Parent Assessment of an Urban, After-School, Youth Soccer Program Sponsored by a Major League Soccer (MLS) Organization: A Case Study Exploration

Steven M. Howell, Northern Illinois University
Paul M. Wright, Northern Illinois University
Jennifer M. Jacobs, Northern Illinois University
Jessica Yavitz, Chicago Fire Foundation

Introduction

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.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine parent assessment and perceived benefits associated with an after-school soccer program, sponsored by a Major League Soccer 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.

Data and Methods

The present study employed multiple methods to develop case studies for the purpose of program evaluation (Stake, 1995). Parents (n=132), whose children participated in the program at 23 different urban, public school sites (located in a large, Midwestern metropolitan city), participated in the study. A multiple case study design was used, integrating data from customized feedback surveys and interviews.

Results

Findings from the present study found that nearly all (97.7%) parents reported being satisfied with and perceived that their child(ren) enjoyed the program. Moreover, 98.4% of parents agreed they would recommend the program to other families. The aforementioned quantitative findings were corroborated by open response comments. Students’ enjoyment of the program was frequently noted as one of the best aspects of the program. Parents’ comments about the organization and quality of the program were consistently positive.

In regards to perceived benefits, a strong majority (94.7%) of parents felt the program impacted their child’s behavior at home. Additionally, most agreed the program benefited their child’s self-perception (96.2%) and their ability to get along with others (97.7%). Open response feedback supported the quantitative results relating to student benefits. Across this qualitative feedback, the strongest themes related to learning life skills (especially team work), increases in confidence and self-esteem, and learning to get along with others. Interestingly, a pattern of responses emerged that was not anticipated or prompted which centered on the physical benefits of the program.

Discussion

Overall, the results suggested that parents had extremely positive views of the program and believed that it benefited their children in a number of ways. Most parents indicated that the personal and social skills developed in the program proved positive for their children at home, in school, and in other social settings. Both qualitative and quantitative data presented here align with previous findings from coaches and students in the program (Wright et
al., in press). Quantitative findings, salient interview quotes, and other implications for research, program implementation, and community/organizational stakeholders will be discussed.