A Case Study Examination of Student Perceived Benefits of an Urban, After-School, Youth Soccer Program Sponsored by a Major League Soccer (MLS) Organization

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies such as self-awareness and relationship skills are predictors of academic success, overall well-being, and avoidance of problematic behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Among school-aged children, research has demonstrated that well-implemented programs can teach SEL competencies and life skills (e.g., leadership and responsible decision making) that can transfer to other settings. Similar claims have been made in the field of sport-based youth development (SBYD), however, the SEL framework has not been widely applied in sport programming (Jacobs & Wright, 2014). Implementation, student learning, and transfer of learning in SBYD programs designed to promote SEL require further exploration.

The purpose of this study was to examine the implementation and perceived benefits of an after-school soccer program, sponsored by a Major League Soccer (MLS) organization, designed to promote SEL. Specific aims were to: (1) identify and describe the essential characteristics of the program; (2) understand how program is implemented across sites; and (3) examine the connection between implementation and perceived benefits.

Method

The present study employed multiple methods to develop case studies for the purpose of program evaluation (Stake, 1995). Fifty-one students (ranging from 8-11 years old) from three different, predominantly Hispanic, urban school sites (located in a large, Midwestern metropolitan area) where this program was offered participated in the study. A multiple case study design was used, integrating data from customized feedback surveys, interviews, systematic observation, and field notes.

Results

Findings from the present study indicated the program reflected many SBYD best practices. For example, students were most often observed actively participating (M = 3.62, SD = .73), engaging with other (M = 3.42, SD = .85), demonstrating respectful behavior (M = 3.36, SD = .80), and cooperating with their peers (M = 2.71, SD = 1.15). Overall, students also indicated having a positive experience in the program. Collectively, students agreed that their coaches supported them (96.1%), thought they were important (84.3%), expected them to do their best (94.1%), and served as positive role models (86.3%). Moreover, students reported feeling motivated to do well (94.1%), felt good about themselves (86.3%), and felt safe (84.3%) in the program. Additionally, students agreed that the program helped them perform at their best in school (94.1%), be a good student (94.1%), and make good choices (94.1%)

Discussion

Although implementation varied between sites, program culture and core values were consistent. Evidence indicated students learned and applied SEL lessons in the soccer program and that transfer beyond the program promoted (i.e., at home and in school). More specifically, participants were most likely to perceive transfer to the school setting, therefore, future studies should examine this topic more directly. Full descriptive statistics, overview of programming efforts, survey findings, and other implications for research, program implementation, and community/organizational stakeholders will be discussed.