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Grappling for Answers: Exploring the Process of Life Skills Development in Youth Mixed Martial Arts Athletes

Project Summary

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a full contact combat sport that integrates striking and grappling techniques from a variety of other combat sports (i.e. martial arts, boxing, sumo, wrestling, karate, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, kickboxing, and Tae Kwon Do). MMA was legalized in Ontario in 2013. Immediately, reporters from mainstream and social media began to emphasize both positive and negative outcomes of youths' participation in MMA, which was largely anecdotal. Perhaps not surprisingly, MMA gyms have adopted only the positive media attention regarding youths' involvement in MMA, and use these claims to promote youth enrolment in the sport.

To date, few studies have examined youth MMA programs' effectiveness in promoting developmental outcomes in youth. Theeboom and colleagues (2009) identified that participation in MMA was associated with increased self-efficacy and self-confidence, as well as improved conflict management and communication skills. Moreover, they found youth were able to transfer these life skills into non-sport contexts with their peers. However, another study found concerning negative outcomes to be associated with MMA. Specifically, Endresen and Olweus (2005) examined the impact of participation in martial arts, boxing, wrestling, weightlifting (components of MMA) by males ages 11-13, finding the youth experienced an increase in antisocial and violent behaviour in non-sport environments

Currently there is no consensus amongst researchers on the positive developmental outcomes of youth participation in MMA. The discrepancies in the findings of past research stem from several methodological limitations when studying youth participation in MMA and the development of life skills. First, no study has clearly defined youth MMA, often resulting in exploration of youth martial arts, an umbrella term for all martial art forms. Second, previous research has used a deficit reduction approach, heavily modifying martial art programs to accentuate the focus on self-reflection and life skills development. Third, youth participants often have been identified as delinquent or troublesome and have been placed into a martial arts program as a remedial behaviour program. Therefore, the overall objective of this dissertation was to explore the potential benefits, factors and processes associated with youths' life skill development in MMA, through the lens of positive youth development.

Research Methods

This research project was comprised of four studies. Three main questions guided our study objectives: (1) What life skills do MMA schools say they develop? (2) What life skills do youth really develop by participating in MMA? (3) How does MMA participation develop these life skills and facilitate life skills transfer?

To address question one a content analysis of the websites for 18 MMA gyms with youth programming, based in Toronto, Ontario was conducted. A 37-item coding manual was developed to categorize the website content. Categories included: general information, MMA gym's goals, 4Cs developmental outcomes (i.e.,

competence, confidence, connections, character; Lerner et al., 2005), 4Cs processes of facilitation, sources of information, and non-relevant messages.

To address question two, 13 youth (n=11 boys) ages 9-14 enrolled in youth MMA programs in Toronto participated in semi-structured interviews focused on their background, knowledge of life skills, MMA experiences, self-reflection, and transfer.

To address the third question, we conducted two studies. First, ten male coaches from ten different MMA gyms in Toronto, Canada, that were actively coaching a youth MMA programs for ages 9-14 participated in a semi-structured interview. Interviews explored MMA coaches' experiences in MMA as an athlete and coach, to identify their role in the process of life skills development and transfer in MMA. Next, nine youth from MMA gyms in the Greater Toronto Area, completed online journals regarding their experiences of life skills transfer. Given that previous research on youths' life skill transfer has relied on direct questions (i.e., using guiding language about transfer), in this study, half of the youth completed journals that included direct questions, and half of the youth completed journals that included indirect questions.

Research Results

- 1) What life skills do MMA schools say they develop?
One quarter of website content was comprised of statements regarding the positive outcomes of youth participation in MMA. We classified these outcomes into one of the 4C outcomes (i.e. competence, confidence, character, connection; Little, 1993). Competence related outcomes represented the greatest number of outcome related statements on MMA websites (38.42%), followed by character-related outcomes (26.11%), confidence outcomes (18.72%) and connection outcomes (16.75%). The most frequently stated competence outcomes were identified as fitness, anti-bullying and balance. For character they were identified as improved discipline, respect, and control. Confidence related outcomes included self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-knowledge. Three developmental outcomes represented the category of connection: social skills, communication, and cooperation.
- 2) What life skills do youth really develop by participating in MMA?
Youth discussed their MMA participation facilitating the development of sixteen life skills. Self-confidence (n=7), self-control (n=4), and social skills (n=4) were the most frequently mentioned life skills.
- 3) How do MMA schools develop these life skills and facilitate life skills transfer?

