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## Evaluation of Outcomes Associated with a Leisure-time Activity Program for Disadvantaged Youth

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## Evaluation of Outcomes Associated with a Leisure-time Activity Program for Disadvantaged Youth

### Abstract

The SLEAK (Skills, Learning and Educational Activities for Kids) program was established in 2008 as a joint partnership between a community leader and the Division of Occupational Therapy Stellenbosch University. The vision of the SLEAK program is to create a sustainable, non-profit, leisure-time activity program for the youth (10-13 years of age) of the community in order to curb drug and gangster-related activities and to foster healthy work-related skills in the youth to make them responsible and productive members of their community.

The SLEAK program was evaluated in its entirety and this article will focus on the results for the outcomes set for the children in the SLEAK program. The results indicated that although it is still a rather small project, it seems as if the project is effective in what it set out to achieve and that it could serve as a pilot for starting projects in similar communities.

### Keywords

Leisure-time activities, Transferable skills, Work-related skills, Youth Development

### Credentials Display

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According to Newman and Newman (2003), children between the ages of 10 to 13 years are in the phase of middle childhood. The skills that need to develop in the middle childhood phase involve friendship, self-evaluation, concrete operations, skills learning, and teamwork. At this stage, children develop an appreciation for group cohesion and the ability to work together. They are more inclined to play games that involve following rules. The acquisition of these skills happens through interaction with their parents, their peers, and their teachers. Family life plays a vital role at this stage of development, as parents need to create opportunities for their children to develop these skills and support and encourage them through the process. The competencies that children achieve in this phase are directly linked with social and work-related skills in later life.

Children learn best through play, and at this age play forms the largest part of their leisure-time activities. For this age group, leisure-time activities should be enjoyable and freely chosen, as found by Passmore and French (2003).

According to the seminal leisure classification model of Nash (1960), leisure-time activities can be classified into six levels ranging from destructive to constructive. Healthy patterns of spending leisure time constructively should be established at this age, as children are ready to learn through modeling before negative behavior patterns are learned through peer pressure in the early adolescence phase. Social leisure is important in the middle childhood years because it provides a sense of belonging.

Socialising with friends appeared to provide opportunities for defining a sense of self and for testing out a range of

behaviours and ideas, and served as a cathartic venue for dealing with life's problems. Engagement in social leisure with friends seemed to support the development of social competence and feelings of self-worth and acceptance. (Passmore & French, 2003, p. 423)

Leisure-time activities provide the opportunity for sharing, taking responsibility, and developing the skills necessary for personal growth. Some of these skills learned through regular participation in constructive leisure-time activities will lead to the acquisition of transferable skills. Transferable skills are non-job specific skills that one acquires during any activity or life experience as defined by the Skills You Need webpage (Transferable, 2015). By presenting a more structured program, the transferable skills learned can be increased to incorporate skills necessary for the development of work-related skills in later life.

Learning can take place in a social environment and happens through imitation and direct instruction, as viewed by social learning theorist Bandura (1989). Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of learning through role modeling. Children tend to imitate role models that are influential, have control over resources, and receive gratification for their behavior. Social learning is one way to stimulate the development of teamwork and group cohesion. These developmental tasks are vital building blocks for middle childhood.

Another way of facilitating behavior change is by applying Skinner's principles of operant conditioning. Operant conditioning happens through reinforcement, which can be

either positive or negative. The best results are achieved if reinforcement is applied immediately after a response (Wait, Meyer, & Loxton, 2005).

In the planning of any new community program, sustainability should be a main focus. Sustainability ensures lasting community change. Harvey and Hurworth (2006) identified factors that need to be considered in the planning and implementation of community projects. Congruency with community needs and the availability of training, regular monitoring, and evaluation are among the factors necessary for a sustainable program.

### **Description of the SLEAK Program**

South Africa is a richly diverse country, but the diversity was not always celebrated and embraced. Before the 1994 democratic election, a system of apartheid was in place, which perpetuated discrimination against nonwhite races and contributed to an unequal distribution of wealth and resources according to race. The effects of apartheid are still visible today in some of the previously disadvantaged communities. According to a report by Seekings (2007), discrimination in South Africa has contributed to previously disadvantaged areas currently being characterized by poor living standards, overcrowding, high crime rates, high levels of gang activity, and relatively inferior educational facilities.

