



# Residential immersive life skills programs for youth with physical disabilities: A pilot study of program opportunities, intervention strategies, and youth experiences



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** A pilot study was conducted to assess correspondence among measures of program characteristics (opportunities and intervention strategies) and youth experiences in a range of activity settings in a residential immersive life skills (RILS) program.

**Method:** Opportunities and intervention strategies were assessed in 18 activity settings in the 21-day program. On two occasions each, four youth completed a measure of experiences and took part in onsite interviews.

**Results:** There was good convergence between observed program opportunities and the use of socially-mediated, teaching/learning, and non-intrusive strategies. Youth experiences of social interaction, choice, and personal growth were further informed by interview information. There was substantial convergence between program characteristics and youth experiences, indicating the program was provided and experienced as intended.

**Conclusions:** This pilot study indicated the fidelity of the program and the feasibility of using the measures in a future study. The preliminary findings suggest that RILS programs may provide a favorable environment for developmental experiences concerning social interaction, autonomy, and personal growth.

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## What this paper adds?

Given increasing interest in program fidelity, it is important to examine whether life skills programs for youth with disabilities are provided and experienced as intended. This paper adds to our understanding of the opportunities and experiences provided by a residential life skills program for youth with disabilities, where youth attend a university residence to learn life skills and gain a realistic experience of what living away from home might entail. As assessed by novel observer-rated tools capturing program opportunities and intervention strategies, the program provided a favorable environment for youth

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to have developmental experiences concerning social interaction, autonomy, and personal growth. These are cornerstones of self-determination that are not always experienced by youth with disabilities in their home environments. Furthermore, the study contributes a unique methodology for assessing program environments and experiences. The study indicates that program characteristics and in-the-moment youth experiences can be reliably and meaningfully assessed, which we believe will be of interest to others conducting and evaluating life skill programs, including those that are non-residential. By examining the 'black box' of program characteristics and in-the-moment experiences, this study serves as an innovative example of 'process research', where attention is paid to discovering how program environments facilitate change. It is important to understand how therapy environments bring about client experiences and personal changes that lead to improved life outcomes, as this will support the development of theory driven programs.

## 1. Introduction

There is increasing interest in the nature of environments that support optimal development for adolescents at risk for poorer life outcomes due to chronic health conditions (King, Rigby et al., 2014; Petrenchik & King, 2011). Enriched program environments, such as organized after-school and life skills programs, have the potential to make appreciable differences to the lives of youth with disabilities, yet little is known about whether they are provided and experienced in the ways intended by service providers. Literature on organized, out-of-school activities for typically developing youth at risk for poorer academic outcomes points to the developmental importance of structured activities with respect to competency development, social relationships, and identity formation (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Eccles & Templeton, 2002). Although this literature examines participants' experiences (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007), the actual qualities of these programs (e.g., the opportunities they provide for development) are typically inferred and not directly assessed (Eccles, 2005).

In a series of past studies, we examined the nature of optimal environments for youth with severe disabilities (i.e., youth with complex continuing care needs and youth who communicate using augmentative and alternative systems). We developed a series of innovative techniques and instruments to assess the environmental qualities of youths' home and community activity settings, and their experiences of these settings. 'Activity settings' are contextualized settings that situate child/youth activities and their participation experiences (e.g., reading in the library) (King, Rigby, & Batorowicz, 2013). They are considered to be a useful construct for considering environmental qualities that provide opportunities for participation and beneficial developmental experiences (Eccles, 2005).

This past research indicated that developmentally favorable environments provide *opportunities* for choice, interaction with adults, and social interaction with peers (King, Batorowicz, Rigby, Pinto et al., 2014) and *experiences* of belonging, fun, and choice and control (King, Gibson et al., 2014). These opportunities and experiences meet needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competency, which are fundamental facets of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002). According to a developmental health model of relationships between *opportunities* and *experiences* (King, Petrenchik, Law, & Hurley, 2009; Petrenchik & King, 2011), environmental opportunities are necessary for youth to have experiences associated with the development of social belonging, self-understanding, and competency. These experiences may ultimately lead to positive life outcomes, including psychological/emotional benefits (e.g., enhanced self-efficacy and self-worth) and competency-related benefits (e.g., skill development, physical benefits, and academic benefits) (King et al., 2009).

To date, most of the research on life skills programs for youth with disabilities has focused on post-program changes in self-determination, self-concept, and life preparedness (Alwell & Cobb, 2009; Evans, McDougall, & Baldwin, 2006; Kingsnorth, Healy, & Macarthur, 2007; Sheppard & Unsworth, 2011). We know of no studies that have examined the actual nature of the opportunities provided by life skills programs.

Our interest is in a particular type of life skills program. Residential immersive life skills (RILS) programs aim to assist youth with physical disabilities to develop important life skills during adolescence. These youth often lack the same range of opportunities as their able-bodied peers to engage in trial-and-error learning concerning problem solving, decision making, and social relationships (Gorter et al., 2014; King, Law, Hurley, Petrenchik, & Schwellnus, 2010; King, Baldwin, Currie, & Evans, 2005). In RILS programs, youth live in college/university residences for 1–3 weeks and are immersed in challenging learning and social environments with other youth with disabilities. Like other life skills programs, RILS programs include a formal curriculum and a combination of structured group education, one-to-one support, informal and formal peer mentorship, coaching, and experiential learning opportunities (Kingsnorth et al., 2007). Youth return home after a short immersion experience, hopefully with enhanced skills, increased confidence, and a sense of opened possibilities that assists their transition to college/university settings and adulthood (McPherson et al., 2016). RILS programs are highly promising with respect to sustainable impacts, as they appear to provide powerful "situated learning" (i.e., learning through participation in natural environments) (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Our RILS program research has examined service providers' perceptions of important program features (i.e., format and program content) (King, McPherson, Kingsnorth, Stewart, Glencross-Eimantas, Gorter et al., 2015). In an interview study, RILS service providers attributed positive youth changes to the residential group format and afforded opportunities, which included being away from home, navigating public transportation, directing attendant services, and sharing intense learning and social experiences with peers (King, McPherson, Kingsnorth, Stewart, Glencross-Eimantas, Gorter et al., 2015). They also indicated that they attempted to create a supportive program atmosphere with multiple opportunities for learning, including choice making, problem-solving, and skill mastery, and that they used non-intrusive, coaching/guiding, and engagement strategies to support, encourage, and involve youth (King, McPherson, Kingsnorth, Stewart, Glencross-Eimantas, Jones-

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