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Examining Positive Youth Development in Elite Sport Contexts Using Photo Elicitation

Project Summary

Previous research in the field of positive youth development has highlighted the importance of extracurricular activities, such as sport, in developing healthy youth (Larson, 2000, Petitpas et al., 2005). Further, the National Research Council Institute of Medicine (NRCIM, 2002) have suggested eight setting features that are critical to the growth of positive young people: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support of efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts. The presence of these setting features has not yet been examined extensively within youth sport contexts (Perkins & Noam, 2007). Recent research with elite youth sport coaches found the presence and delivery of the setting features within elite sport contexts (Strachan, Côté, & Deakin, 2011). With increasing elite sport participation by children and youth, it is critical that elite sport contexts be explored through examining athlete perceptions to ensure the best possible program delivery. Results point to the 7th setting feature, opportunities for skill building, as a meaningful feature of elite sport contexts. Other highlighted features include physical safety as well as appropriate structure.

Research Methods

Twelve athletes (Mage = 11) were recruited from swimming and gymnastics. These athletes were all invested in their respective sports spending at least 10 hours per week in practice. A photo elicitation methodology was used; this methodology involves individuals taking photographs within a specific context in order to explore the environment in greater depth (Morrow, 2001; Power, 2003). Each athlete participated in three or four separate sessions which have proved to be appropriate with children and youth (Cook & Hess, 2007). The sessions include an explanation of the methodology, taking pictures during a practice, selecting pictures, and speaking to the researcher about their experiences by explaining the photographs taken. The final session was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Research Results

Athletes described features related to Opportunities for Skill Building as the most meaningful part of their elite sport experience. Interestingly, skill building encompassed a broad range of activities: skill development, cognitive development, and psychological skills development.

Physical Safety and Appropriate Structure were also important to these athletes as they wanted to feel safe in their sport experience and have an understanding that proper progressions were being taught and delivered.

Positive Social Norms and Support of Efficacy and Mattering were often mentioned by these athletes as they understood that they were developing positive values in sport. In addition, recognition was mentioned by several athletes as important in their experience and this was extremely valued.

The support and encouragement of friends as well as having supportive coaches were not mentioned quite as much but were also very valued by these athletes.

Opportunities to Belong and Integration of Family, School, and Community were the least reported by these athletes.

Policy Implications

The first goal of the Canada-Manitoba Sport Development document is to increase the level and range of participation in sport within Manitoba's remote, isolated and inner urban communities, and especially among Manitoba's Aboriginal and new immigrant populations. While special populations have not yet been addressed through this research, results can have an impact on the level and range of sport participation among youth.

Participation in elite youth sport brings about many challenges, particularly with issues of dropout and burnout. A greater focus on the tenets of positive youth development in this context can help to encourage talented athletes to persist in sport while gaining positive experiences within a more deliberate context.

Next Steps

The next steps of this research include examining more of the context in elite youth sport, particularly parents/guardians and their contribution to positive development. More links are needed examining family structure (i.e., siblings), school involvement, and community links within elite youth sport. Further, more diverse populations are important to consider through this research including Aboriginal and New Immigrant youth, athletes with physical disability, and athletes with intellectual disability.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

The key stakeholders in this research include:

- The Coaching Association of Canada
- Sport Canada – LTAD
- Swimming Canada/Swim Manitoba
- Gymnastics Canada/Manitoba Gymnastics Association