

## Research Paper

## Therapy or human right? The meaning of recreation for children and youth with disabilities in the “Krembo Wings” youth movement

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## Abstract

**Background:** Research shows that leisure or recreation promotes health, quality of life and wellbeing. Participation in leisure is also a fundamental right of people with disabilities. Studies report disparities in leisure participation between children and youth with and without disabilities. Youth movements are a form of leisure activity, and are of particular importance in Israeli society.

**Objective:** In this study we set out to explore how the youth movement Krembo Wings (KW) outlines the meanings of recreation for children and youth with disabilities. Our theoretical framework centers on the critical perspective of a disability study committed to disability rights.

**Methods:** We conducted a qualitative study of KW. Data were drawn from multiple sources: published and unpublished documents, website materials, and semi-structured interviews with various key people in the movement. Data were analyzed through directed content analysis and were categorized into either the biomedical model or the social model of disability.

**Results:** Most of our findings show that KW adopts a biomedical understanding of disability. Nonetheless, indicators of the social model, though few, were also evident.

**Conclusions:** Although the biomedical model was found to be dominant in Israel, there are promising indicators of change. Our somewhat mixed findings might suggest that KW is at a transitional phase between biomedical thinking and a more rights-based approach. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Qualitative study; Therapeutic recreation; Biomedical model; Social model; Youth movements; Israel

Research shows that leisure or recreation<sup>c</sup> can promote various aspects of health, including physical, social, and psychological health, through a variety of mechanisms.<sup>1–3</sup> Participation in leisure is also a fundamental right of people with disabilities; section d of Article 30 (Participation in Cultural Life, Recreation, Leisure and Sport) of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) obligates state parties “[t]o ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system.”

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<sup>c</sup> In this paper we use leisure and recreation interchangeably as “the most widespread definition, and the most acceptable to providers of leisure is that recreation is activities in which people participate during their leisure time” (see, Torkildsen, G. 2005. *Leisure and Recreation Management*. New York: Routledge, p. 51).

Lord and Stein<sup>4</sup> argue that this right has been largely ignored by human rights scholars and practitioners, although it is “a vehicle for inclusion and a social change conveyor.”

Many studies show that children with disabilities participate less in recreational activities than those without disabilities. They also report social and physical barriers to participation.<sup>5–10</sup>

Youth movements (YM) are argued to be a form of leisure activity.<sup>11</sup> “A YM is a particular type of youth organization, with an explicit political, religious or social agenda”<sup>12</sup> (p. 223).

In Israel, YM are informal educational organizations. They are run by youth, and guided by defined principles. Membership is voluntary.<sup>13</sup> There are thirteen “official” YM in Israel, i.e., they conform to various criteria as laid out by the Ministry of Education, which supports them.<sup>13,14</sup>

The importance of YM in Israeli society stems from their role in nation-building in the pre-State era (before 1948).<sup>15</sup> The extent and impact of these movements are considered a unique characteristic of Israeli society.<sup>13</sup>

Although no official data exist regarding the participation of children and youth with disabilities in Israeli YM,

there is a widely-held consensus that they are definitely excluded from such activities.<sup>16</sup> Only in 2014 was a national program launched for integrating children and youth with disabilities in nine YM.

Against this background, Krembo Wings (KW), the focus of our study, was established in 2002. It defines itself as a YM. However, it does not meet the eligibility criteria for the Ministry's support because of its relatively low number of members.

KW's self-definitions are sometimes contradictory. For example, the movement's Internet homepage defines it as both a "movement for youth with special needs" and "a YM for children with and without disabilities, the first and only of its kind in the world." While the latter statement could be contested, it remains true that KW is a unique phenomenon in Israel. It is recognized for its excellence and leadership, having received several prestigious awards. KW was established "to address the social isolation of children with disabilities, particularly those with severe disabilities." The impetus for KW comes from Kfir Kobi, his family and his helper. Kfir was born in Jerusalem, Israel in 1996, and was diagnosed with severe Cerebral Palsy (CP). When he was three years old, his mother gave birth to another child and sought outside assistance, a volunteer, to spend time with the baby. A 12-year-old girl, Adi Altschuler, approached her, and insisted on playing with Kfir, rather than the baby. Kfir and Adi quickly learned to understand each other, establishing a strong connection, and spending more time together at home and in outdoor activities.

When Adi was 16 she joined (LEAD), a training program in leadership skills. As part of her training, she needed to create, plan and implement a social project in her local community. Based on her experience with Kfir and similar families whom she had met during her four years volunteering at the Kobis' home, in 2002 Adi established a social group of children with disabilities, in collaboration with Kfir's parents and other LEAD participants. They met regularly for social activities, supervised by a non-disabled teenager.

From 2002 to 2009, eight similar groups were established around Israel. As of 2015, KW operates over 50 branches nationwide, with over 4000 members.<sup>17</sup> Members meet at least once weekly, for 3 h, in the afternoon. The meetings include accessible activities focusing on, e.g., art, theater, cooperation and conflict, countries and cultures, and Jewish and Muslim holidays. Additional activities include the annual opening; distribution of movement uniforms; heritage activities; holidays and graduation events, summer camp, and the "wings parade," during which the KW badge is awarded to the members with disabilities. KW also offers summer camps, hiking and camping, and sports activities, similar to other Israeli YMs.

In this study we set out to explore how KW socially constructs (or defines) recreation for children and youth with disabilities.

## Theoretical framework

Our theoretical framework centers on the critical perspective of a disability study committed to disability rights. The social model (or "minority group" model)<sup>18</sup> of disability is widely held among scholars. It perceives disability as a socio-cultural construct, a product of the oppressive socio-cultural structure and, therefore, argues for changing disabling mechanisms, i.e., discriminatory social structures<sup>19</sup> and the attainment of civil rights.<sup>18</sup> The social model contrasts with the biomedical model of disability which perceives disability as a physical phenomenon, a deficit or limitation inherent to the person, who is, therefore, an object of care and treatment.<sup>18–20</sup>

It has been argued that, while therapeutic recreation (TR) and disability studies hold a similar commitment to people with disabilities, to supporting their right to full inclusion in recreation, they seldom intersect.<sup>21</sup> Sylvester<sup>22</sup> argues that this is extremely unfortunate, as recreation inclusion is part and parcel of TR. Recreation inclusion – "full standing within recreation environments"<sup>23</sup> – also aligns with the approach of disability studies.

Various scholars have criticized TR's inclination toward the biomedical model of disability, especially in the United States.<sup>21,22,24–28</sup> Genoe and Whyte<sup>21</sup> argue that TR should engage in political, rather than clinical, practice: "... in the process, therapeutic recreation discards the 'white coat' for leisure better suited for resisting stigmatization and discrimination and for reclaiming respect, dignity, and relational autonomy and self-determination" (p. 186). This concept of political TR practice resonates with the social model of disability. It goes beyond an individual approach (focusing on functional abilities, rehabilitating the individual and recovery) to addressing disabling factors in the environment.

In this study we reclaim the connection between TR and disability studies.<sup>29</sup> The present study set out to explore how KW assigns meanings to recreation for children and youth with disabilities. Specifically, we examine whether recreation is framed through the biomedical model (recreation as therapy) or the social model of disability (recreation as a human right).

## Methods

Qualitative research methods were employed in order to test how KW defines meanings for recreation for children and youth with disabilities. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon, and obtain more and better evidence that will allow us to interpret it, we sampled data from various sources.<sup>30,31</sup>

## Documents and website

KW's extensive website allowed access to plentiful written materials. Its administration provided further material.

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