Exploring the impact of a summer sport-based youth development program

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A B S T R A C T
The purpose of this study was to examine the benefits of youth participation in a sport-based youth development summer program, the National Youth Sport Program (NYSP). This study also identified areas of programmatic strength within the program, as well as areas for improvement. 193 participants in NYSP completed a pre- and post-test that assessed belonging, social competence, athletic competence, and competence related to eight specific sports. Significant improvements in perceptions of overall athletic competence and competence related to five specific sports were found. Although perceptions of social competence and belonging increased from pre-to-post test, findings were not statistically significant. Site observations resulted in the identification of strengths and areas that also inform areas for programmatic improvement. Implications for the design, implementation, and evaluation of sport-based youth development programs are discussed.

Sport-based youth development programs are designed to promote both social and athletic competence, as well as broader life skill development, in youth today (Anderson-Butcher, Riley, Iachini, Wade-Mdivanian, & Davis, 2012; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005; McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, & Riley, in press; Ullrich-French, McDonough, & Smith, 2012). Intentionally as part of their programmatic designs, sport-based youth development programs “use a particular sport to facilitate learning and life skill development in youth” (Perkins & Noam, 2007, p. 75). More specifically, sport-based youth development programs promote the mastery of skills and techniques relative to specific sport contexts and foster life-long physical activity involvement. They also promote youth assets and protective factors such as social and life skills (Larson, Hanson, & Moneta, 2006).

Berlin, Dworkin, Eames, Menconi, and Perkins (2007) describe several examples of sport-based youth development programs. For instance, Harlem RBI is a baseball/softball-based program that focuses on both sport-specific competence promotion through content on baseball and softball-specific skills, as well as social competence promotion through simultaneous activities focused on enrichment, teamwork, and social-emotional development (Berlin et al., 2007). First Tee is another example of a sport-based youth development program, focusing on social competence and golf-specific competence promotion through a curriculum-based golf program (The First Tee Life Skills Experience, 2012). Other examples exist such as Hellison’s Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility in Sport Program (Hellison, 2003; Hellison & Cutforth, 1997; Martinek, Schilling, & Johnson, 2001), as well as Danish’s Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation program (Brunelle, Danish, & Fornerish, 2007; SUPER Program, 2012).

Collectively, these sport-based youth development programs have dual priorities. One priority is a focus on the development of social and life skills among youth participants. The value of these programs in promoting these skills is growing, especially given that 20% of youth ages 6–17 demonstrate poor social and interpersonal skills (Blumberg, Carle, O’Connor, Moore, & Lippman, 2008). The other priority is the enhancement of overall athletic competence (i.e. defined as one’s view of his/her ability and skill in a specific sport) among youth participants (Amorose, 2002). Given dramatic rises in childhood obesity rates (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), promoting athletic competence is essential for fostering intrinsic motivation and continued participation in physical activity and sports (Amorose, 2002). Based on these important contributions to both athletic and social competence development, as well as broader life skill development, there has been growing emphasis on the implementation of sport-based youth development programs (Gould & Carson, 2008).

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Despite these emerging program designs, however, the research base exploring the impact of these programs continues to be limited (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012; Newton, Watson, Kim, & Beacham, 2006; Schilling, Martinek, & Carson, 2007; Watson, Newton, & Kim, 2003). There are few quantitative studies that explore the impact of these programs, as most studies are qualitative (Riley and Anderson-Butcher, 2012). For example, Schilling (2001) and Schilling, Martinek, and Carson (2007) have utilized interviews and focus groups to explore youths’ commitment to these programs. Of the existing quantitative studies, few have focused specifically on both athletic and social competence as outcomes under examination in the same study. For instance, Brunelle et al. (2007) evaluated the impact of a sport-based youth development program on youths’ self-reported empathy, concern for others, and social responsibility. Cecchini, Montero, Alonso, Izquierdo, and Contreras (2007) evaluated the impact of a soccer-based youth development intervention on youths’ sportsmanship behaviors. Neither study examined the impact of these programs on youths’ athletic competence. Also, only a few studies (Newton et al., 2006; Schilling, Martinek, & Carson, 2007; Schilling, 2001; Ullrich-French et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2003) were identified that focus specifically on the impact of summer-based programming. One in particular examines parents/caregiver perceptions of the program logistics and benefits of a summer sports-based youth development program, but did not examine specific outcomes among youth participants Iachini & Anderson-Butcher (in press).

