A Good Place for What? Placing 'Value' in Youth Centres

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Abstract

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Introduction: More than *A Matter of Time*

While concerns about young people at leisure are longstanding (Addams, 1909; Whyte, 1943; Cohen, 1972; Willis, 1977), the topic of 'unproductive' youth and unsupervised leisure time re-entered mainstream conversations in the 1990s. Sparked by anxieties about America losing its competitive edge in the global economy, reports such as *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Non-School Hours* (Carnegie Council, 1992) highlighted the amount of discretionary time available to American youth compared to youth from around the world, as well as the high rates of youth criminality, sexual activity, and other socially destructive behaviour in the three hours immediately following the school day (Halpern, 2002). This report, and others like it, operated as a kind of 'call to action' to government and large charitable foundations to harness this unproductive time for productive ends (Halpern, 2002; Kwon, 2013; Teitle, 2012). Although youth programs have been in existence since the beginnings of organized recreation (Addams, 1899; Bocarro, Greenwood & Henderson, 2008; Dieser, 2013), the call to action in the 1990s transformed the landscape of community-based youth recreation, engendering the largest influx of government and foundation funding to community-based after-school programs and an explosion in growth of the field (Halpern, 2002; Witt & Crompton, 1996).

The expansion and attention directed to community-based youth recreation also drew research interest from scholars across the fields of youth development, recreation, and leisure. Much of this attention has been directed to research designed to measure or improve the impact of programs on a range of crucial indicators. Much less attention has been directed to

investigations that explore the historical, social, political, and ideological terrain in which the expansion and attention of community-based youth programming is situated, and its implications for young people at leisure.

In this paper we investigate the discursive contexts of contemporary community-based youth centres to critically interrogate ideas and practices concerning leisure, youth, and youth centres. Specifically we ask, what is the "good" that they do, particularly in relation to the young people who are the intended beneficiaries? How do young people negotiate these discourses? We explore these questions in the context of research conducted at two community-based youth centres that were recently established in two neighbourhoods in the Niagara region (Canada). We draw on data collected with youth through a variety of approaches including field visits, neighbourhood mapping exercises, digital storytelling workshops, and over 40 semi-structured interviews with young people, most of whom were regular attendees at the centres. We also analyze the publicly available organizational and policy documents related to the establishment of the youth centres.

In what follows, we argue that the youth centres operate in a kind of discursive tension, constructed as a *place to change* by the (organizational) bodies that established them, and a *place to chill* by the (youth) bodies that used them. In our analyses we elaborate on these two discourses in terms of their program logics, measures of success, and constructions of youthful subjectivities. We trace how these discourses entered into the everyday lived contexts of the youth centres and highlight moments of discursive tension that arose as bodies moved in, out, and within the walls of the youth centres. We pay particular attention to how young people negotiated the values and purposes of the youth centres, specifically their positioning, discursively, as "bodies to be changed." We close the paper with a discussion of the implications

of the research in terms of how youth and recreation practitioners might use youth centres to

support young people's leisure.

The Changing Context of Community-Based Youth Services Provision

The timing of the release of the *Matter of Time* report was important because it marked

an inflection point in the ideological shift toward a political, economic, and social philosophy

about youth characterized by neoliberalism. As an ideology, neoliberalism is grounded in the

"free, possessive individual," with the state cast as tyrannical and oppressive (Hall, 2011, p. 10).

Whereas welfare philosophies imagine the state as an enhancer of human well-being through its

provision of programs that ensure social and economic security, neoliberalism views the

redistributive and regulative actions of the state as an infringement on an individual's rights to

freedom of action, expression, and choice, and thus an inhibitor to well-being (Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberal agendas look for ways to free citizens, and the economy, from government

intervention, and in the 1990s pushed for privatization, deregulation, and the removal of the state

from social welfare provision (Harvey, 2007). Various forms of 'outsourcing' are encouraged,

including outsourcing youth services to the community-based sector of non-profit youth

organizations – the very approach promoted in the call to action. This influx of government and

foundation funding directed to outsourced community-based after-school programs transformed

a field of fairly small and autonomous organizations into a large and coordinated field of youth

services providers (Halpern, 2002; Teitle 2012).

The moment of the *Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Non-School Hours* report

(Carnegie Council, 1992) was also marked, conceptually, by Ulrich Beck's (1992) and Anthony

Giddens' (1991) theories of "the risk society." In the risk society, at a time of increasing public

distrust in the institutions and social structures of late modernity, people must become active, yet individualised, "risk managers." Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) argue that in late modernity it is only as individuals that people confront the "opportunities, threats, and ambivalences of the biography, which [were] formerly possible to overcome by the family group, in the village community, or by recourse to a social class or group" (p. 8). Now, risk "must increasingly be perceived, interpreted, and handled by individuals themselves" (p. 8). The ability to successfully manage increasingly individualised risks results in increasing attention to self-actualisation and personal empowerment and a concomitant decrease in attention to structural matters such as social class or 'race'. Beck (1992, p. 91) referred to this as the "individualisation of social inequality." For both Beck and Giddens (1991), managing risk requires self-reflexivity; self-reflexive risk assessment is ongoing, continual, and unsettling.

