A Qualitative Examination of Teacher/Coach Assessment 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 coach/teacher assessment and benefits associated with 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 used a qualitative approach (e.g., interviews, self-assessments) for the purpose of program evaluation (Stake, 1995). Six coaches (i.e., teachers) from three different, predominantly Hispanic, urban school sites (located in a large, Midwestern metropolitan area) where this program was offered participated in the study. The research design integrated data from customized feedback surveys, interviews, systematic observation, and field notes.

Results

Findings from the present study found that coaches were extremely satisfied or somewhat satisfied on items related to the organization of practices and game days, site visits by program staff, communication and involvement by program staff, soccer equipment, instructional resources, and student logbook. Additionally, the curriculum, training, resources, and support reinforced the primary focus of SEL development. Coaches shared that their coaching philosophy and the core values of the program was positive, but also indicated the various struggles within each of their programs. The coaches across sites shared a student-centered focus and valued establishing relationships with their students. As an example, one coach shared, that they “really enjoyed the experience as a coach and a mentor and want to give these kids a chance…and love that when these kids have issues and need support they can go to their coach, and that coach can then go to their teacher and give them the support they need.”

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, coaches believed that the participants were most likely to perceive transfer to the school setting, therefore, future studies should examine this topic more directly. Salient interview quotes, overview of programming efforts, survey findings, and other implications for research, program implementation, and community/organizational stakeholders will be discussed.