Given the limited quantitative research simultaneously exploring the impact of these programs on both social and athletic competence, as well as limited research exploring programs that operate in the summer months, continued research is needed.

This study evaluates the outcomes associated with one promising sport-based youth development program, the National Youth Sport Program (NYSP), specifically exploring if participation increases social and athletic competence, as well as feelings of belonging, among youth from disadvantaged circumstances using a pre-test post-test design. This evaluation study also sought to understand programmatic strengths and areas for improvement that might be used to inform continuous program improvement efforts. Together, this study provides lessons learned for those designing and implementing sport-based youth development programs, as well as for others evaluating the impact of these intervention contexts.

1. Methods

1.1. Sample

A total of 408 youth enrolled in the study, which represented 67.7% of all NYSP participants. Of those youth enrolled, 350 youth completed the pretest and 214 youth completed the posttest. The sample for this study consisted of the 193 youth who completed both the pretest and posttest. These participants ranged in age from 9 to 16 years old (M = 11.93, SD = 1.64). Over half of the participants were male (56.5% male). With regard to race/ethnicity, 77.5% of participants were African American, 9.6% Multi-racial, 3.2% White/Non-Hispanic, 4.8% Native American, and 4.8% identified as other.

1.2. Intervention

NYSP was a federally funded summer program initially designed to offer economically disadvantaged youth a daily program to learn skills in various sport, fitness, and educational activities. For almost 40 years, NYSP served over two million youth in the United States at over 200 colleges/universities. Five years ago, in 2007, the federal grant program was not renewed due to a variety of contributing factors, including overall funding cuts, changes in government and funding priorities, as well as a general lack of research supporting the effectiveness of the program. As of 2009, only 24 NYSP or similar programs with different names remained. At Ohio State University (OSU), the Department of Athletics and Recreational Sports Department managed the NYSP since the program’s inception. This included providing general oversight and management of the program, including securing space, hiring program staff, and managing the day-to-day operations of the program. Ohio State administration recognized NYSP as the single-largest community outreach program on campus. As the federal funding was not renewed, OSU was deciding whether to continue the program or not. This program evaluation study was initiated to help inform this decision.

During the summer of 2008, OSU’s NYSP was implemented for 20 days over a period of 4 weeks. The program lasted five hours each day. The 600 campers enrolled in the program were split into 12 groups of 50 participants based on age. Program staff consisted of 74 teachers and other members of the community, as well as college students. Additionally, a parent liaison was hired as part of the program staff, and was responsible for enhancing communication among parents/guardians, youth and program staff. More specifically, if a camper had an issue or need, the parent liaison was contacted by the counselors. The parent liaison would then communicate with the parent/guardian to ensure that program staff and families were working together toward the best outcomes for each child. While formal training was not provided for program staff, NYSP employees met informally with the activity director prior to the start of the program to gather information around program logistics. Groups were supervised and mentored by program staff assigned to the counselor role. Key program components included sport instruction and enrichment activities. Specifically, participants engaged in two sport activities each day, and they rotated through the sports on a weekly basis. Therefore, campers participated in two hours of sport each day, and eight different sports over the course of the program. Sports provided include volleyball, football, swimming, aerobic, soccer, track, basketball, and whiffleball. Youth also received one hour of enrichment each day, which incorporated health/wellness, drug/alcohol prevention, and social competence training that specifically focused on the development of problem solving and assertiveness skills. As part of the program, participants also received breakfast and lunch, as well as free transportation to and from the program.

1.3. Procedures

All procedures were approved by OSU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Parent/guardian consent was obtained for all youth interested in participating in the study. Youth assent also was obtained for participants 14 years of age and older. Please note youth under 14 years-old were not required to complete written assent per university IRB protocol. IRB-approved researchers were responsible for the distribution and collection of the surveys. Dependent upon the participant’s age, the pre-survey was either completed in enrichment sessions during the first day of the program, or during the first two to three days of the program to allow for more time. The post-survey was distributed in the same manner, and completed during the final two days of the program. To ensure the confidentiality youth indicated their name and birthdate on a separate sheet of paper from the survey. Then, when youth completed both the pre- and post-survey, youth only indicated their birthdate on the top of the survey. By doing this, the youth’s name was absent from the actual data provided. In all cases, youth were encouraged to raise their hands if they had questions so that research staff could speak with them.
individually. Youth also were told that they could stop participation in the study at any time.