Thus, defining risk – what is risky, who is at risk, how risks should be managed, and who gets to decide – is invariably a political act, and one that we see play out repeatedly in youth recreation and leisure programming. For example, youth programs supply "good kids" with a "good place" for recreation: to stay out of trouble, keep away from danger, illegal activities, drugs, gangs, and other risks. The *Matter of Time* (Carnegie Council, 1992, p. 9) report warns: "millions of young people are not developing into responsible members of society. Many likely will not lead productive or fulfilling lives. […] The passage through early adolescence should result in healthy outcomes." Moreover, good youth places provide a venue for youth to show that they are capable of becoming successful self-reflexive risk managers. Here, the terminology of the *Matter of Time* report resounds. As young people "begin to make their initial decisions about potentially dangerous behaviours" they "face risks far more serious than did their predecessors

and they face them earlier in life" (1992, p. 9). Rather than the aforementioned "healthy

outcomes", for many young adolescents:

> Instead of safety in their neighbourhoods, they face physical danger; instead of economic
>
> security, they face insecurity; instead of intellectual stimulation, they face boredom; in
>
> place of respect, they are neglected; lacking clear and consistent adult expectations for
>
> them, they feel alienated from mainstream […] society. (1992, p. 9)

However for recreation and leisure, that space of freedom and choice, "the expansion and

heightening of the intention of control ultimately ends up producing the opposite" – that is, for

young people, leisure as free time or free choice, is anything but free (Beck, Giddens, & Lash,

1994, p. 9). Instead, it is a series of increasingly narrow decisions about risk management in the

face of neoliberal lifestyle choices.

Neoliberalism also changed the relationship between government and the non-

governmental (NGO) sector, particularly as the massive levels of support of the 1990s began to

scale back and funding became more difficult to secure. This new climate of operational

insecurity (Kelly, 2012) has engendered intense competition among organizations (Peck et al.,

2009). This has also blurred the once-clear boundaries and distinctions between state and non-

governmental organizations (King, 2006). Rather than operate autonomously, organizations

increasingly maintain a relationship with the state through various fiduciary or service provision

relationships as government grants, service provision contracts, and public-private partnerships

(King, 2006). These arrangements make NGOs more susceptible to external demands to adopt

and internalize organizational practices of accountability and other measures of "proving

worthiness" desired by today's funding and political bodies (Gordon, 2013; Webb & Richelieu,

2016).

Scholars have raised concerns over how the neoliberal climate has infiltrated the programmatic work of youth organizations (Kwon, 2013; Baldridge, 2014; Kelly, 2012). For example, there is evidence that links operational insecurity to a tendency in organizations to overemphasize the dangers, inadequacies, and "riskiness" of youth when communicating with funders – a strategy that, while it may help to win funding, also diminishes the agency of youth, youth workers, and their communities (Baldridge, 2014), fuels processes of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant, 2008), and legitimizes intervention (Kelly, 2012). Jeffs and Smith (1999, p. 48) refer to this as a "Janus-faced approach" to youth work, since it involves organizations telling one story to the young people they serve and a different story to external audiences such as funders:

> When pleading for funds they tend to emphasize both the dangers posed by unmonitored youth as well as the failings and inadequacies of young people…the face offered to young people and colleagues is different. Here the talk is of empowerment, engagement, and participation – not control and inadequacy. (Jeffs & Smith, 1999, p. 48)

Other scholars argue that community-based after-school spaces have been completely co-opted by neoliberalism, in that they are no longer operating to offer young people a space in which to explore who they are that is sheltered from the demands of the adult world, but have begun to operate with the intended purpose of preparing young people with the skills and attitudes they need to succeed in a neoliberal world (Kwon, 2013; Leslie & Hunt, 2013). Pointing to the growing number of youth programs that focus on enhancing human capital, personal responsibility, or empowerment, some contend that youth development programs now operate according to a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" logic that encourages young people to see

themselves as not only capable to be successful adults but also responsible for their success – in other words, as the ideal neoliberal citizen (Gordon, 2013; Kwon, 2013; Leslie & Hunt, 2013).

