It Depends: A Contextual Evaluation of a Youth Sport and Development Program

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The multifaceted nature of sport has led to both praise and criticism for its potential as a vehicle for both individual and community betterment. For this reason, the growing number of youth sport and development programs in the past decade has been followed closely by a spike in research seeking to understand the mechanisms through which these programs foster development (Coakley, 2011). The societal consequences for failure of such programs require stringent, theory-based evaluation that assesses the organizational model of program goals and activities not only for the program in general but across the varying context of individuals that it serves. Recent work in positive youth development (PYD) suggests that a youth’s psychological growth occurs through the interaction of a youth’s internal assets, external assets, and the environment (Lerner, 2005). The purpose of this research is to examine the developmental change in participants of a youth sport for development program through the lens of PYD, highlighting differences in program delivery and outcomes across various environmental factors, including gender, race, family structure, and school environment.

The study of youth development has seen a shift in the last 25 years from a model that emphasizes the reduction of deviant behaviors, to a more positive framework that identifies the developmental assets within a youth to create positive attributes. Known as Positive Youth Development (PYD), in the past 20 years it has become an essential framework for studying the determinants of adolescent behavior (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Loezak, & Hawkins, 2004). Emerging from a relational, developmental systems theory, PYD suggests an individual and his/her various internal and external assets mutually interact to create different levels of psychological development (Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011). As a particularly salient activity for youth, sport specifically is viewed as a vehicle through which positive development can occur (Weiss, 2008).

Within this framework, these internal and external assets interact only within a given context or environment (Larson, 2000). In Lerner et al.’s (2005) model, context is further shaped by the long-term behavioral outcomes of PYD, and the process continues through which the ever-changing assets and context interact. Most environmentally based research within youth development in the last 20 years acknowledges the differences of outcomes based on social and environmental factors (Catalano et al, 2004). Riggs and Greenberg (2004) identify three factors that can affect development programs: type, location, and climate. However, they acknowledge that, despite the importance of environment on program implementation and outcomes, there has been little comparative research investigating the differences.

This study is part two of a three-year program evaluation, conducted at Students Run Philly Style, an after-school running program begun in 2004, targeting 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.

Year One of Program Evaluation (2012) focused on the individual change over time for program participants. Involvement in the program was shown to be associated with several positive psychological outcomes. External factors, such as gender, race, and family structure were found were found to moderate the strength of several outcomes, including self-efficacy, one of the programs most important metrics. Attrition rates both in the program and in the study prevented comparison across teams. Furthermore, interviews conducted with running leaders, organizational staff, and board members in January of 2013 revealed substantial differences in program design across teams. Variations in school performance and school location were also found to have a profound impact on program delivery. For this reason, Year Two of the evaluation decided to focus on capturing data that allowed for adequate
comparison across teams, gender, race, and family structure, in addition to measuring individual change over time. This comparison across external influences examines the way in which developmental outcomes may vary based on the environmental context that is exogenous to the actual program delivery.

Program participants were surveyed at the programs inauguration in March of 2013, and will be surveyed again at the conclusion of the Philadelphia Marathon event in November 2013. A combination of online and paper instruments was used to maximize response rate. In addition to demographic information, students’ previous level of experience with physical activity was measured. Their sense of psychological connection to the program, measured via the construct of psychological involvement, was also measured to compliment students’ level of behavioral involvement. In terms of program outcomes, one item from each of the 5 dimensions of Lerner’s (2001, 2005) 5 C’s (competence, confidence, caring, character, and connection) was measured. Academic achievement was measured using self-reported grades and attendance. At-risk behavior was measured using self-reported incidence of detention and suspension in previous quarter. Finally, variations in environmental context were captured using the School Performance Index (SPI), a composite measure created by the School District of Philadelphia. Computed on a scale of 1(highest performing) to 10(lowest performing), it is comprised of attendance rates, tests scores, graduation/promotion rate, and socioeconomic status.

As of this submission, only Time 1 data had been collected. A total of 652 program participants across 52 teams were surveyed in the March collection. Cross-sectional analysis of baseline program outcomes found that school performance level (SPI) was associated with differences in students’ confidence in their academic future ($t = -1.98, p <.05$), overall future connectedness ($t = -2.368, p <.05$), and character ($t = -2.149, p <.05$). Additionally, lower performing schools were also associated with higher levels of both suspension ($t = 2.26, p <.05$), and detention rates ($t = 3.91, p <.001$) on the team. Differences were also found in baseline physical confidence measures across gender. Boys were found to be significantly more confident in their level of fitness than girls starting the program ($F = 13.55, p <.001$). No other baseline differences were noted across gender, race, or family structure.

While results from Time 1 and Time 2 will be presented, baseline results reveal different development starting points for students on teams in higher and lower performing schools, as well as significant differences in perceived physical fitness across gender. The extent to which these differences change program outcomes for these individuals offers a more nuanced understanding into the programmatic framework necessary to define a “successful” youth sport for development program. Particularly, as a program into which students self-select, recognizing differences in both program delivery and program outcomes across students in different environmental contexts is essential to understanding the true impact of the program. While those who exhibit high baseline levels leave little room for positive development over the course of a single programmatic season, students with different and more restrictive contingencies, and therefore in greater need of programmatic intervention, may benefit in different, more complex ways than their higher-performing counterparts. Evaluation of these differences can contribute to both understanding the role of context within the PYD theoretical framework, as well as highlighting practical implications for organizational and program design.