The community described in this paper is one of these previously disadvantaged communities that still suffer the indignities of the past. It is a low socioeconomic area and, according to the 2011 South African National Census (Statistics South Africa, 2012), 47% of the population earn less than R3200 per month—less

than the subsistence level. There are 54,006 people that reside in the area, and 99% of the community is nonwhite. Twenty-seven percent of the economically active population (15-65 years of age) is unemployed.

Flisher and Chalton (1995) found that in these previously disadvantaged communities there is a high prevalence of high school drop-out rates in the age group of 15 years and younger. These dropouts have poorly developed work-related skills and therefore are unable to compete in the labor market, thus adding to a high unemployment rate. The 2011 South African National Census statistics reflect that 15.4% of the community has either not completed primary education or has no education at all (Statistics South Africa, 2012).

The community described in this paper has a high prevalence of destructive leisure activities (Nash level 0 or -1), such as alcohol and drug abuse. Destructive leisure activities expose children to negative role models, as they see wealthy drug lords as their role models. Children aged 6-12 years form 14% of the population (Statistics South Africa, 2012) and grow up in overpopulated homes with limited space for play activities. Limited developmental stimulation takes place due to parents working shifts and having limited contact with their children. Schools are overcrowded and the teacher-child ratio averages between 1:40-55. These overcrowded classes make it difficult to maintain discipline and ensure an effective learning environment. The community offers limited resources and facilities, and what is available is inaccessible and dangerous to the children of this community because of a high crime rate in the area and the undesirable activities that are

conducted at these venues. A local community leader emphasized the participation of a majority of the children in unconstructive leisure-time activities, such as watching television and playing on 'MXIT'. Involvement in these activities keeps the children entertained but not moved to a significant level of involvement. Once they get bored, they tend to get involved in destructive activities, such as drug use and gangsterism. A further complicating factor is that some school subjects, such as needlework, art, music, and physical education, have been taken out of the school curriculum. Schools have limited extracurricular activities, and thus children miss out on the opportunity to develop basic skills, such as teamwork and creativity.

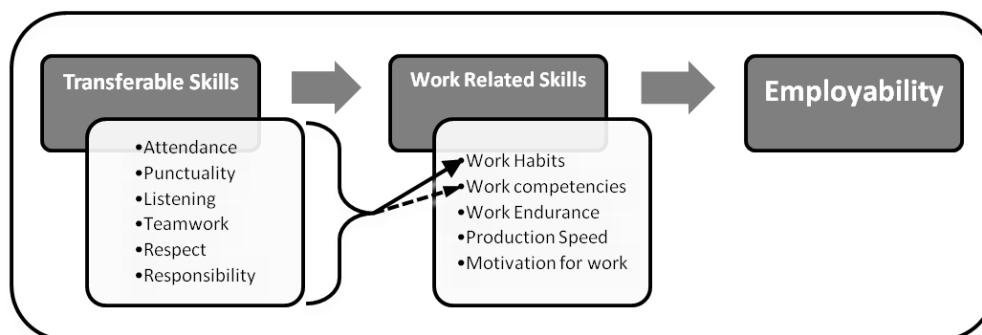
The occupational therapist working at the community rehabilitation center identified the need for a program focusing on the community's youth. Her biggest concern was for the school-aged youth of this community because there were limited services (Wegner, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard, & King, 2008; Wegner, 2011) for this age group at that stage.

In 2007, an in-depth situational analysis was conducted on different levels before the onset of the program. The focus of the situational analysis was to identify the facilitating and inhibiting factors in the community that influenced the functioning of children of this age group. Visiting non-governmental organizations,

the library, recreational facilities, and church groups helped to identify available resources in the community. Stakeholders (community leaders, such as headmasters, church pastors, parents, teachers, and children) were identified and individual or focus group interviews were conducted. Document analysis with available national census and household survey information were also done.