To be fair, much of the scholarship referenced above engaged in a discursive analysis of the intended aims of youth development programs as articulated in materials produced by organizations, funders, or government policy, or in interviews with organizational leaders. There is a small body of research that focuses on how the discourses that construct youth development programs are negotiated by the people who are subjected to them. For example, in her study of youth workers in community-based programs, Baldridge (2014) identifies deep tensions in youth workers' experiences, in that even as they critiqued the neoliberal reforms that shaped their work they were forced to hold young people to markers of success defined by neoliberal ideals. Similarly, Teitle (2012) and Nolas (2014) illustrate how the "audit culture" demanded by neoliberalism enters into the banal, everyday practices of an after-school drop-in centre, forcing youth leaders to monitor and record young people's activities in the language of productivity. However, all of these works also demonstrate myriad ways that young people (and youth leaders) negotiate the rhetoric of productivity and accountability to open space to define their leisure on their own terms. Research that chronicles and analyzes these small moments is important for how it engenders reflective questions and new insights about young people and youth work, and it is in this realm that we aim to contribute with this research.

Research Context and Methodology

Our research context was the Region of Niagara (population 500 000). Like many areas across North America, since the 1990s Niagara has been undergoing a difficult economic restructuring from manufacturing to a less stable service-based economy, increased

unemployment, and a relative decline in household income. The region was also charged with new responsibilities for providing social welfare programs, as a result of a massive restructuring of government at the provincial level. This restructuring – referred to broadly as "downloading" – led regional governments to search for innovative ways to meet broad welfare goals with the funds transferred from the provincial government.

These broader changes introduced some new strategic directions for social services provision which drove the establishment of new after-school youth centres in the region. One was an emerging interest in a neighbourhood-based approach to social services provision. Similar to other cities, the region completed a neighbourhood mapping exercise, and then established a program that directed funds to non-profit organizations to "support poverty reduction and prevention activities" in neighbourhoods identified as "in need of attention" (Niagara Prosperity Initiative Website, 2018). The second was a new strategic direction by the United Way, the region's largest charitable funder, to consolidate its funding on fewer initiatives in order to have larger impact. It established the "After-School Matters" initiative that funded six after-school free drop-in programs in "stressed neighbourhoods" in order to "mitigate the negative effects of low-income" for children and youth (Website, 2018). The first one to open was in "Redcrest" (NB: the names of the neighbourhoods have been changed), which had been open for five years at the time of our study, followed later by one in "Rosetown", which had been operating for two years.

Both Redcrest and Rosetown are fairly small neighbourhoods, with a population of approximately 1100 people in Redcrest and 1250 in Rosetown (Census, 2011). At the heart of each neighbourhood is a subsidized townhouse complex that houses nearly half of the neighbourhood's residents in a compact and relatively self-contained community of about a

dozen multi-unit buildings arranged in clusters and joined by walking paths. In both

neighbourhoods, youth centres occupied a converted townhouse unit with a kitchen and

living/meeting room on the main floor, with a computer room and smaller meeting rooms

upstairs. The United Way contracted local youth-serving organizations to run all of the

programs, and they followed a very similar program structure with provision for younger

children immediately after school, and one for teens later in the evening. Both centres offered a

weekly schedule of activities and regular field trips and special events.

In contrast to its surroundings where residents are aging and also comprised

overwhelmingly (93%) of residents who identify as White and of European descent (2011

Census), the populations of Redcrest and Rosetown are comprised of many families with young

children and people of color. This is partly because the townhouse complexes have been

designated as family housing by the non-profit housing agency that manages them, but also

because over time the neighbourhoods, especially Redcrest, have become a destination of choice

for families who have emigrated or relocated to the region, particularly from Muslim and Arabic-

speaking countries like Sudan, Libya, and Egypt. According to 2011 Census data, 32% of

residents of Redcrest and 22% of residents of Rosetown neighbourhood claim ethnic origins

outside of North America or Europe and identify as a visible minority, although the percentage is

much higher in the townhouse complexes – informally estimated at about 70%.

We began the project by ~~also~~ collect~~ing~~ed all publicly available organizational and

policy documents produced by the main funding bodies (United Way and regional government)

that related to the youth centres and the initiatives that established them. Then, b~~B~~etween 2014

and 2016, we made repeated visits to the two youth centres, joining young people on field trips,

running filmmaking workshops, conducting neighbourhood mapping activities, and holding over

40 semi-structured interviews with young people, most of whom were regular users of the youth centres. Data were collected mainly by three research assistants, Tyler Collymore, Katie Faust, and Jocelyn Murtell, who as university students could engage more easily with the young residents of the neighbourhoods. Field visits and observations were made at different times in the day, week, and year, and the inclusion of both male and female researchers helped us to engage with young residents across a relatively wide range of youth with varying leisure interests. In our first interview with young people consisted primarily of a neighbourhood mapping interview, in which young people were asked to draw a map of their neighbourhood, and tell us about it. The map served as a prompt to discuss places and moments that were important to them. Follow-up interviews were typically within a few week of this initial interview. Field visits also were interspersed with interviews, and the visits informed interview question development. Later in the project, young people were invited to participate in a digital storytelling project at the university, which attracted some young people we knew as well as introduced us to new people, who we also invited to participate in a neighbourhood mapping exercise.

