

Community-Based Sport Program—Vehicle to Pyd

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ABSTRACT

Researchers assert that sport can be a context that enhances youth development. As a result, an increasing number of community sport programs have begun to incorporate life skills (Wenger & Foutz, 2010). However, formal evaluations of such programs are sparse and therefore little is known regarding their effectiveness. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived impact of a barrier-free youth sport program. Results indicated that youth perceived PAL as a program where they develop athletic skills ($M=3.51$), put forth effort ($M=3.32$), develop a sense of belonging in their community ($M=3.12$), establish diverse peer relationships ($M=3.11$), and learn how to take initiative ($M=3.10$). Results from interviews supported these findings as the themes that emerged detailed PAL as a fun, safe, and accessible environment that enables friendships to emerge, acts as a catalyst for the development of life skills, and facilitates the transference of skills to outside domains.

Keywords: Boys and Girls Club, positive youth development, sport, mix-methods, community program

INTRODUCTION

Positive youth development (PYD) has emerged as an alternative approach to the reactive and reductionist methods that have historically been used when working with youth (Botvin, 2004; Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard, & Arthur, 2002; Damon, 2004). More specifically, PYD is a proactive approach that works to provide an environment conducive to healthy development rather than fixing problems youth often encounter throughout adolescence (e.g. drinking, drug use, drop out, teen pregnancy; Botvin, 2004; Damon, 2004; Edwards, Mumford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007). Consequently, the ultimate goal of PYD is to prepare and engage youth in opportunities that will benefit them in the future. Both researchers and practitioners assert that when youth are not provided with opportunities to achieve optimal health they may fail to reach adulthood as healthy, resilient, and engaged citizens (Bloom, 2000; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2007; Theokas et al., 2005).

At-risk youth are particularly vulnerable of not achieving optimal development. Specifically, at-risk youth have been identified as children and adolescents (approximately ages 6-18) who are at a higher risk of unhealthy, antisocial, and risky behaviours due to poverty (low socioeconomic status), risky peers, and/or lack of access to resources (Dryfoos, 1991; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Pickett, Garner, Boyce, & King, 2002; World Health Organization, 2006). It has not been until recently that proactive measures have been purposefully incorporated in program models with goals of yielding positive psychosocial outcomes for at-risk youth (Holt & Jones, 2008; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005).

Sport has been used as a specific context and environment that can help facilitate these psychosocial outcomes for youth in general (Martinek & Lee, 2012; Papcharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005; Petitpas et al., 2005), and more specifically, at-risk youth (Danish, 1996; Edwards et al., 2007; Hellison, 2000). Moreover, sport is one of the predominant contexts that have integrated a PYD approach (e.g., teaching life skills) and research has shown that sport-based life skills programs can yield both physical and psychosocial benefits (Holt & Jones, 2008; Perkins, 1997). Not only do such programs provide a positive alternative environment for at-risk youth, but these programs also help to develop values and other positive assets (Pitman & Cahill, 1991). However, very few programs

have been evaluated in terms of their effectiveness and impact on youth participants (Salmon, Booth, Phongsavan, Murphy, & Timperio, 2007).

The Boys and Girls Club is a youth service organization that uses a proactive approach in working with youth. The Boys and Girls Club has been in operation since the late 19th century (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012a). This organization is designed to provide community programming to youth between the ages of 6-18 from low income families or disadvantaged communities and to establish positive relationships with adults and peers (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012a; Perkins & Noam, 2007). The organization offers after-school, evening, weekend, and summer programming, including but not limited to sport.

More specifically, programs developed within this organization aim to create opportunities and help youth develop life skills, contribute to their communities, and increase their ability to live a productive adult life (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012b; Perkins & Borden, 2003). Life skills can be defined as skills that enable people to deal effectively with challenges in their life and succeed in various life domains such as school, work, and their community (Danish, 1997; World Health Organization, 2006). One particular program, the Police Athletic League (PAL), is a social recreation sport program that provides youth an opportunity to compete in a variety of different sports. More specifically, PAL is a barrier-free sport program as there is no registration fee and has its own bus to transport participants to and from the games. In addition, the league supplies all of the sport equipment; all that is required of the youth is gym clothes and running shoes. Therefore, this program helps to eliminate potential barriers for at-risk youth. Eliminating such barriers is particularly important when working with at-risk youth, as according to Johnston, Delva, and O'Malley (2007) participation in sport and physical activity is negatively correlated with socioeconomic status; many families cannot afford to pay registration fees of recreation programs and/or do not have access to these facilities.

