle. For example, educating youth for leisure often involves exposing them to a wide range of activities so they can develop an awareness of the leisure opportunities that exist and they have a chance to develop interests. The process may also focus on brainstorming pro-social ways to alleviate boredom (a common leisure problem identified by youth). Alternatively, educating older adults about leisure may include the physical and mental health benefits of leisure participation and the opportunity for leisure to provide valued identities (important for those who lose valued identities when retiring). Many instruments - pencil and paper exercises, games, and discussion prompts - have been developed by leisure scholars to facilitate the leisure education process with various populations.

Although I discuss with my class how educating for leisure can be important for business (e.g., improving worker productivity) and for addressing social issues such as crime, violence, or gender inequity, leisure education as a tool for improving health and wellness is a significant focus. Depending on their degree program (Bachelor of Recreation and Sport Studies or Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology), students learn about various concepts involving leisure, health, and wellness, but little attention is given to *educating for leisure* and the potential of such education to influence health and wellness outcomes.

The students' term project - writing a funding proposal for a program to educate a specific population for leisure - challenges students to explore and demonstrate the value of leisure education for the health and wellness of their chosen population. Because the interests and anticipated career paths of students taking the course are diverse (e.g., community recreation, education, health promotion, occupational therapy, sport management, youth work), the nature of the proposals vary. In the most recent offering of the course, student projects focused on individuals diagnosed with Type II diabetes, youth living in rural communities, children who are overweight, new parents, individuals who have acquired disabilities (e.g., spinal cord injury), young people who are recovering from addictions, young adults suffering from depression, individuals caring for a chronically ill partner, and those recovering from a cardiac incident. In all cases, students justified why educating these groups for leisure was important for health and wellness.

After conducting a literature review on their specific population, students make connections between the health issues or circumstances that could affect the health of their group, and the role that leisure can play in their lives (e.g., coping with stress,

meeting new people, physical activity, spiritual expression, releasing negative emotions). For example, one student reported that although physically active leisure has been found to help caregivers relieve stress, caregivers of chronically ill partners often do not feel entitled to participate in leisure. These connections form the framework for the proposed leisure education process. Students then set goals and objectives for their proposed program (e.g., increase caregivers' sense of entitlement to leisure; have caregivers identify two leisure activities they can do at home to relieve stress). Next, students determine what the content of the program will include (e.g., educating about: general benefits of leisure, leisure and coping with stress; assessing individual interests; identifying home-based leisure opportunities). Students then choose the leisure education instruments they will use to deliver the content, and decide where the program would ideally be delivered (e.g., hospital setting; online). Finally, students conclude their project by identifying ways in which education their population for leisure may affect dimensions of wellness.

Although it is perhaps not considered as part of traditional health and wellness education, the Leisure Education course provides students with an opportunity to expand their understanding of leisure as an avenue to achieving and maintaining health and wellness. Acquiring knowledge about leisure and educating for leisure can offer students a different lens through which to examine health issues. Further, educating for leisure can be used as an approach to solving health-related problems that individuals or groups of individuals may present to students in a number of careers they pursue.

References

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