As a result, over~~Over~~ the course of two years many young residents were interviewed multiple times, both formally and informally. We held sit-down interviews at different locales in the neighbourhood, or at nearby coffee shops or fast food restaurants. All interviews were transcribed in full with interviews lasting between 20 minutes to one and a half hours. Although we extended invitations to all young residents of the neighbourhoods, the ones who accepted our invitation tended to be those who were active users of the youth centre and public youth spaces in the neighbourhood. ~~We also collected publicly available organizational and policy documents produced by the main funding bodies (United Way and regional government) that related to the youth centres and the initiatives that established them.~~ The project received ethics clearance from

Brock University and all names (neighbourhoods, individuals) have been changed to ensure

anonymity. For more information on methods, see Authors (date) [information withheld for the

review process]. .

Thinking with poststructuralism works to crack open the limitations we place on

ourselves in social life by pointing to the discourses that enable these limitations to exist and

thrive (Foucault, 2001). In this research, we traced the discourses that constructed young

peoples' experiences at the youth centres, as well as how young people negotiated their own

values, beliefs, and practices in relation to these discourses. To identify the broader political

discourse of youth centres, we conducted a Foucauldian discourse analysis of the organizational

and policy documents produced by the major funding bodies.

To gain insight into the discourse that circulated among young people, we followed the

method recommended by Aston (2016). Aston suggests a process in which researchers begin by

identifying important issues in the data texts (interview transcript, field note, organizational

documents), with the idea of 'issue' being loosely defined to refer to a topic of interest. Some of

the issues identified in data analysis included 'leaders,' 'group dynamics,' 'why kids don't go,'

and 'youth centre purpose.' As issues are identified, we followed Aston's recommendation of

identifying the beliefs, values, and practices enunciated in the text. Identifying beliefs from the

perspective of the author of the text is a useful way "to pay close attention to and begin to

deconstruct the issue identified in the text" (p. 2262). It was through this process, and in

particular through analysis of data that captured or described moments of interaction, tension, or

conflict, , which involved examining the intricacies of interactions, looking closely at moments

in the data which people indicate experiencing tensions or conflicts, because these moments can

offer~~ed~~ insight into ~~how~~ competing discourses ~~compete~~ as well as how <u>young people</u> ~~a person~~ experience<u>d</u>~~s~~ power (Raby, 2005).

Our analyses are presented in two sections. In the first section, we contrast competing discursive constructions of the youth centre: as a "place to change" young people which circulated among program funders and government, and as a "place to chill" which circulated among young people. The second subsection focuses on discourses of measuring success. Throughout, we show how these discourses came into contact with one another primarily through moments of "inside-outside" encounters—i.e., both in the centre as well as in the broader spaces of the city—and how these moments of discursive tension were experienced and negotiated by the young residents of the two neighbourhoods. Following this, we discuss the implications of the analyses for young people and youth "programming."

Analysis

A Place to Chill or a Place to Change? Negotiating Program "Logics"

For most of the young people we interviewed, the youth centres were important and meaningful places in their lives. They used the centres regularly. For many, going to the youth centre was part of their daily routine. Jack, for example, described his involvement:

Jack: We're here every night – I've literally missed one day this year, it was last week because I was sleeping. We come here, we like the activities, we like doing art. We love going to the gym on Tuesday, I don't know why but we do, and we're going to [nearby school's] gym tomorrow so we enjoy doing that. We cook, we'll all cook and help make whatever we're making that week. And then we watch a movie on Friday. So we know what we're doing every day and we'll just come here to chill out.

Jack was like many of the young people in his description of the youth centre as a place to "chill," with chill having a few different meanings. Partly, it referred to a space in which young people were able to do what they wanted, rather than having to do what other people wanted them to do. Trisha explained that this was her favourite aspect of the youth centre:

> Trisha: I like it because it's a place where we can go that's not home, because to be honest I don't really like being at my home. It's not like anything bad, just… But teen program is better because we can do what we want. Well obviously they have rules but it's a place to just hang out. [...] You do what you feel like doing, not what they make you do.

Chill also referred to the youth centre as a space of unguarded relaxation: a place where young people felt at ease, and able to "let their guard down" in terms of behaving and presenting oneself. For example, Aliya compared the feeling of being at the youth centre (and her neighbourhood) to the feeling of being at school: "I feel like at school you're more professional and at [the youth centre] it's like whatever. It's more comfortable, it's like they're family." For Asim, some of the feeling of comfort was associated with having a place to be with people with a similar culture and history. Although he enjoyed school, he also acknowledged that it was "very white" and that "it's just good to be very diverse at one point and then just get with your people at the end of the day." Whereas Asim's comments hint at the performative work required of racialized young people to navigate spaces that adhere to conventions of normalized Whiteness (McDonald, 2009; Spracklen, 2013), Jaylene, who self-identified as biracial, stated this explicitly. She explained how the youth centre was a space of comfort to her because it gave her a place to enact her "black side:"

Jaylene: I would really have two personalities. There's the white side of me and the black

side of me. The black side of me is what you see at [the youth centre], except for

yesterday when I was having Starbucks. My white side is on Instagram and my black side

is in person.