As for the format, PAL is much the same as a typical competitive sport program where regular practice time is established and the season is divided into league play, tournaments, and play-offs. In addition, rules and regulations are set out by the league. However, unlike a typical competitive sport program the youth can enter the league at any skill level because the primary focus of PAL is on promoting physical activity, personal and social development, and leadership (Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, 2012c). While competition is a part of the PAL program, the overall emphasis is on social recreation. As the program director for the Boys and Girls Club stated: "the emphasis still remains on giving the kids social skills and community skills" (J. DeFazio, personal communication October 8, 2010). In addition, the coaches are carefully selected and these coaches, along with the referees, are trained to emphasize respect, responsibility, effort, and personal improvement. In other words, the coaches and referees aim to create a mastery learning climate which self-improvement and effort are encouraged (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Petitpas et al., 2005). This philosophy is consistent with a proactive PYD approach (Fry & Newton, 2003; Larson, 2000; Petitpas et al., 2005).

Based on past reviews, the Boys and Girls Club as a whole, provides a nurturing environment and allows for the acquisition of positive behaviours and the development of competence and self-esteem (Carruthers & Busser, 2000; Davison, 2000). However, as mentioned above, there is a lack of formal research examining the perceptions of youth participation in community-based programs such as PAL and many studies within this field have looked to understand the program impact from the eyes' of the adult leaders and coordinators (Larson, Eccles, & Gootman, 2004; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences in the PAL program through the perspectives of the youth using a mixed-methods approach.

METHODS

Participants

One hundred and eight youth (84 males, 24 females) between the ages of 11 and 18 ($M=14.63$; $SD=2.28$) participated in one or more of the following sports within the PAL: soccer, ball hockey, and basketball. Each participant was a member of one of the six Boys and Girls clubhouses located in a city in Eastern Ontario, Canada. The length of involvement in the Boys and Girls Club and PAL ranged from 1-11 years and the youth reported participating

in at least one, but up to three sport leagues any given year. The Boys and Girls Club held these different leagues of PAL over the course of each year, where participants played soccer in the fall, ball hockey in the winter, and/or basketball in the spring. Participants took part in PAL twice a week: once for a practice at his/her 'home' clubhouse and once at a central clubhouse where teams competed in league and playoff games against one of the other five clubhouse teams. Each PAL sport season lasted 10 weeks, where eight weeks were dedicated to regular season play and two weeks were for play-off games. On average, each game and practice lasted 50 minutes, with a five minute warm-up.

Procedure & Measurement

A mixed-methods approach was used to conduct this research. First, the youth participants completed one questionnaire during the final game of each of the three sport program sessions (fall, winter, and spring). In addition, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with the youth as they would allow for the youth to share a more in-depth perception of their experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2000). These interviews were conducted during the last three games of the spring session when all three of the PAL sessions were over and the program had concluded until the following fall. All participants were interviewed at the clubhouse in which the PAL program was run, either before or after their scheduled game time.

The Youth Experiences Survey (YES) 2.0.