To assess program strengths and areas for improvement, 10 site observations were conducted throughout the NYSP program by 3 program evaluators. Program evaluators each had at least 3 years of previous experience providing consultation and technical assistance to youth development programs. An observation form was used to guide observations. Once trained in using the observation form, the program evaluators conducted site observations throughout the NYSP program implementation period. Each evaluator introduced themselves at the start of an observational session, and each observation lasted approximately 1 h.

1.4. Instruments

To assess outcomes associated with youth participation in NYSP at OSU, youth participants completed a pre- and post-survey assessing perceptions of social competence, belonging, and sport-specific social competence. Social competence was assessed using Author 1, Author 2, and Author 6’s (2008) 4-item Perceived Social Competence Scale (PSCS; \( \alpha = .81 \)). The internal consistency of the items in this sample ranged from .66 to .74. An example item within the PSCS is “I get along well with others.” Youth responded on a 5-pt likert scale with 1 = Not at all and 5 = Very Much. Belonging was assessed using Anderson-Butcher and Conroy’s (2002) 5-item Belonging Scale (\( \alpha = .93 \)). The internal consistency of the items in this sample ranged from .82 to .85. Example items from the scale include “I am part of the NYSP” and “I feel comfortable with people at the NYSP.” Responses were based on a 4-pt scale with 1 = NO! and 4 = YES! Perceived Sport-Specific Athletic Competence was assessed using an adapted version of the Amorose (2002) Perceived Athletic Competence scale (\( \alpha = .76 \)), with three items assessing competence related to each specific sport offered within the NYSP intervention. In this sample, the internal consistency of the items in each scale ranged from .91 to .97. Sample items included “How good do you think you are at (insert sport name)” and “How skilled do you think you are at (insert sport name).” Responses were based on a 5-pt scale with 1 = Not good at all and 5 = Very good. Perceived Athletic Competence was assessed using the average of the Sport-Specific Athletic Competence items (\( \alpha = .88 \) to .92). All scales were determined appropriate for the age range participants in the NYSP Program. The belonging and social competence scales have been utilized with younger populations (ranging from 4 to 16 year olds), and the sport-specific competence scale has been tested in a sample of middle and high school students with a mean age of 12 years old (Anderson-Butcher, Iachini, & Amorose, 2008; Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002; Amorose, 2002).

Site observations were conducted using a modified observation form used in an earlier study in after school programs (Anderson-Butcher, 2010). Descriptive information, such as what activity was happening and how many campers and staff were engaged, was collected on the observation form. Notes were taken throughout in relationship to strengths and areas of improvement around the following topical areas: type of activity, campers’ engagement in the activity, instructional content and pedagogy used, leader behaviors (i.e., providing feedback, using names of campers, etc.), and equipment.

1.5. Analytical approach

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for all demographic and outcome variables in the study. A series of paired mean t-tests were conducted to compare pre- and post-test responses on targeted NYSP outcomes, and correlational analyses examined the relationships among the variables. Data collected via site observations were analyzed by one trained program evaluator. Themes related to overall program strengths and areas for improvement were categorized. A peer reviewer who was familiar with the data reviewed the themes to enhance validity, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). When discrepancies were found, the program evaluator and the peer reviewer would together re-cluster the themes, establishing consistency between thoughts. To further ensure the representativeness of the data, and as recommended by Barker and Pistrang (2005), the resultant themes were also shared with two NYSP program administrators who were not involved in the research. This was done to examine if the emergent themes were consistent with what the program administrators observed in the program during informal checks on program staff and activities. Program administrators confirmed observational findings, thus providing a form of “member checking” to enhance the study validity.

2. Results

Program evaluation findings document key outcomes associated with participation in NYSP, as well as note various strengths and areas of improvement for the program.

2.1. Purpose one: key outcomes from participation

Basic descriptive statistics suggest that youth have relatively high perceptions of social competence, athletic competence, and belonging (Table 1). Results demonstrated significant increases in participants’ perceptions of overall athletic competence (\( t (138) = 4.15; p < .01 \)) and competence in volleyball (\( t (173) = 2.36; p < .05 \)), swimming (\( t (170) = 2.36; p < .05 \)), aerobics (\( t (169) = 4.20; p < .01 \)), and whiffleball (\( t (165) = 6.63; p < .01 \)). Participants’ perceptions of social competence (\( t (190) = .23; p = .82 \)), belonging (\( t (191) = 1.02; p = .31 \)), and competence in football (\( t (176) = 1.29; p = .20 \)), track and field (\( t (172) = .92; p = .36 \)), and basketball (\( t (172) = .79; p = .43 \)) increased over the course of camp, though