As a result of the needs analysis, a community leader, who is the headmaster of a local primary school, and the Division of Occupational Therapy Stellenbosch University partnered in 2008 to establish the SLEAK (Skills, Learning and Educational Activities for Kids) program. This pilot program focused on the grades 4-7 children, as role models may easily influence this age group and their tendencies toward negative behavior can still be addressed (Wait et al., 2005).

The occupational therapy focus aimed to develop the children's transferable skills, which could lead to work-related skills, through the use of constructive leisure-time activities. These transferable skills form the building blocks for the development of a well-rounded person who has the ability to obtain and maintain employment. They thus become productive and contributing members of their community, which could, in turn, empower the community (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Linkage between transferable skills, work-related skills, and employability. The solid line arrow in the figure indicates a direct link between the transferable skills and the work-related skills while the dashed line arrow indicates an indirect relationship.

The leisure-time activities used in the program are selected to be age appropriate, gender neutral, made from low-cost materials (recycling materials is encouraged), and reproducible or available as an end product that can be played with at home.

Volunteers from the community present the activities. The final-year occupational therapy students work in partnership with the volunteers to ensure that the program presented to the children is culturally congruent (Sumsion & Law, 2006). A client-centered approach is used with the volunteers, since this recognizes their autonomy as individuals and involves them in decision making. The volunteers are trained to present the activity groups to the children. There are three after-school leisure groups per week.

Group norms are established based on transferable skills, such as respect, punctuality, responsibility, and listening, and are reinforced by means of a star and dot chart. Behaviors that warrant a dot (punishment) are clearly defined in observable behaviors that the children need to adhere to while in the groups. The behaviors are taught to and repeated by the children at the

beginning of every group session. Examples of these behaviors are:

- Respect (red dots): Children are not allowed to tease or call others names or hit another person.
- Punctuality (blue dots): Children must be at the group session on time or make an excuse if they are unable to attend.
- Responsibility (green dots): Every child has an attendance card that his or her parent must sign after each group session, and he or she must bring the attendance card to every group session.
- Listening (yellow dots): Children are not allowed to talk while others are speaking.

Children that do not receive a dot while in a group session are awarded a star. Stars are initially exchanged for sweets (immediate gratification), and then children are encouraged to save the stars to exchange for other incentives, such as participation in an outing.

The groups are structured in such a manner that the children get the opportunity to learn and apply these transferable skills. These skills are acquired through participation in age-appropriate leisure-time activities, which are presented in the group

sessions. A social learning approach is used to present the activities to the groups, and the children get the opportunity to imitate positive role models.

### **Community Change Outcomes Resulting from the SLEAK Program**

The evaluation of the intervention process and the outcomes of the program are presented by means of a logic model (Hayes, Parchman, & Howard, 2011; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999; McLaughlin & Jordan, 2004). The logic model aims to convey what the program wants to achieve, why it is important, and how the program's effectiveness would be measured.

The overarching goal for the program is to create a sustainable, non-profit leisure-time activity program for the youth (10-13 years of age) of the community in order to curb drug and gangster-related activities and to foster healthy work-related skills in the youth to make them responsible and productive members of their community. Annually, the program cycles through four major phases:

1. **Situational analysis:** All aspects pertaining to the program are investigated to determine any necessary changes that are needed based on the current situation and with cognizance of the recommendations made the previous year.
2. **Planning phase:** Outcomes for the year are set and indicators are determined so that all outcomes can be measured at the end of the year.
3. **Implementation:** The implementation and monitoring of actions needed for the program.

4. **Evaluation:** An evaluation of the entire program is done to evaluate the program in terms of its structure, its management, and especially its outcomes related to the children and volunteers involved, in order to identify those program elements that need to be retained, adapted, and/or redesigned in order to reach the program's vision.

The focus in this paper will be on the process and results of the evaluation completed at the end of 2014 to determine whether the outcomes set out for the children involved in the SLEAK program were reached.

The program theory pertaining to the children is presented schematically in Table 1.