Interviewer: Why do I see your black side at [the youth centre]?

Jaylene: I don't know. It's just somewhere I don't want to be white.

The construction of the youth centre as a space to chill contrasted with how the space was

constructed in broader political discourse, particularly among the bodies involved in its

establishment. In these circles, the youth centres were imagined a space to change. To the

establishing bodies, change involved "moving the needle" on key social indicators in the region,

through the mechanism of changing the capabilities of those in the region who were deemed as

having the greatest room to improve: young people who lived in neighbourhoods "in need of

attention" (Niagara Prosperity Initiative Website, 2018). Funds from regional government and

the United Way were used to deliver programs designed to enrich young people with the skills

and knowledge that help them live healthier lives, perform better in school, and integrate more

fully into the community. It is in these terms that the youth centres were described on the website

of the United Way, where it articulates that the purpose of the program is to deliver "quality

educational, recreational, and leisure activities" (United Way Website, 2018). The website goes

on to describe some of the benefits available to the preteens and teens who drop in, including

"homework help, physical activity, nutritious snacks, and enrichment programs such as cooking,

music, and science" (United Way Website, 2018). This is followed by a listing of the program's

measurable impacts: "Since attending: 80% of participants report doing better in school; 85% are

more physically active; 78% eat healthy foods more often; and 95% feel better about their

future." The change expected of centre attendees, according to this website, is beneficial

development that prepare them for their future success, aligning with neo-liberal imperatives and

aspirations.

Also accessible on the United Way website is a program logic model: a program planning

tool that arranges program components into a logical relationship that can demonstrate how

activities impact outcomes in a "theory of change" (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Logic models

arrange activities and outcomes into an "if-then" relationship, in the sense that "if" activities are

delivered in the right way, "then" the desired outcomes will result. In the logic model, the youth

centres are connected in an if-then relationship to all three of the organization's desired outcomes

for young people (increased connectedness, improved performance in school, increased sense of

well-being), since the youth centre can operate as a space in which a multitude of change-

oriented activities (e.g., life skills programs, tutoring, physical activity programs, leadership

programs) can be delivered to youth (United Way Website, 2018).

Program logic models became increasingly common in youth services practice through

the 1990s and 2000s as influential funders like the United Way and the Kellogg Foundation

began to use them as tools for program planning and also accountability – to ensure that the

funds "get results" (Carpenter, 2017). The program logic model is also deeply inflected with the

logic of efficiency, in that it works to maximize "yield," or the most impact for the least amount

of input (Simmons, 2016) – a logic that is clearly at play in the overall approach taken by the

organization in its decision to direct its funding to "stressed neighbourhoods." However, logic

models also reproduce a specific view of young people and the leisure spaces intended for them.

A core assumption of the logic model is that change is linear and predictable—if the right inputs

are entered into the model and the activities are properly delivered (Carpenter, 2017). In so

doing, it discursively constructs young people as (docile) bodies to be transformed. That is, the

program model produces broad social change through the mechanism of working on the bodies

of young people, using the various programs or activities as a method for producing in young

people the capabilities that not only help them improve their own lives, but also alleviate broader

social problems. Thus, logic models construct young people as both the cause of and solution to

social problems – a positioning that reinforces deficit views of young people and obscures the

structural roots of social problems (Carpenter, 2017; Lashua, 2016; Moeller, 2013).

Building a theory of change requires organizations to predefine the outcomes they want

to achieve and establish a relationship of cause and effect. This kind of pre-definition can be

problematic in a complex field such as youth work where diverse outcomes emerge from a non-

linear, youth-centred process (Duffy, 2017). This was certainly a problem in Redcrest and

Rosetown, where the interests among young people to use the centre to "do what they wanted"

came into conflict, at times, with pre-determined, outcome-oriented program goals. Although

young people valued the activities that were offered at the centre and generally participated in

them, they engaged as they wished, often deciding what to do in the moment and following the

energy of the group. Rarely did the activities take the form of a "program" in the sense of having

a clear beginning and end with a program "leader" and "instruction" given to youth participants.

Aliya explained: "I feel they do have things set up for us but we just don't go with it sometimes.