The YES 2.0 is a self-report questionnaire that aims to examine youth experiences in different activities, clubs, and organizations as it relates to PYD outcomes (Hansen & Larson, 2005). More specifically, the YES 2.0 focuses on examining various domains of socio-emotional development that involves the processes wherein youth are "active and conscious agents of their own development" (Larson, Hansen, & Monet, 2006, p. 851). Psychometric testing with 1822 youth indicated that the YES 2.0 is a valid and reliable instrument with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.75 to 0.94 for the different subscales. Although the YES 2.0 has 17 subscales and a total of 70 items (Hansen & Larson, 2005), only the subscales relevant to the objectives of PAL were used in this study. Participants responded to 36 items (11 subscales) using four response items (4: Yes, definitely; 3: Quite A Bit; 2: A little; 1: Not at all). The subscales included were: identity exploration, identity reflection, goal setting, effort, problem solving, time management, emotional regulation, athletic skills, diverse peer relationships, prosocial norms, and linkages to community. Cronbach's alpha indicated that all of the subscales were reliable ranging from 0.72 to 0.81 with the exception of prosocial norms (0.42). It is believed the reliability of this subscale was low due to the fact that it only has two items which ask about very different aspects of prosocial norms (item 1 – I learned about helping others; item 2 – We discussed morals and values). As a result, caution should be taken when interpreting the results from this subscale. It should be noted that this method used did not test whether actual learning did occur during this activities, but whether the youth reported the experiences within PAL were related to the occurrence of the subscales. However, Larson (2000) argues that youth are active and conscious producers of their development, therefore it should be noted that such surveys are of value when understanding the developmental processes that are occurring. In addition to the 36 items, three open-ended questions were asked about the youth's experience in PAL—what they liked about the program, what they did not like about the program, and what they would want to change to make the program better.

Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 of the PAL participants. The average age of those interviewed was 16.5 years. Ninety percent of the sample was male which is reflective of the general demographic of participants in the PAL leagues. As mentioned above, the purpose of these interviews was to gain a more in-depth understanding of the youth's experience participating in PAL. The researcher used purposeful sampling as it was important to talk to youth with a variety of experience in PAL. Therefore, youth were sought out who had a variety of different experiences; youth who were participating in the PAL league for the first time, youth who has participated in the program for several years, and youth who participated in the different sport leagues. As a result youth from the three different PAL leagues (Soccer, Floor Hockey, and Basketball) with various years of experience were selected. For example, four of the interviews were conducted with individuals who had been participating in PAL for a number of

years and had recently started to take on a leadership role by volunteering part-time with the Boys and Girls Club. These interviews provided insight into the perceived impact of PAL on participants' growth and development over the course of time. The interview questions focused on what participants liked and disliked about the program, their overall experience in the program, what they believed they had learned through their participation in PAL. Probes were also used to further explore areas of the participants' experiences if needed. All of the interviews were recorded using a digital audio-recorder and varied in length from 15-30 minutes. All procedures were approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the YES 2.0 was analyzed using SPSS 17.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc. Chicago, IL, USA). In particular descriptive analyses were performed (means and standard deviations). The qualitative data was analyzed using an inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). This type of analysis allows important themes to emerge inductively from the responses of the participants (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using an iterative four step process. First, the researcher read through the transcripts to become familiarized with the data. Second, the researcher read through the transcripts a second time and made notes in relation to any interesting and/or relevant responses made by the participant. Third, the researcher re-read the transcripts and the side notes and grouped responses into broader themes. Fourth, the broad themes were organized and relevant quotations were highlighted that supported the emergence of these themes. An independent auditor, who was a graduate student with experience in qualitative data analysis, reviewed the transcripts to examine whether the identified themes were consistent with the data collected. Small discrepancies between researchers in the analysis process were identified. In these cases the discrepancies were discussed until an agreement was reached. Identification codes were created for each quotation as a means to indicate the gender of the participant and the sport(s) the individual participated in to ensure anonymity and confidentiality (F = Female; M = Male; B = Basketball; H= Ball Hockey; S = Soccer). Additionally, numbers were assigned to the participants in the order in which they were interviewed. For example, the identification code MHB-10 would indicate that the interviewed participant was a male who participated in both ball hockey and basketball and was the tenth individual interviewed.

RESULTS

The results section is divided into two sections: the quantitative results from the YES 2.0 and the qualitative results from the semi-structured interviews.