- Column 1 illustrates the problems the children in the middle-school years experience that inhibit them from developing work-related skills in the long run.
- Column 2 highlights causable factors from the community environment that contribute to the problems presented in column 1.
- Column 3 states the goal(s) that the SLEAK program hopes to achieve in order to address the stated problem in column 1.
- Column 4 gives the activities used to achieve the goal(s) in column 3.
- Column 5 states the outcomes that the children will achieve by participating in the SLEAK program to overcome the problem stated in column 1.
- Column 6 shows the indicators that were used to evaluate whether the outcomes were achieved and will be discussed in detail in the next section.

The table can be read by inserting information from the corresponding columns in the following sentences: The **PROBLEM** that results from **CAUSES**. If the SLEAK program achieves the **GOAL** through **ACTIVITIES**, then the children will have **OUTCOMES** that can be evaluated by **INDICATORS**.

**Table 1***Logic Model of SLEAK Program Theory*

PROBLEM	CAUSES	GOAL	ACTIVITIES	OUTCOMES	INDICATORS
1. Lack of age-appropriate constructive leisure-time activities.	1.1. A lack of safe facilities and resources. 1.2. Overpopulation in homes and thus limited space to perform activities. 1.3. Too many negative role models achieving wealth and status through illegal activities.	1. Children attending SLEAK should have been exposed to age-appropriate leisure-time activities that they can play with or reproduce in their home environment.	1. Participation in age-appropriate leisure-time activities appropriate to their socioeconomic circumstances.	By the end of 2014, children attending SLEAK should have: 1.(a) had the opportunity to attend at least 50 activity groups exposing them to constructive leisure activities; 1.(b) participated in age-appropriate constructive leisure-time activities at home that were taught at the SLEAK program.	1.(a) Record of groups presented. 1.(a) List of activities presented with NASH level rating. 1.(b) Parent questionnaire. 1.(b) Focus group with the children.
2. The children have poor listening skills.	2.1. The environment at home and school is not conducive to learning these skills. 2.2. Overcrowded classrooms with teachers lacking the skills and time to attend to all students.	2. The ability of the children to listen should have been improved to such an extent that they keep quiet when others are talking and are able to follow verbal instructions.	2. Participation in constructive leisure-time activities that are presented in a structured environment where they are expected to listen and follow verbal instructions.	By the end of 2014, the children will have: 2.(a) improved transferable skills of listening and following instructions, applying them in other areas of life, such as at home; 2.(b) received no more than one yellow dot per term for poor listening during SLEAK groups.	2.(a) Parent questionnaire. 2.(a) Focus group interview with the children. 2.(b) Star and dot chart (yellow dots).
3. The children's lack of respect.	3.1. The environment at home and school is not conducive to learning this skill. 3.2. A lack of positive role models. 3.3. Peer pressure. 3.4. Too many negative role models achieving wealth and status through illegal activities.	3.1. The children's ability to cooperate with others will be characterized by respectful behavior toward peers, superiors, and the physical environment.	3.1. Participation in constructive leisure-time activities that are presented in a structured environment with the expectation that they show respect to peers, superiors, and the physical environment. 3.2. Exposing the children to activities that show them the importance of respect for the environment.	By the end of 2014, the children will have: 3.(a) an improved transferable skill of respect and apply it in other areas of life, such as at home; 3.(b) received no more than one red dot per term for displaying disrespectful behavior during SLEAK groups.	3.(a) Focus group interview with children. 3.(a) Parent questionnaire. 3.(b) Star and dot chart (red dots).
4. The children's poor punctuality (late for school and group sessions).	4.1. The environment at home and school is not conducive to learning this skill. 4.2. A lack of positive role models.	4. The children's punctuality will have improved so that they attend the group sessions on time or make an excuse if they are going to be late or miss a group session.	4. Group sessions that start and end at a specific time.	By the end of 2014, the children will have: 4. received no more than one blue dot for not excusing themselves or being late for a group session.	4. Star and dot chart (blue dots).
5. The children's lack of responsibility.	5.1. The environment at home and school is not conducive to learning this skill. 5.2. A lack of positive role models.	5. The children's sense of responsibility would have improved to such an extent that they will bring their attendance card signed by their parents to the group sessions.	5. Checking that attendance cards are brought to every group session and signed by a parent.	By the end of 2014, the children will have: 5. received no more than one green dot per term for not bringing a signed attendance card to every group session.	5. Star and dot chart (green dots).



