"We Wanna Do Different Stuff": Lessons Learned from a Pilot Program

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Middle school youth are vulnerable to disconnection from school, family, and communities as they experience changes in their bodies, minds, and emotions or encounter comprehensive shifts in their life-structures (Witt & Caldwell, 2010; Fernandes-Alcantara, 2014). Addressing such potential disconnection early in teens’ lives through an intentional intervention allows participants to discover a new passion and engagement in social institutions. Newland, Dixon, and Green (2013) found that interventions often focus on after-school health and physical activity programs because of the rise of obesity and reduced amounts of physical activity. Linking this understanding to reports of high dropout rates of traditional sports (Sabo & Veliz, 2014), a nontraditional sport-based intervention called CrossFit Boro Prepared for Anything- youth edition (CFBPFA) was developed for a population identified as at-risk. CFBPFA was geared to develop the whole child (Black, Costello, Craft, Katene, 2015; Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Coalter, 2012). A positive psychology theoretical framework (Seligman, 2000) was used aiming to transform the participants’ lives by teaching them the skills to live a balanced life of well-being.

This presentation represents one phase (the evaluation process) of a larger study and will address the management, organization, and effectiveness of CFBPFA. The evaluation of CFBPFA was completed on a regular basis, and therefore, the vision, mission, values, and deliverables of CFBPFA were addressed. The purpose of this presentation is to highlight the results from the evaluation of CFBPFA and discuss some of the critical lessons learned.

The methods for evaluating the CFBPFA intervention included a series of focus groups with the assistant/student coaches, participants, and administrative staff. Qualitative approaches are, in essence, a form of social inquiry striving to bring context to and deeper understanding of how people live their lives through work, school, and home (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014). The focus groups consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions to allow for participants to fully and deeply explore the impact of CFBPFA on their lives. To fully triangulate the focus group data, program observations and notes were also used.

The evaluation process directed us to re-evaluate the intervention vision (participants will strive to find ways to continuously improve themselves in all aspects of life), mission (to promote, teach, and guide participants to develop healthy habits, strive to continuously develop their personal self, and build onto their social skills), and outcomes (addressing physical, social, personal and intellectual). Upon review, it became apparent that the outcomes were not easy-to-follow as suggested by Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Nols (2012). Focus group narratives supported this finding as themes emerged: lack of variations in workouts and not progressing in movements. CFBPFA generally related to the micro-level impact dimension of the Sport Development Impact Assessment Tool (Burnett, 2001) because emphasis was placed on the holistic development of participants in terms of personal experiences and development. Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Nols (2012) argued that an individual-based development approach should not be the starting point for sport-based interventions for youth-at-risk because of challenges encountered by this population. Instead, programs should be based on a thorough analysis of the social challenges that gives attention to broader structures (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Coalter, 2012). The aim of the focus groups were to discuss changes in goal setting, strengths and weaknesses from the sessions, and social environment. There was little discussion about parental/social approval of their participation, challenges to maintain activity outside of the sessions, or general life challenges that would inhibit their activities. Foster and Spencer (2011) suggested focusing on the youth’s narratives and interpretations in relation to the pasts, presents, and futures. This in turn would provide a greater understanding of sport-based social interventions and their impacts because of the complex and ever-changing nature of youths’ lives.
The evaluation process also highlighted similarities to Newland, Dixon, and Green’s (2013) study that the vision and mission of the program were not funneled down to the design and implementation of the program to the head trainer. The research team identified the coaches for the program because their Crossfit, academic and experiential qualifications. Aligned with suggestions by Coalter and Taylor (2009) it was critical that the coach had experience with youth work to be more youth-driven than sports coach driven. It was anticipated that the coaches would foster in-depth, intensive, and extensive social relationships with the youths (Smith, 2003). Additionally due to their academic background and experience, it was expected that they would be accustomed to dealing with the participants’ problems (Theeboom, De Knop, & Wylleman, 1993). Despite numerous meetings about planning and linking to outcomes, the evaluation highlighted lack of preparation, limited connections between the participants and some trainers, and limited experience running such programs. The coach is a key aspect to successful interventions as actions and interactions of coaches influence the extent to which youth have positive experiences (Bailey and Dismore, 2004).

Lastly, the evaluation identified a disconnect between the partnership with the organization from which the kids came and the program. Although the organization provided a general letter of support outlining their role, they failed to provide shoes, schedules for the participants, and travel to all the sessions. This impacted the number of sessions that the participants could attend.

Overall, the initial development of our intervention fell into the “black box” idea that youth activities (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003) or sport-based interventions will create positive changes (Coalter, 2007). An idealistic vision was created with numerous expected outcomes that did not incorporate the narratives of the youths. Evaluating an intervention needs to encompass the dynamic interplay among values, intervention goals and broader external forces impacting the delivery of the activities (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2012). If the evaluation process is completed effectively, administrators will gain a better understanding of the desired outcomes of the participants and can improve the sports-based intervention in terms of design, organizational capacity, and implementation (Burnett, 2001; Coalter, 2010). Although there are a number of positive aspects of the nontraditional sport-based intervention, the lessons learned from the evaluation process were: the participants need to have more of a voice with development and direction of the intervention; there needs to be links and discussions about life outside of CrossFit to gain a better understanding of the complexities of the participants’ lives; the staff needs to be more involved and aware of the overall goals and learning elements; and more disposable time needs to be added into sessions.