Youth Experience Survey (YES) 2.0

The results from the YES 2.0 indicated that PAL was perceived by the youth as a program that helped them develop a variety of life skills. In particular, the subscales 'athletic skills' ($M=3.51\pm 0.86$), 'effort' ($M=3.32\pm 0.77$), 'linkages to community' ($M=3.12\pm 0.88$), 'diverse peer relationships' ($M=3.11 \pm 0.84$), and 'goal setting' ($M=3.10\pm 0.70$) all had mean scores above 3 indicating that the youth believed that the PAL program helped them to develop these skills. The remaining subscales 'identity exploration' ($M=2.92\pm 0.76$), 'identity reflection' ($M=2.71\pm 0.84$), 'problem solving' ($M=2.73\pm 0.79$), 'time management' ($M=2.86\pm 0.74$), 'emotional regulation' ($M=2.82\pm 0.76$), and 'prosocial norms' ($M=2.87\pm 0.80$) all had mean scores between 2.5 and 3.0 indicating that the youth perceived PAL as helping them develop such life skills, but not to the same extent as the subscales outlined above.

In addition to the YES 2.0 results, it was interesting to note the feedback the youth conveyed regarding the PAL program from the three open-ended questions on the questionnaire. When asked what the youth did not like about PAL very few responded with complaints. In fact, the typical response was there is nothing they did not like about the program. However, for the question "what would you change to make PAL even better?" the youth made a number of recommendations including a longer playing season, involving more regular season games, and offering a wider variety of sports. Finally, there were requests to have the referees certified due to what some participants perceived to be 'poor calls.' It was also noted during interviews that the referees were not always impartial to both teams as "sometimes they had other people on the other team that they knew from different [clubs], so they'd be a little biased" (FHB-7).

Participants' Perceived Experiences

Overall enjoyment of PAL was noted in all 10 interviews. Additionally, 100% of the participants agreed that “yes, PAL is a positive program for youth” and that the program should be continued long into the future. Five themes emerged from the participant’s perspective of the program: (1) fun, safe and accessible; (2) enables friendships to emerge; (3) opportunity to experience success; (4) catalyst for life skill development; and (5) facilitates the transference of life skills to outside domains.

Fun, safe and accessible. The perception of the environment was expressed by the youth through pure enjoyment. The pure sense of fun and enjoyment of participating in PAL was acknowledged by all 10 youth that participated in the interview process. When asked what they liked best about being in the program, eight of the participants indicated the sense of enjoyment and fun they experienced in PAL. Two participants indicated that they looked forward to the specific day of the week they had PAL. One participant highlighted: “It’s been fantastic. I’ve learned a lot, and gained a lot of experience. Overall it’s just a really fun time for me” (FHB-6). One of the volunteers and current participants of PAL recounts: “I look forward to my Thursdays...I like the fact that you can just go and play...and enjoy yourself and it’s not “crazy competitive”. You just go out there and have fun” (MHB-4). It was also indicated that the program offered a sense of competitiveness that had not been present in other recreational programs within the Boys and Girls Club. As one participant shared: “PAL was competitive and very fun! Very fun at the same time ‘cause we got to do stuff off the court and on the court” (MB-2). The overall consensus of the youth was that they recognized the league as competitive, but not as cut-throat competition that occurs for many youth that participate in sport specialization. One youth explained that “it’s just a fun league to play in—like it’s not all serious where like you lose and that’s your only chance in life, like life goes on and you still get other chances” (MSH-10). Additionally, the above quotations speak to the concept that teams were competitive with each other during the game because they all wanted to win, yet this element of cut-throat competitiveness was absent from the league as they were able to be friends with members of the other team before, during, and after the games.

Offering the PAL program in a geographic area where many families living on low incomes reside (e.g. community housing), had a great impact on the youth participants as they were consciously aware of what few positive alternatives were available to them in their community outside of the PAL program. Three youth recognized that PAL provided a safe and accessible environment where they could have fun and learn new things. One participant stated: “This isn’t the best neighbourhood, so it’s better that [we’re] behind a bench and not in the back seat of a cop car” (MH-8). A number of participants believed that if they did not participate in the PAL program, they “would probably be troubled” (MH-5). One participant felt very fortunate, and somewhat relieved that the PAL program was offered to him because it “...gives a lot of people something to do; a lot of kids that would otherwise be doing something else...kids that might not have a place to go to do things that are positive like this” (MH-9). It was evident that youth were aware that few positive alternatives were available to them in their communities. They recognized that PAL provided a safe environment that enabled them to be constructive and productive.