Every day something is assigned, sometimes we just end up talking or laughing instead of doing

the actual thing." Even when young people engaged in a program from beginning to end, the

program served less as a learning opportunity than as a backdrop for young people's playful

improvisations in their ongoing project of "having fun with friends." Nadia explained that to her,

the programs were what set the schedule for getting together with friends: "it makes the time and

place for us to come and hang out together. […] it gives us something to do together. We don't have to plan something, we just come here."

For the most part, the leaders who worked regularly at the centres embraced the idea that they were spaces to chill. This was a quality that many young people liked about leaders. As Jack explained, the role of leaders was "to have fun with us. Like we don't want you to act like a teacher and sit around and just watch us do all this fun stuff. We obviously want the workers to get involved." Occasionally, when leaders seemed to be too controlling or didactic, some young people demonstrated their dislike through various forms of resistance. Jack described this in a story about a recent experience with a leader who was brought in to teach a weekly yoga class, and how he and his friends at the centre managed to get her to leave:

> Jack: Today we're supposed to be doing Yoga and Art but nobody does yoga because one week we were just not paying attention and the yoga girl got really mad at us and Jaylene fake cried. Jaylene literally started fake crying because she yelled at us and the yoga lady had to leave. We didn't want her there. It was nothing against her it's just that we didn't want to do yoga. I don't know why we voted for it last year. And if she were here then [youth centre leader] would force us to do the program so we were like no. We've got to get her out some way fast enough. So Jaylene started fake crying. So she started crying so me and Samira go into the washroom and she started laughing so hard. We gave each other high fives, take one for the team.

The "yoga leader incident" is instructive because it illustrates the way that the youth centre was constructed among young people. It is illustrative in terms of how they imagined the space and what they valued about it, as well as the careful negotiation required of young people to uphold this construction. It also highlights the positive emplacement of young people within a

discursive context that positioned young people as deficient bodies in need of improvement. As Jack's story shows, what he and his friends valued was having the authority to do what they wanted, whatever that might be at the time, versus having to submit to leader-determined program plans and goals. However, to refuse to participate in the program would have seen them at risk of being labeled disruptive, ungrateful, inactive, and "problem" youth. Instead, they demonstrated "risk management" through tactical disengagement and manipulation of the situation. For example, Jaylene actively managed the risks involved through emotional manipulation that positioned her as a non-threatening (tearful, passive) non-participant, and Jack as a sympathetic friend.

A Good Investment? Negotiating Constructions of Success

The "operational insecurity" (Kelly, 2012) and intense competition among youth organizations for funding has led to an increased focus on "proving worthiness." This involves proving that programs have the power to produce transformative change, as well as proving to funders that an organization is a worthy investment (Gordon, 2013; Webb & Richelieu, 2016). The current focus on targeted neighbourhoods can be linked to this logic, as the perception that servicing people that are constructed as the most deprived in a community is a worthwhile approach because it offers funders the greatest return on investment (Hayhurst, 2013). Ostensibly, this is the logic that underpins the rationale of a neighbourhood-based approach to funding: by directing funding to those areas that are thought to be most problematic, the funds can have the most impact. Targeted neighbourhood approaches construct young people in these neighbourhoods through a deficit lens. For example, in order for United Way to promote the "measurable impacts" of their funding initiatives, their website describes the youth they seek to

serve as, "less likely to graduate high school, less likely to pursue post-secondary education, and more likely to live in poverty as adults" (United Way Website, 2018). The youth centres that received funding were meant to serve the young people in the city who were seen as the most deficient and least likely to grow up to be successful – with success defined in terms deeply inflected by neoliberal notions of economic self-sufficiency. For example, in policy documents such as *A Matter of Time*, the risks of "unproductive" youth are set out in purely in cost/payment terms:

> […] society pays heavily for such outcomes. We pay for diminished economic
>
> productivity of a generation. We pay bills for crime, welfare, and health care. We pay
>
> immense social costs by somehow having to absorb millions of alienated people. And we
>
> pay the moral costs of knowing that we are producing millions of young adolescets who
>
> face predictably bleak and unfulfilling lives. (Carnegie Council, 1992, p. 10)

This neoliberal language also makes clear that it is young people who are to be changed, who are deficient, rather than addressing broader social inequities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, young people in the targeted neighbourhoods did not buy into the discourses that the youth centres were established as a way to reach the "bad kids." In practice, young people constructed the youth centre in almost the opposite terms: as spaces where the "good kids" went to get away from the perceived negative influences who supposedly roamed their neighbourhoods. The construction of the youth centre as a space for good kids afforded a way for the youth who attended to position themselves as motivated and engaged, in contrast to the "lazy kids" in the neighbourhood who chose not to attend. When we asked Jack what could be done to get more kids to the centre, he shrugged and said, "It's them not wanting to. Literally you could open it to six year olds and up

and it's just laziness. The laziness of the teenage group." Similarly, Samira constructed the kids

who didn't visit the centre as kids who were going nowhere fast:

Q: What can you tell me about other teens in the community that don't come to [the

        youth centre]?

