Sports-Based Prevention and Intervention Programs for At-Risk Youth: Meanings, Motivations, and Impacts

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Sport for Development - Other (Youth Sport) Saturday, June 9, 2018
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Room: Annapolis C

Abstract 2018-357

Introduction
Risk-taking is a natural part of the psychological development in adolescence (Dryfoos, 1990; Hamburg, 1997; Ponton, 1997). However, risky behaviors (such as violence, delinquency, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and antisocial behaviors) have negative repercussions for youth’s health, wellbeing, and life prospects (Fergusson et al., 2007; Mirza & Mirza, 2008; World Health Organization, 2014) as well as present a burden on the public health and criminal justice systems (Cohen & Piquero, 2009; Piquero & Steinberg, 2010). The antecedent social determinants of risky behaviors in adolescence include both risk and protective factors that are often mapped using a social-ecological framework comprised of the individual, relational, community, and societal levels of influence (Foshee et al., 2011; Jenson & Fraser 2011). Respective risk factors include rebelliousness, dysfunctional families, crime-ridden communities, and failing policies, while the corresponding protective factors encompass resilience, parental attachment, school and community involvement, and access to sport and recreation resources (Reingle et al., 2012; Logan-Greene et al., 2011; Wong et al., 2010). Hence, offering sport and recreation after-school programs to at-risk youth can serve as one of the protective factors buffering the negative influence of the risk factors (Lodewijiks et al., 2010; OJJDP, 2014).

Sports-based programs targeting at-risk youth provide them with a safe environment, alleviate boredom, offer positive role models and prosocial peer relationships, and help develop essential life skills such as cooperative competition, leadership, obedience to authority, self-control, and moral values (Spruit, 2015; Weinstein et al., 2014). Such sports-based programs are classified into three types: (1) primary prevention programs offered to general youth population; (2) secondary intervention programs targeting youth prone to or already involved in risky behaviors; and (3) tertiary rehabilitation programs provided to youth who have already been in contact with the criminal justice system (Nichols, 2007). Various sports-based prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation programs rely on some combination of deterrence, diversion, and prosocial development mechanisms to address risky behaviors among youth (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). Deterrence mechanism suggests that the presence of sports-based programs in high-crime areas deters offenders from that area (Nichols & Crow, 2004). According to the diversion mechanism, sports-based program diverts youth’s time and energy from risky to positive behaviors by occupying them with supervised and structured sports activities (Coalter, 2005; Morris et al., 2003). As for the prosocial development, this mechanism focuses on helping youth to attain social inclusion and sense of competence and to develop socio-emotional skills essential for wellbeing and making healthy life choices (Lerner & Lerner, 2013; Lubans et al., 2012).

The roles of sport, however, in the sports-based prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation programs should be examined critically. Existing literature offers equivocal evidence regarding the effectiveness of sport as a prevention, intervention, or rehabilitation tool (Coakley, 2011; Crissey & Honea, 2006; Holt et al., 2017; Spaaij, 2009). Some reasons for healthy skepticism are as follows. First, many programs offer sports activities in combination with arts and crafts, recreation, community service, and various kinds of counseling, which complicates the evaluation of the effectiveness of the sports component per se (Gioanel et al., 2017). Second, all the sports-based prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation programs are context-specific (including the aspects such as the type of sport, the program leaders, the target behavior and the population), which confounds across-program comparisons and often prevents the replication of successful models (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004; Petipas et al., 2005). Lastly, some existing evaluations of such programs have challenged their design and effectiveness in reducing risky behaviors and delivering long-term protective outcomes (Hartmann, 2012; Nichols, 2007).

Thus, while there is an increasing number of sports-based prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation programs,
there is still insufficient evidence-based guidance for these programs regarding successful strategies and participant-driven outcomes (Cox, 2012). Namely, the ability of the program to deliver aspired outcomes is contingent on the youth’s levels of engagement with and commitment to the program, meanings assigned to their experiences, and intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivations for participation (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Cammarota, 2011; Kaplan et al., 2012). To address this important gap in knowledge and practice, the purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the motivations and experiences of at-risk youth participating in sports-based prevention and intervention programs addressing risky behaviors. Specifically, we will focus on the following research questions. First, what are the meanings assigned by youth to their experiences in the program? Second, based on the youth’s recollection, what were their motivations for joining the program and what were the transformations (if any) in their motivations throughout their involvement in the program? Third, what are the youth’s subjective perceptions of any attitudinal and/or behavioral changes due to the program?

Methodology
Previous literature suggests that qualitative methodologies are better suited for understanding the motivations and meanings associated with at-risk youth’s participation in prevention and intervention programs (Merrill, 2014; Whitelaw et al., 2000). Hence, we will implement constructivist grounded theory that has roots in the interpretative tradition and construes both data and analysis as co-created from shared experiences and relationships between the participants and the researchers (Charmaz, 2006; 2009). We will recruit research participants in the Don Moyer Boys & Girls Club, Champaign, Illinois, serving at-risk youth who are challenged with difficult economic, family, educational and neighborhood environments and helping them to refrain from risky behaviors. Such criteria for identifying target population are in-line with the literature suggesting that at-risk youth typically demonstrate poor school performance, reside in dysfunctional families, have lower socioeconomic status, belong to a racial/ethnic minority, and engage in risky behaviors (Lauer et al., 2006; Worthington et al., 2008). We will focus on the participants of two sports-based programs: (1) Project Athletes – an athletic training program offered to 7th-12th grade students; and (2) Triple Play – health and wellness program offered to youth ages 6-18 to increase their daily physical activity among other outcomes. According to the program leaders, these sports-based programs provide positive outlets for at-risk youth, build friendships, offer positive role models, help maintain academic achievement, keep youth out of trouble and engaged with the benefits of sports. Program leaders will introduce us to youth and help us identify and recruit high-risk youth.

The data collection will include participant observations and in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 20 at-risk youth (ages 14-18, with equal representation by gender; informed parental consents and youth’s assents will be obtained) and five program leaders. The interview guide will focus on the participants’ subjectively construed meanings, motivations, and outcomes of the program. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. The field notes and the transcripts will be analyzed using constructivist grounded theory. Following the procedures suggested by Charmaz (2006; 2009), data analysis will progress through the initial/open, focused, and theoretical coding phases. The trustworthiness of the analysis and interpretations will be bolstered by adhering to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (DeCrop, 2004). Upon the conclusion of this study, we expect to offer contributions to both research and practice by having addressed the under-researched issues related to at-risk youth’ participation in sports-based prevention and intervention programs and by offering practical recommendations to these programs regarding maintaining youth’s engagement in the program and achieving aspired outcomes.