In addition, the youth also discussed that the lack of registration fees enabled access to participants who were not financially able to participate in recreational or competitive sports leagues offered locally through the city. Without PAL, there would be no, or very limited options for extra-curricular sport activities. An individual noted: “I can’t afford it [other competitive leagues]...and the best part about that is...I have PAL...some of these kids that come here, they don’t have the money for [outside] leagues so PAL is a very good place for kids” (FHB-6).

It was acknowledged that the structural environment of PAL benefited the youth as they had a place to come each week and participate on teams and in sports that they might not have otherwise had the chance to participate in, often due to financial barriers.

Enables friendships to emerge

Meeting new friends on both their own team and opposing teams was a pertinent theme that emerged when talking with the participants. Two participants commented that their team was like a “family” (FHB-6; MHS-9). As earlier stated, the PAL environment was not typical of a hyper-competitive sports league, where teams are often

isolated from each other and communication and interaction between teams are discouraged. In PAL, the youth from different teams travel to and from the games together. One participant indicated that “most club teams just go and play and then go home. Here when we go home, we go home altogether” (MB-2). Her tone of voice and smile that emerged on her face highlighted that this was an element of PAL that she really enjoyed. Another participant commented that “even though on the court you’re competitors, and enemies technically speaking, off the court you become friends. That’s probably the best part about it” (FHB-6). The above quotations speak to the social support that was valued within the league, as all members of the PAL league travelled to and from games together. They identified this time frame as a social time, where individuals from other clubs bonded and became friends. From the friendships that developed, a support network was created that was considered something of great importance to the youth: “...the support from my team...when they’re in the bleachers cheering me on; I’d never had anyone cheer me on like that” (MHS-10). This sense of support was very meaningful to the participants especially when such friendships extended to outside the club. One youth stated:

I got to meet a lot of new people who went to the Boys and Girls Club around the city. I’m friends with them and I’ve been friends with them for about ten years now. So my friends that I hang out with now are all ones that I played [ball] hockey with in PAL when I was younger. (MHB-4)

Establishing long-lasting friendships at PAL that have translated into other domains of participants’ lives is an element that was pertinent to participants’ social capital during current and past seasons of PAL, and even more so as they continue to grow older.

Opportunity to experience success

The youth believed that the PAL program provided opportunities for success that went beyond a competitive sport victory. One participant enjoyed the feelings associated with winning, as well as being in the program: “it makes me feel good and my teammates feel good” (MHS-1). The program provided special events such as having the championship game held at the local university gymnasium and a the charity game where the local police force plays against the PAL participants in front of a big crowd. A participant felt that through the involvement in the program he had the opportunity to feel important. This youth described how he felt when playing in the charity game: “[I] actually know what it feels like to be famous, like one of those big stars” (MHS-10). To him, it was not the result indicated by the scoreboard that dictated his success; it was the opportunity and the experience that attributed to these feelings of success. Additionally, a participant indicated that having the PAL championship game held at a major university gymnasium was “every kid’s dream” (MB-2) and that this opportunity was deemed more important than the actual championship game. Finally a participant vocalized just how much influence a program like PAL can have on an individual: “a program like this, it really does make a difference” (MH-8).

Another theme that surfaced related to experiencing success was the improvement of physical and athletic abilities. One youth indicated that participating in PAL helped him to achieve better physical fitness. “Before this, I wasn’t very active...getting into this, I’ve been a lot more active which helps me control my diabetes” (MH-8). Others stated the improvement of their athletic skills led to them making a school team: “When I made it for PAL I got better and made it for the grade seven team, and I felt really good about myself” (MHS-10). Overall there was a general consensus about the improvement of basic sport (soccer, hockey, basketball) skills.