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Pre-test mean (SD)</th>
<th>Post-test mean (SD)</th>
<th>T-test</th>
<th>p value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.73 (.73)</td>
<td>3.74 (.78)</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>3.37 (.54)</td>
<td>3.41 (.52)</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volleyball competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.41 (.93)</td>
<td>3.56 (1.01)</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.91 (1.13)</td>
<td>3.98 (1.14)</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>&lt;.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.90 (1.10)</td>
<td>4.05 (1.08)</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerobics competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.16 (1.19)</td>
<td>3.53 (1.18)</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.52 (1.12)</td>
<td>3.75 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Track and field competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.79 (1.20)</td>
<td>3.86 (1.20)</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>&lt;.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiffleball competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.29 (1.10)</td>
<td>3.92 (1.02)</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>4.16 (.97)</td>
<td>4.21 (1.01)</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic competence</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.70 (.58)</td>
<td>3.87 (.63)</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
these results were not statistically significant. Table 1 presents these data. In addition, significant positive relationships were found among key study variables (see Table 2).

2.2. Purpose two: strengths and areas for improvement

Analyses of the site observation data resulted in the identification of several key areas of strength and areas for improvement in NYSP. Specifically, 5 overall areas of programmatic strength were identified. The most common strengths identified through the observations related to the engagement of and interactions among staff and campers. First, the data suggested that many NYSP counselors were able to effectively engage and support youth. This was evidenced during the site observations, as a large percentage of youth were actively involved in the various observed program activities. Additionally, positive interactions were noted between counselors and youth participants. For instance, NYSP counselors would work one-on-one with individual campers, providing individual feedback and encouragement. They also would use campers’ names during their instruction. Furthermore, observational data identified strengths in the implementation of several of the sport activities, especially in soccer and swimming activities. NYSP staff were observed talking about a sport skill, modeling the skill, and then providing youth with opportunities to practice the skill. Two additional strengths were noted, but observed less often by the program evaluators. Positive parent/staff relations were noted during observations at the end of the camp. More specifically, many parents/guardians attended the last day of the NYSP camp, supporting their children in their activities. Additionally, the NYSP parent liaison was observed working collaboratively with parents/guardians. Another documented strength was of the diversity of the staff. NYSP staff included students at the university, as well as community members who were representative of the camper demographics. Please note, demographics were not collected from camp staff, but camp administrative staff indicated that many NYSP staff members worked and lived in the community where NYSP youth participants resided.

Several areas of improvement also emerged from the site observation data. The most common weakness observed within the program related to behavioral management challenges. Staff were observed having difficulty working with youth to resolve peer conflicts. Some observations documented how staff were not consistently enforcing program rules, such as active participation or following directions. Another improvement area emerged around the lack of social skill promotion within the sport activities. While social skills were promoted during the enrichment hour, site observation data indicated that sport leaders and counselors were not reinforcing and discussing the social skills within the sport activities. Most of the instruction and encouragement was focused solely on the sports skill instruction. This was identified as an area of improvement within the overall NYSP strategy.

3. Discussion

Overall, the findings from this program evaluation suggest the promise of OSU’s NYSP. Youth participants’ perceptions of their sport-related competence improved over the course of the camp. Participants’ perceptions of competence in relationship to volleyball, swimming, aerobics, and whiffleball also significantly increased. The findings related to the promotion of athletic competence are important, particularly as research demonstrates the critical role competence serves in promoting youths’ motivation to continue participating in various programs or activities (Amorose, 2007). In particular, self-determination theory suggests that feelings of competence are a fundamental need of individuals, and the more programs can intentionally foster and promote these feelings, the more individuals will want to engage in activity because of their own enjoyment and interest (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Considering the staggering rise in childhood obesity, promoting and fostering this intrinsic form of motivation for participation in sports and physical activity continues to be critical (CDC, 2011; USDHHS, 2010). This is in contrast to youth who are more extrinsically motivated to participate in sport. Youth who are extrinsically motivated oftentimes engage in an activity to satisfy external pressures, such as the request of significant others, or to avoid feelings of guilt (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This less autonomous form of motivation can translate into more sporadic engagement in physical activity, compared to fostering more prolonged engagement. Sport-based youth development programs, such as NYSP, may serve as critical prevention mechanisms toward this end.