A: They just like to smoke weed, everyone basically smokes.

Q: Everyone?

A: Everyone smokes.

Q: What other kinds of things do the teens do other than smoke weed?

A: Skip school, stay home. Someone got arrested yesterday actually.

Whereas Jack was able to sidestep the construction of the neighbourhood as a bad place

by assigning badness to specific (lazy) individuals, others found this more difficult. For example,

Nadia expressed some discomfort with being one of only a few select neighbourhoods receiving

this kind of youth investment. Although she struggled to put it into words, her comments suggest

an awareness of how the fact that her neighbourhood was chosen for a youth centre also marked

out the young people of that neighbourhood as "special" and this was not seen as altogether

positive (read: problem). Her desire to see youth centres everywhere is an indication of her

interest in positioning young people in her neighbourhood as just like kids everywhere – normal,

everyday kids:

Nadia: I was just thinking, I don't understand why they don't – okay I understand why,

but they shouldn't have [youth centres] only in communities like Rosetown and Redcrest.

They should have it in every community where there's children. Because it's like nice for

any child whether any community they're living in.

It was also being marked out as "problem youth" that produced for Jaylene an ambivalence about participating in the youth centre's field trips. The youth organization generally offered excursions to participants from all of the youth centres, ostensibly to open up experiences to all of the young people it served, as well as perhaps for the financial savings on staffing, bus rentals, and other fixed costs of excursions. Jaylene, from Rosetown, indicated that while she enjoyed the field trips, she despised attending them with kids from *other* youth centres. We observed, on a field trip to a skating rink, her reaction of visceral disgust to the arrival of kids from the Redcrest centre (e.g., "eww Redcrest"). Jaylene referred again to these feelings in an interview: "The kids from Redcrest – they are so immature. We're mature. They just need to die." While Jaylene may have disliked young people from Redcrest, arguably she recognized how the practice of being grouped together on these field trips encouraged a reading of her body as one of an undifferentiated group of "problem kids in need of help" who had been targeted for investment, rather than the good (or even "normal" kid) that she imagined herself to be.

More than *A Matter of Time* (again): A numbers game?

In the audit culture of neoliberalism, numbers are important. According to de St. Croix (2018) in the new "youth impact agenda, "getting paid for numbers becomes normalised as funding agencies reward organisations that are able and willing to measure their effectiveness in numerical and monetary terms" (p. 422). The assumption appears to be that attendance numbers are tied, as evidence, to program impact. That is, in the logic of youth programming, numbers equate to the "input" of young bodies that are then "programmed" to change, with higher numbers equating to greater impact. Low numbers are looked upon unfavourably for how they negatively impact a funder's return on investment – a number that, although never clearly

articulated, can be summed up as a ratio of as much as possible for as little as possible. Low

numbers also show up as poor outcomes when impact is measured in "service units" (United

Way Website, 2018), a term used in this context to refer to the number of units (bodies)

receiving a certain amount of service (program days/hours).

Numbers were an issue at the time of our field visits, especially at the Rosetown centre.

Although the number of young people who regularly used the centre was never more than about

a dozen, a number of the regulars from the first year had stopped attending. During the teen

program, the leaders and young people regularly discussed the low numbers and how the centre

could attract more people to its youth programs. The concern vocalized by the leaders was that

the low numbers put funding at risk: if the youth centre couldn't show that it was attracting

enough young people to make it a worthwhile investment, the programs would end and the

centre would close.

Later we talked to Jack about attracting more young people to the program:

Jack: [The leaders] are always like, 'If you don't get more people to come, the program is

going to end.' We're like, 'We [kids] can't do that.' They can but at the same time they

can't because it's something that we enjoy. And the main idea is so we can have

somewhere that we can chill out and have fun.

Jack was clearly unconcerned with the low numbers. He dismissed the threat of closure and

refused to accept the responsibility of recruiting participants that the program leaders tried to

assign him. As he explained, he "can't do it" because it would be antithetical to his desires: he

liked the youth centre exactly how it was. Jack also constructed the youth centre as a leisure

space that young people could choose to go to if they want to, if it offered something that

interested them.

Additionally, the low numbers also afforded Jack a great deal of power in the centre. Indeed, in many ways Jack and his friends controlled the Rosetown teen program, not only in terms of setting the agenda each day but also including ordering leaders around. Jack described the dynamic: "We treat them like they're the little students. It's funny that they listen. That's why we do it. It's hilarious." When we asked Jack about his dominance in the centre, he explained that he was afforded this control because "they need us." Indeed, they did: as an organization that needed to prove its worth to funders, it needed to attract bodies that could be changed, and as a self-described "Rosetown kid," Jack embodied exactly what the centre was looking for. In a context of low numbers Jack becomes an even more valuable commodity.