Catalyst for life skill development

Participants discussed a number of skills they believed they developed as a result of participating in PAL. These life skills included teamwork, emotional regulation, learning how to put forth effort, set goals, and respect others. The youth vocalized that teamwork developed over the course of the season. “Before when I came here, I was shy, nervous, and didn’t really want to interact with anybody, so when I joined PAL I got a chance to know what it [to be part of a team] feels like” (MHS-10). Working together was strongly encouraged by the coaches and staff members of the PAL teams. One youth reported “I learned how to do sportsmanship, cooperate with my teammates and the opponents” (MHS-1). One of the ways the staff encouraged teamwork was through a constant rotation of players through the line-up, allowing all participants to have equal playing time and the opportunity to work together with

everyone on the team. One participant explained “[understanding] what role everyone had to take... [it is] not a one-person team; we all have our small parts” (MH-8).

Emotional regulation was also often discussed by the youth. They shared that PAL has helped them better control their temper, change their attitude about losing, and be respectful regarding rules and toward the officials. One youth stated proudly that he “learned not to talk back to the refs; that was a big thing for me” (MB-2), while another participant said: “I learned how to change my attitude!” (MHS-10). Within PAL, there is a zero-tolerance policy regarding profanity and/or disputes with the officials. This strongly enforced rule helped to limit any issues. “If [the refs] make a bad call you just have to brush it off and keep playing” (MHB-7). As this rule was strongly enforced by the coaching staff and referees, it further helped teach athletes to “...simmer down...how to lose and still be happy about it; how to not be a sore loser” (FHB-6). The coaching staff were also noted as a support for participants when controlling their emotions: “...sometimes I get stressed or frustrated or mad or anything— the staff help me” (MHS-1).

Learning and continuing to put forth a constant effort was indicated by the youth who stated that specifically at PAL, they gave an extra push both physically and mentally. This indicated a sense of determination to achieve success and personal satisfaction for giving their best effort.

The way I play I do differently in PAL. Like if I am playing in my school it is a different way than how I play at the Boys and Girls Club, like PAL league. Because the Boys and Girls Club, I don’t know, there’s just something about it that makes it seem like, that just gives you this extra push. I don’t know, there’s just a whole change of spirit, and love, and passion that you share at the Boys and Girls Club, so it just changes the way you play, like together. (MHS-10)

Another participant talked about how PAL helped him to develop goals. “It’s a great way to get more involved and being outside of the house and you have goals to work towards, like do better than your team did last year, get more points...”(MH-8). This was a general consensus for three of the youth participants across all three sport leagues within PAL. Both team-oriented and individual goals were identified as being explicitly set over the course of the seasons.

The concept of respect was also very pertinent for participants when interacting with referees, coaches, teammates, and opponents. As mentioned above under emotion regulation, the youth learned how to respect “the calls the refs make” (MHB-7). Additionally, the youth talked about respecting their peers. One youth vocalized the importance of “respecting the other kids” (MHS-1) in the program regardless of their individual differences, such as age or sex and “just let them play” (FHB-6).

Transference of skills

Some of the youth participants stated that the life skills (e.g., developing relationships, teamwork, respecting others, and managing emotions) they felt they developed and/or improved in PAL were helpful in other domains of their lives. One youth shared “I’ve also become a bit more sociable from it (the program)...it’s helped at school” (MH-8). An individual who had a reputation at his school for being involved in disputes with others in physical education class said “this league has affected me in a good way because now that I’m in other leagues, I have learned more about getting along with other people that I don’t know and controlling my temper” (MB-2). Another participant also reported that he has been able to transfer elements of emotional regulation, controlling his temper and dealing with frustration, into the school environment.

[People at school] make me feel bad (about losing) and it’s not really a big deal. I just ignore them or be like ‘no we didn’t’. I try not to argue with them and be like ‘actually, yeah, we did lose’ ...and just accept it (MHS-10).

Further, participants discussed that they have learned how to respect others and attribute this growth to their experiences with PAL. One youth reported he “learned how to respect people, not just here but outside the club” (MHB-7). This speaks to the element of respect that was discussed in the previous section. From this quotation it is evident that the concept of respect has been transferred into other domains of the participants’ lives.