Although youth perceptions of social competence and sense of belonging increased over the course of the camp, these changes were not statistically significant. This finding was surprising given the overall goal of the NYSP program, as well as other research suggesting that sport-based programs can promote social competence (Brunelle et al., 2007; Ullrich-French et al., 2012). Site observation data help inform this finding further. It was noted that social skill instruction was limited outside of the enrichment hour, and behavioral management was challenging for some of the program staff. The design of NYSP might need to be strengthened if indeed these social-skill outcomes are desired. For instance, social competence education might be further integrated into all NYSP program components, including both enrichment and sport activities (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012; Theokas, Danish, Hodge, Heke, & Forneris, 2008). In addition, training and professional development for program staff emphasizing both the development of both sport and social skills might further assist with balanced instruction (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2012; Gould & Carson, 2008). Future examination of implementation fidelity of the program also will be important, particularly as it also might help systematically identify further targets for staff professional development and training.

Finally, another study finding documented significant relationships among the key study variables. Specifically, social competence, athletic competence, and belonging all were found
positively and significantly related to each other. This indicates the interconnectedness among these constructs, and how potential improvements in one area could relate to improvements in another. Future research is needed, however, to explore the temporal order in which these are related. For example, do youth need to feel an enhanced sense of belonging before they experience changes in social and athletic competence? Or, as youths’ perceptions of competence increase, do youth feel a greater sense of belonging to the program? Further research and more rigorous statistical analyses would be useful to further understand these dynamics.

3.1. Limitations

These findings must be considered in light of the limitations to the study. Overall, the design of this study lacked quasi-experimental elements such as a comparison group and random assignment. As such, this limits the generalizability of this study. Attrition also was a challenge with over 400 youth originally enrolling in the study, but only 193 completing both pre- and post-test measures. This is due in part to fluctuations in program attendance. Additional strategies will be needed in the future to collect post-test data from youth who are not in attendance on the last 2–3 days of the program. There also was no long-term follow-up with youth participants to demonstrate whether these gains lasted over time. Study scales also were self-report in nature, and had some limitations in terms of reliability. Future studies might consider utilizing additional scales, and collecting data from multiple informants, including both youth and parents/guardians. Additionally, collecting more systematic qualitative data also will be important in the future. Observations were only conducted 10 times throughout the camp period, and the observation form prompted for general observations, as opposed to specific details related to quality. Even though methods were used to enhance validity, results should be interpreted with caution. Future qualitative inquiry should involve random observations and a more detailed observational system that allows for the further distillation of most common and relative importance of strengths and limitations to be noted.

3.2. Lessons learned

Together, the findings of this study provide support for the value and contribution of sport-based youth development programs, and highlight several key lessons for program designers to consider. For example, sport-based youth development programs can help foster and enhance youths’ sport-specific competence. Preparing program staff for their roles in this area is critical, especially through professional development and training. Specifically targeting youth development outcomes, such as social competence and belonging, however, are oftentimes more challenging. Stronger intervention design strategies are needed that intentionally integrate sport and social skills within all programmatic activities. Providing training and support for program staff around behavioral management strategies also might be important to consider. Evidence from this study provides support for these contentions. Additionally, program designers should consider how to strengthen parent/family involvement in these programs. A parent liaison helped facilitate these connections within NYSP, and may be a role others consider establishing within their program designs.

Additionally, lessons also were learned regarding the evaluation of these programs. For example, parental consent forms were distributed at parent events associated with the program. In the future, collecting consent forms more systematically as part of program registration processes might help in terms of ensuring all parents, not just the parents who attended the events, have access to these materials. In turn, this may increase the number of youth participants involved in future studies. In relationship to pre- and post-test implementation, the researchers found that dividing up the time younger participants spent in completing the survey was important. It allowed youth to take their time while completing each question, and reduced the possibility of errors due to fatigue. As mentioned previously, while staffing and resource constraints limited the systematic collection of observation and implementation fidelity data in this study, collecting these measures continues to be important for evaluative efforts, particularly as it can offer insights into changes in targeted program outcomes. Other sport-based youth development programs may consider adopting and implementing these evaluative designs based on the outcomes targeted within their programming.

4. Conclusion

Overall, this study provides additional support for the importance of sport-based youth development programs, such as OSU’s NYSP program. As these programs continue to emerge, and incorporate both social competence and sport-related outcomes within their designs, the findings of this study may be useful to evaluators, program leaders, educators, and others working in the field of sport and positive youth development.

References


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