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Unique research project involves at-risk youth sentenced to playing chess

Local youth involved in the criminal justice system are being referred to a program where they learn to play chess as part of their sentence. The Chess for Life program is a research project that aims to explore how learning to play chess affects youths' thinking and the choices they make every day.

After a local judge sentenced a youth to practice basketball a couple of years ago, Dr. Lance Grigg, a University of Lethbridge associate professor in education, brought up the possibility of learning to play chess as a possible alternative sentence for youth involved in the criminal justice system. The judge liked the idea and Grigg organized a trial run of the Chess for Life program last year.

"I had a handful of youth," says Grigg. "They came regularly, the youth were engaged and one of them even started playing chess online. It worked and I got good reports from the people the kids were working with."

A team came together to work on the Chess for Life program, including Dr. Monique Sedgwick, an associate professor in nursing, and Dr. Jeffrey MacCormack, assistant professor in education. Josh Markle, an instructor in the Faculty of Education, and Riley Kostek, a teacher at Victoria Park High School, joined the team as research assistants.

Since mid-January, Markle, Kostek and Grigg have provided chess instruction on Friday afternoons to five youth, ranging in age from 12 to 18, who have been referred to the program by the Crown, the judge and the probation officer. The instructors help the youth think ahead and plan their moves — all the way to the end of the game.

"We have conversations about chess and we don't have to go very far before they start to draw parallels between what we're talking about and their own lives," says Markle. "I can see change already."

"There are a lot of rules to chess," says Grigg. "In the first four moves alone, there are over 300 billion options. So, there are a lot of rules that make possible a lot of creativity. Chess needs

planning, you need memory and you need to be able to see the consequences of actions before you make them.”

MacCormack brought his expertise on executive function to the project. Chess has been shown to positively impact executive function, which includes skills such as planning, making decisions, remembering, thinking flexibly and developing self-control.

“As kids become better chess players, they aren’t just learning how to play a game; they’re learning to play the game of life,” says MacCormack.

“There’s very little in the research literature that deals with the youth experience involved in the criminal justice system, let alone in alternate sentencing,” says Sedgwick. “We want to hear their voices to see whether or not they feel that this program has changed them somehow. We also want to hear from the adults who are involved with these youths to see if the chess program is influencing how the youth see themselves.”

The Chess for Life program will continue until the end of May. The program is not yet funded but the Faculty of Education is paying the salaries for the research assistants. The team is applying for additional funding and hope to offer the program again and even expand it provincially.

This news release can be found online at [Chess for Life](#).

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