As explained earlier, a number of the interviews were conducted with long-standing participants of the program and four of these individuals have now attained a volunteer position at the Boys and Girls Club because of their personal growth throughout the program. One individual noted that the skills he learned through PAL helped him achieve the volunteer position at the club. "I found that the leadership role [I was given in PAL] was like a middle man for me getting my job [volunteer position] here...shows that you're ready to move on and take other spots as a leader" (MHB-4). A current participant and staff of PAL program said: "I've gained a lot of leadership skills... just being able to pass on [as a volunteer]...and have the opportunity to teach someone, you feel so much better. It's a feeling I can't even describe" (FHB-6).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences and perceived impact of the PAL program. Results of this study indicated that the youth believed the PAL program provided a positive environment for them to be active in an enjoyable and safe environment and to also develop and transfer life skills. The quantitative results indicated that the youth perceived the PAL program as helping them learn how to put forth effort, set goals, develop relationships with diverse peers, and develop a sense of belonging in their community, in addition to being able to improve their athletic skills. More specifically, the quantitative findings were supported by the qualitative results. In particular the youth believe that PAL provides an opportunity to develop relationships with peers, put forth effort and as a result experience success, and develop in positive ways such as enhancing their athletic skills, goal setting abilities, as well as how to work as a team, respect others and manage their emotions.

Petitpas and colleagues' (2005) framework for planning youth sport programs that foster psychosocial development highlights that positive psychosocial growth is most likely to occur when youth are engaged in an intrinsically motivating activity that is voluntary, has clear rules, provides a welcoming environment where youth can feel a sense of belonging, has supportive coaches that are willing to challenge the youth to reach their potential, and provides opportunities to develop and transfer life skills. Based on the results of this study it appears that the PAL program is one youth program that may be fostering the development of youth. PAL is a program in which Boys and Girls Club members can voluntarily join and based on the interviews with the youth they appear to enjoy the program. Such theme related to the sense of enjoyment was unique in that it created a foundation as providing a safe environment that is accessible allowed for the remaining themes to emerge once the predominant objective of the program was achieved.

In addition, although PAL runs like a typical community sports program in that it is a competitive league with a clear rule structure, the overall environment appears to create a mastery climate, which research has shown results in more positive outcomes (Eccles et al., 1998; Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2009; Smoll, Smith, & Cumming, 2007). Eccles and colleagues (1998) emphasized the importance of not only striving to create, but also maintaining, a mastery learning environment for youth. The PAL program has succeeded in creating such an environment as the youth described PAL as a fun and supportive atmosphere where they were more likely to try harder, set goals and persevere than in other domains of their life. Both the quantitative and qualitative data illustrates that the participants learned how to put forth effort and to improve their athletic skills. The qualitative results also speak to the youths' opportunities to experience success in very different ways than simply winning. Particularly, the youth mentioned achieving better physical fitness and athletic skills over the course of the season, regardless of the final outcome at the end of each game and the season. This notion is in line with the literature as Roth and colleagues (1998) discussed how the environment of a recreation program is critical to the perceived success of the program by its participants.

Furthermore, in line with Petitpas et al.'s (2005) assertion that youth should be surrounded by caring adult mentors within a program, in this study the participants talked a lot about the positive influence of their coaches. The youth shared that the coaches provided everyone with equal playing time and emphasized teamwork. The youth also explained how the coaches helped them to learn how to regulate their emotions and to respect the other players and the referees. From this research, it is evident that if community organizations take the time to ensure their leaders and coaches are aware of the importance of the elements discussed above, such as fair play and managing emotions, the programs can have a positive impact on youth participants.

Finally, researchers assert that sport-based programs need to incorporate opportunities for youth to develop and transfer life skills (Lee & Martinek, 2013; Petitpas et al., 2005). As discussed above the youth reported learning a number of life skills due to their participation in PAL (e.g., goal setting, teamwork, respect, emotion regulation). However, one of the most predominant reported experiences shared by the youth was how they had transferred such skills into other domains of their life such as school and work. For example, the youth discussed that they were better able to meet new friends in school, manage their emotions more effectively at school and transfer the leadership skills they had developed into their current place of employment.