Where Jack refused to help the organization boost its numbers, other young residents, especially the participants in Redcrest, were more willing, for reasons we suspect had to do with their direct experiences with the operational insecurities of the youth programs. In contrast to the Rosetown centre which was still in an early period of growing pains, the youth centre in Redcrest had been open for five years and although its attendance had stabilized, the youth organization continued to face challenges with funding and at times it had been forced to close its teen program temporarily. The young people who had experienced these periods of closure were more willing to work with the organization to help them do what was needed to keep the interest of funders. For example, Yasmin described how she had recently hosted a "tour" of people from one of the program's major funders, who wanted to see "what's happening with their money:"

> [They] have tours for people who donate to [youth services agency] or to the after-school programs themselves, so they do want to see what's happening with their money. So they come and see the neighbourhood, they love it. Like yesterday someone came in, she went upstairs, I swear they were gone for like half an hour. I was like what's going on up there,

I'm really, really paranoid because what if something bad happened up there, but they

came down with laughing smiles and I was like, they got it.

In this interview excerpt, Yasmin indicates the anxiety that this visit provoked since so

much was at stake. Although she was happy with the outcome of the tour, we wonder about the

performance of youthful subjectivity that funders are looking for in these moments of proving

worthiness. Will funders be more impressed if they see "badness" in the centre, indicating that

their funds will produce a bigger impact? Do funders want to see happy, "changed" youth as

proof that their money was well spent? And what happens if they see teenagers who simply wish

to "chill"? Will they be disappointed or disenchanted if they do not witness productive activity?

Moments like these position young people ambiguously, if not impossibly, between discursive

constructions where no matter what they do, they cannot "win."

This is the paradox of neoliberalism for young people at leisure. If they have a place

simply to chill, they're not improving themselves for success and thus don't deserve funding.

But, in a "place for change," young people are participating in programs that construct their

bodies as docile, deficient, flawed, and failed. Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994) argue that

ambivalent performances like these, and the self-reflexivity and individualization they involve,

are requisite of the risk society (Beck, Giddens, and Lash, 1994). The risk society involves "a

new type of arranging and conducting life […] based on welfare state regulations" which

"presume the individual actor, [as] designer, stage director of his or her own biography, identity,

social networks, commitments and convictions " (p. 14). This kind of self-actualization,

however, is not based solely on free choice, but rather operates under the conditions of the state,

education system, and labour market (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994). Thus the dilemma,

especially for young people, is the illusion of self-making – i.e., "I am whatever I say I am" – set

against national and global social problems, such as poverty, which individuals alone cannot surmount. As Beck, Giddens and Lash lay out regarding "participation" in leisure, work, or education: "all of these are requirements which do not command anything but call upon the individual kindly to constitute herself or himself as an individual to plan, understand, design, and act – or suffer the consequences which will have been self-inflicted in case of failure" (p. 16). As illustrated in the interview narratives and analyses above, the troublesome paradox between funder expectations and participant expectations for this space, resonates at the core of this dilemma.

Conclusion: Placing Value in Youth Centres

In this research we examined the contemporary context of community-based youth centres and the discursive tensions between constructions of these centres as places to chill and change. In so doing, we aim to show some of the ways that young people are subjected to, and negotiate, messy and at times contradictory constructions of "young people at leisure" that are situated in a history of intense neoliberalization and the cultures of managerial accountability and performativity that have been ushered into community-based youth programming.

Indeed, these discourses construct two different views of youth centres and young people: one constructs young people as bodies to be changed and the other as young people with agency to change if they choose or not. One is broadly accepted and deeply entrenched. The other, perhaps, better reflects the embodied experiences of young people who attend youth centres. Both enact certain operations on the bodies of those involved in the youth centres studied here. For example, the discourses of deficit motivate and channel funding into neighbourhoods, where centres of safety, comfort, identity formation and community are provided to youth. Yet for

young people using these centres, finding meaning in them is fraught with risks that need to be managed – particularly the risk of being (re)defined as deficient, docile and problem youth.

As leisure scholars, we are also concerned about where "leisure" is in today's community-based youth centre. To what extent is the focus on programs impeding young people's opportunities to freely explore their lives on their own terms? Who is to say that change isn't happening in meaningful ways through "chill," or that time spent in improvisational play is not productive? Under whose terms are we defining productivity? In a context of neoliberalism we are seeing it become increasingly difficult to hold open the material and discursive space for young people to be at leisure – to chill with their friends, and hang out – especially young people who are constructed in deficit terms. However, as this research indicates, even when this leisure takes place there is always so much more going on. As scholar-practitioners, it is important that we acknowledge the contradictions of neoliberalism for young people at leisure and the necessity to reframe the decidedly individualistic focus on "change or chill" to also interrogate the historical, social, political and ideological terrain that always already impacts young people.

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