

Run for Your Life: A Developmental Program Assessment of an After-School Running Program

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Socio-cultural

Friday, May 31, 2013

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)**

Abstract 2013-139

1:15 PM

(Room 412)

The first decade of the 21st century has seen an increase in the number of youth sport and development programs around the world (Coakley, 2011). While scholars struggle to define both the determinants and outcomes that frame youth sport and development programs, decision makers must make choices about which programs to support and finance. In order to determine the effectiveness of these programs, appropriate assessment tools become paramount to the exchange process, as well as vital for making contributions to the ongoing academic discourse regarding what constitutes positive youth development (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). The purpose of this study is to examine the specific developmental effects of an after-school running program over the course of a single programmatic year. Specifically, this study evaluates the effectiveness of the program in achieving its goals for the at-risk participants: significant positive change in academic attitudes, academic performance, and level of self-efficacy, as well as lower levels of at risk behavior and attitudes.

It is well established that physical activity and sport have important influences on youth physiological development (CDC, 2006), and serve as potential drivers for other positive psychological and sociological outcomes, including higher self-esteem (Marsh & Kleitman, 2003), academic success (Dwyer, Sallis, Blizzard, Lazarus, & Dean, 2001) and community engagement (Wankel & Berger, 1990), along with lower levels of at-risk behaviors (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Coakley (2011) proposed that tangible positive development is “contingent” on various factors including context, relationships between other participants and mentors, level of involvement with the activity, and the type of physical activity or sport. This has led to the distinction between programs that serve merely to promote sport, and those that also focus on specific areas of positive development, teaching life skills along with technical skills of the activity. Petitpas et al. (2004) created a framework for components successful programs should include: an intrinsically motivated activity, external assets provided by mentors, internal assets achieved through goal setting and problem solving skills, and research and evaluation. Building on this framework, the current study seeks to add to the ongoing conversation through the evaluation of a sport and development program that: engages youth in the activity of running and marathon training (an intrinsically motivated activity), that are surrounded by running leaders who support their goal achievement (external assets), and help them gain the supplemental tools, skills, and confidence to help them achieve their goals (internal assets).

This study was conducted with members of Students Run Philly Style, an after-school running program begun in 2004 that targets at-risk youth ages 12-18 in Philadelphia. The primary goals of this program are to increase student self-efficacy, self-esteem, and academic performance, and reduce at risk behaviors. In this program, students run/train three times a week with their team and running leaders, volunteers who serve as mentors for the students. Students train over the course of nine months, culminating in the completion of the Philadelphia Marathon or Half Marathon. The program includes several programmatic teaching elements, including a leadership camp in the summer.

Participants were surveyed three times over the course of a single programmatic year. Self-efficacy was measured using Schwartz’s (1987) self-efficacy scale. Academic achievement was measured using self-reported GPA scores, in addition to an 8-point scale measuring grades that students “typically got in school” (Holt, Finkelhor, & Kaufman Kantor, 2007). Academic confidence measures were derived from McCoach and Siegle’s (2003) Attitude Assessment Survey. Other attitudinal measures included motivation for running (Markland & Tobin, 2004), involvement with the program (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009), and commitment (Beaton, et al, 2009) and satisfaction (Oliver, 1980) with the program. Finally, the strength of the student-running leader relationship was measured using the Youth Mentor Relationship Questionnaire (YMRQ) (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005).

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

As of this submission, data from Time 1(T1) and Time 2 (T2) had been collected from the program participants. A total of 97 students completed both data points, representing 16% of the program's entire population. Within this sample, 45% were male and 55% were female. Repeated Measures ANOVAs were performed to compare the mean scores of various outcomes between the two trials by entering the T1 and T2 scores for each outcome as within-subjects trials. The analyses also included gender as a between-subjects factor to determine any differences by gender.

There was a significant change in students' mean scores of self-efficacy over this time period ($F=15.58, p<.001$). In addition, a significant interaction between time and gender was identified ($F=8.56, p<.01$), suggesting that the changes are dependent upon gender. Specifically, the mean self-efficacy scores for boys increased, while scores for girls remained almost unchanged. In terms of program attitudes, there was also a significant interaction between time and gender for involvement with the program ($F=7.11, p<.05$). Boys' scores increased significantly while girls' scores slightly decreased. Specifically, analysis of the various dimensions within involvement revealed a significant interaction between gender and the pleasure dimension ($F=6.12, p<.05$). Boys' pleasure scores were significantly higher than girls' scores. No other significant overall changes or interactions were found for other outcomes based on the repeated measures ANOVA. Results from a one-way ANOVA revealed that girls scored significantly lower than boys in three out of four dimensions of the YMRQ: not dissatisfied ($F=6.045, p<.05$), not unhappy ($F=11.932, p<.01$) and helped to cope ($F=7.711, p<.01$).

While results from all three data points will be presented, preliminary results from two data points reveal several important findings as well as opportunities for future research. The differences in the program effect on self-efficacy in terms of gender call for an examination of possible programmatic elements that determine this discrepancy. Furthermore, boys' significantly higher levels of involvement with the program and connection with running leaders and mentors support previous literature that such internal, psychological assets (i.e. involvement with the organization) and external assets (i.e. the mentor-student relationship) are essential components for a youth sport and development program to yield significant results (Petitpas, et al, 2005). The results also suggest a connection among time in the program, involvement with the program, and programmatic outcomes. This relationship will be further explored after collection of Time Three (T3) data.

Research has shown that task orientation and perceived success are important components for girls' level of enjoyment with an activity (Kane, et al, 2007), and therefore their scores may be explained by the fact that a program is still in progress. Data collected after the students have successfully completed the half or full marathon (T3) will allow for a more comprehensive examination of the outcomes associated with this program.