It is also critical to acknowledge the importance of providing opportunities like PAL for at-risk youth. Youth from families living on low incomes are at higher risk for poor developmental outcomes (Wilson, Williams, Evans, Mixon, & Rheaume, 2005). A number of the youth recognized that this program played a big role in providing, not only an alternative that kept them out of trouble, but a positive opportunity to develop essential skills for adulthood. Pittman and Fleming (1991) speak to this issue by emphasizing that simply preventing high risk behaviors is not the same as positively preparing youth for the future. Being problem-free does not necessarily mean youth are adequately prepared. "There must be equal commitment to helping young people understand life's challenges and responsibilities and to developing the necessary skills to succeed as adults" (Pittman & Fleming, 1991, 21-22).

One interesting discrepancy was noted between the quantitative and qualitative results. Within the interviews the youth discussed how PAL helped to manage emotions, particularly anger and frustration, while on the YES 2.0 the mean score of emotional regulation was 2.82. One explanation for this discrepancy may be related to the types of emotions the youth learned how to regulate. The emotional regulation subscale on the YES 2.0 is made up of four questions. The first and fourth question asked about learning to control their temper and learning how emotions can impact their performance. For these two items 70% of participants scored a 3 or 4. On the other hand, the second and third items asked about managing anxiety and stress. Less than 55% scored a 3 or 4. Therefore, it appears that the PAL program is perceived by the youth as helping to regulate their emotions such as anger and frustration, emotions often characteristic in competitive sport compared to anxiety and stress. Moreover, given that the youth described PAL as a positive and fun environment it is likely that they did not experience much stress and anxiety and therefore did not have the opportunity to learn how to regulate such emotions.

Although the results of this study indicate that the youth involved in PAL perceived the program as a positive experience that enabled them to develop a variety of life skills it is important to recognize the limitations of this research. This study did not measure changes in life skill development over time and also relied on self-report. It is recommended that future research employ a longitudinal design and use more objective measures of positive youth development to examine the impact of programs such as PAL. Furthermore, the majority of the individuals interviewed were older youth. Although the older youth, because of their developmental level and veteran-status in PAL, may have a greater ability to reflect on their experiences, this approach limits the generalizability of the results to younger youth. Additionally, the sample of interviewees was predominately male. However, it should be noted that the majority of PAL participants were also male. Nevertheless it would be beneficial to attain feedback from a greater number of female participants in the future. Lastly, the length of some of the interviews can be considered short, lasting only 15 minutes, yet this occurred with two of the younger PAL participants, yet as Smith and Osborn (2008) stated considerably long and intense semi-structured interviews are not always advisable with young children.

As stated earlier, the overall emphasis of PAL is social recreation with the goal of enhancing development. According to the results, PAL is meeting this objective and also doing so by being barrier-free for youth from families living on low incomes. Many of the youth stated that without PAL they would not have the opportunity to participate in a sport program. As a result, it is recommended that community sport and recreation organizations recognize the value of incorporating a philosophy similar to PAL, as using sport as a tool for enhancing social development can have a positive impact on the development of youth. However, there is always room for improvement and it is suggested that researchers and practitioners work together to identify both the strengths and areas of development for the various sport and recreation programs in which they are involved. Once strengths and areas of improvement are identified, specific strategies can be implemented to further enhance the development of the youth participants. This study showed that the PAL program is helping youth set goals, learn how to put forth effort, regulate their emotions,

and develop stronger relationships with peers and their community. Nevertheless, future work is needed to better understand the role (and impact) of coaches and instructors in teaching life skill development and transference.

CONCLUSION

This research provides insight into the youth's experiences and perceived impact of the PAL program offered through the Boys and Girls Club located in Eastern Ontario, Canada. It was evident that the youth participants perceive PAL as a positive context and a program that enhances their personal and athletic development. More specifically, it appears that providing an environment that was fun, safe and accessible enabled participants to develop friendships, to experience success, to develop life skills, and to transfer these skills into other domains, particularly the school environment. However, it is important to note that this positive and supportive environment is strongly influenced by the coaches and staff members that facilitate the PAL program. In sum, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on PYD and it is recommended that the Boys and Girls Club continue to offer programs like the PAL program so that youth can build a stronger foundation that will help them to succeed in their future endeavours.

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