According to Youth

Youth outlined that their coaches were the main facilitators of their life skills development. Youth described that when they had positive perceptions of their coach and developed relationships that went beyond the interactions of teaching/learning technical skills (i.e. relationships as friends, mentors, and/or father figures), they experienced more opportunities for life skills development. Youth described two strategies used by their coaches to enhance their life skills learning experiences. Coaches used explicit strategies which included talking about the life skills learned in class and the importance of using life skills in non-MMA contexts. Youth also mentioned that they had an opportunity to use these life skills when their coaches paired them with younger MMA athletes or athletes with lower technical skill ability. The majority of youth did not notice if their parents remained during the MMA class to watch them and felt their presence during class was not important. However, youth suggested that their discussions about MMA class with their parents were

important to help facilitate their self-reflection and recognize the usefulness of life skills learned in MMA into non-MMA contexts (i.e. home, school).

According to Coaches

Coaches described how their ability to facilitate life skills development in their athletes stemmed from their own personal history and experiences in the sport. Coaches attributed their own involvement in MMA with helping them overcome challenges in their childhood and/or enhancing their life skills development. Coaches had developed strong relationships with their past coaches that shaped their coaching beliefs and practices. Coaches felt that having strong relationship with their athletes' parents enhanced athletes' opportunities for life skills development during MMA classes and facilitated transfer of life skills at home. Coaches that had open communication with parents suggested these parents provided them with information about athletes' life skills needs and progress outside of the MMA class setting. Coaches described how they would focus on certain life skills or modify their strategies depending on the information provided by parents. In class strategies included explicitly addressing life skills and transfer during mat chats and open conversations, and providing youth opportunities to use life skills by pairing them with younger or less skilled youth.

Policy Implications

This research project strengthened our knowledge of the potential psychosocial benefits of youth participation in MMA and enhanced our understanding of the role of coaches, parents, peers and youth in the process of life skills development.

The main implications are as follows:

- 1) Currently, MMA does not have a national governing body under the umbrella of Sport Canada, (i.e., MMA does not have a National Sport Organization (NSO), Provincial Sport Organization (PSO), and is not funded by Sport Canada). One responsibility of a Canadian NSO is to provide professional development for coaches and officials within the sport; however, the absence of a NSO/PSO to govern coaching practices in MMA opens the door for extensive variation amongst coaching practices with youth. Findings from the current study provide a springboard for future professional development for MMA coaches, as participants outlined several strategies to enhance life skills development, and offered a deeper understanding of the interactions, teaching approaches, and strategies used by coaches that align with the principles of PYD. This work is particularly important, given that some coaching strategies may in fact lead to negative outcomes among youth (e.g. increased aggression).
- 2) Currently, MMA coaches are not required to complete a coaching program or have MMA coaching certification. Findings from this study inform MMA coaches on best practices that will facilitate positive developmental experiences in youth athletes.

The primary researcher is currently in the process of disseminating findings of this study in a brief report to MMA gyms and organizations, highlighting key findings and considerations when training youth young MMA athletes.

Next steps

MMA was identified by coaches as a unique sport, whereby their personal experiences and previous coaches and beliefs about the sport were the primary (sometimes only) coaching education they received. Future

research should explore the beliefs, customs and culture of MMA and how this is integrated into the athletes' developmental experience.

Popular/social media and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) are continuously communicating stories, videos, and images about MMA, which in turn have a tremendous influence on the public's perception of the sport. Future research should explore these media outlets and organizations, and their relationship to youth MMA, to in turn assure alignment between aims and claims of programs, and ultimate developmental outcomes among youth.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- National Sport Organizations
- Provincial Sport Organizations
- Martial art programs (regional)
- Schools