**Evaluation of SLEAK Program Outcomes by Means of Qualitative and Quantitative Measures**

The findings will be discussed according to each of the five problems listed in the logic model. Each problem will be dealt with in its entirety.

***Lack of Age-Appropriate Constructive Leisure-Time Activities***

**The children will have: 1.(a) had the opportunity to attend at least 50 activity groups exposing them to constructive leisure activities.**

According to the group record, 52 groups were presented in 2014. Activities presented at the group sessions all fall on the three highest levels of constructive leisure-time activity (level 2-emotional participation 9%; level 3-active participation 37%; level 4-creative activities 54%) according to Nash's six levels (Nash, 1960).

**The children will have: 1.(b) participated in age-appropriate constructive leisure-time activities at home that were taught at the SLEAK program.** Data obtained from the parent questionnaires indicated that the children participated in the same activities at home to which they were exposed during the SLEAK groups. It was noted that the children repeated most often the type of activities that needed few or no materials to perform. This could be explained by the fact that the low socioeconomic status of the households could not carry any added expenses in terms of materials needed for leisure-time activities. Activities repeated the most at home were games produced in the SLEAK groups, such as dominoes and "pick-up sticks." In the focus group interview held with the children they agreed that they mostly played with games produced at the SLEAK groups.

**The Children Have Poor Listening Skills**

**The children will have: 2.(a) improved transferable skills of listening and following instructions, applying them in other areas of life, such as at home.** More than half of the parents felt that their child's listening skills had improved since he or she started attending the SLEAK groups. As indicated by the following quote, some children reported that they have learned the importance of listening: "listen when other people talk—I nearly never listened. Now that I am a part of SLEAK, I have learned that listening is important" (child, 10 years old).

***The children will have: 2.(b) received no more than one yellow dot per term for poor listening during SLEAK groups.*** Yellow dot behavior declined over the course of the year and no yellow dots were given in the last term.

**The Children's Lack of Respect**

**The children will have: 3.(a) an improved transferable skill of respect and apply it in other areas of life, such as at home.** The parents indicated that there was an improvement in the behavior of the children at home. The parents reported that there was less teasing, swearing, and littering at home. The parents all indicated that their child has formed new friendships since joining the SLEAK groups. The information gathered from the children showed that they have good insight into the skill of respect, as shown by their spontaneous mention of examples of respectful behavior that they have learned: "*I have learned to respect others, not to make fun of or call each other names*" (child, 12 years old).

**The children will have: 3.(b) received no more than one red dot per term for displaying disrespectful behavior during SLEAK groups.**

During the year, there was an improvement in the children's respectful behavior. Problems noted with respect in the beginning of the year mostly concerned children talking while superiors were talking. This behavior also improved and no red dots for disrespectful behavior were given in the last term.

***The Children's Poor Punctuality***

**The children will have: 4. received no more than one blue dot for not excusing themselves or being late for the group sessions.**

In terms of punctuality, the child's behavior improved and no dots for being late were awarded in the second half of the year. One of the children commented that he has learned that: "If I am going to be late, I have to make an excuse" (child, 10 years old).

***The Children's Lack of Responsibility***

**The children will have: 5. received no more than one green dot per term for not bringing a signed attendance card to every group session.** In the first half of the year the children struggled with taking responsibility for their attendance cards. A majority of them did not remember to bring the card to the group sessions or did not ask a parent or guardian to sign it. In the first three terms, more than 20 attendance cards were forgotten or not signed per term. In the last term, only one child forgot the attendance card once.

**Lessons Learned from the SLEAK Experience**

The SLEAK program set out to create a sustainable leisure-time activity program for the youth of an impoverished community in order to

develop transferable skills that could form the basis for work-related skills in later life. The lessons learned through this program and the recommendations will be discussed based on the highlighted concepts of this goal.

**Ensuring a Sustainable Program**

To enhance the worth of the program for the volunteers, actively involve them in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program theory. Recruit volunteers from the same community as the children to ensure contextual congruency in the role models. Gather detailed baseline information regarding the identified problems from each child in order to evaluate the long-term impact of the program in addressing these problems. Structure the record keeping in line with the outcomes from the start of the program to obtain comprehensive data with which to evaluate the program. Regular monitoring of the program needs to be done in accordance with the outcomes, and that will increase the reliability of the data gathered. Involve all stakeholders in the planning of the monitoring and evaluation of the program to ensure valid information is gathered for triangulation. To ensure sustained attendance, do not include gender-specific activities (e.g., making handbags or jewel boxes), as these could potentially exclude one gender from attending the group sessions.

**Presenting Groups to the Younger Child**

Work toward developing a group identity and sense of belonging among the childrens (e.g., group name, chant, and group-specific rituals) to achieve stimulation of the developmental task "belonging to a peer-group." Activities should have a successful end product so that self-

evaluation can take place and the development of self-esteem is enhanced.

### **Factors to Consider When Setting Up a Leisure-Time Activity Program**

Age-appropriate activities that can be performed in the groups must be used (e.g., construction, group games, and craft activities) in order to elicit interest in the developmental tasks of skill-development and teamwork. Activities should produce an end product that can be played with or reproduced at home (e.g., board game, catcher and bean-bags) so that patterns of constructive use of leisure time can be transferred to the home as well. The materials needed for activities should be limited to waste materials or none at all (e.g., dance, musical chairs, and skittles from empty plastic bottles) because of the children's low socioeconomic household status. Present a variety of activities so that one activity is not done in excess, and present activities that require the active participation of all group members to prevent some members from becoming spectators (this will prevent retardation of self-development, according to Nash). Ensure that the volunteers have the opportunity to be actively involved during their training; for example, the making of a product so that through role modeling they acquire the skill of presenting.

### **Teaching Transferable Skills**

Boundaries in terms of behavior must be made explicit at the start of each group session (e.g., concrete examples of wanted/unwanted behavior). The group sessions must follow a set pattern, and a set time must be allocated to each session in order to establish a routine for the children. This will also contribute to the learning of positive behavior through repetition. Facilitate

change in behavior through consequence and immediate reinforcement (e.g., application of the star and dots) with a conscious effort to acknowledge positive behavior. Start with immediate gratification (e.g., children can exchange a star for a sweet) and build on that gradually to prolong the gratification (e.g., children can save their stars to exchange five stars for a packet of chips). When a child's behavior warrants a dot, first allow the child to identify the behavior that led to the dot so that he or she can develop self-regulation of that behavior. Do not criticize the child who exhibits negative behavior; rather, focus on the specific behavior that was wrong and indicate to the child how he or she can alter the behavior. This will help the child to learn from his or her mistakes and not to feel like a failure as a person.

The volunteers must be enthusiastic and act as role models to display the positive behavior that is expected of the children. This will create a positive environment where learning through role modeling can take place. Keep in mind that the volunteers do not necessarily have the skills that are being taught; therefore, the structure of their training should mimic the group sessions with the children in order to instill the same behavior in them.

### **Conclusion**

The information gathered from the records, children, parents, and volunteers indicates that the SLEAK program contributed to a positive change in the behavior of the children participating. The program has proven sustainable, despite the limited resources available. Although this paper focused on the outcomes achieved by the children, there is a clear indication that the volunteers and

students involved also benefited from their participation with the SLEAK program. From this evaluation it is clear that the SLEAK program is successful in creating a supportive and positive environment in which learning takes place. It is a place where children get the opportunity to learn new skills and to feel good about performing them. The SLEAK team is positive that they are currently making a difference in the lives of the children and that they are developing the skills that will lead them to become worthy and contributing members of their community.

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