

DO YOUTH LEARN LIFE SKILLS THROUGH
THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN HIGH SCHOOL
SPORT? A CASE STUDY

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In this study we examined whether and how youth learned life skills through their involvement on a high school soccer team. We collected data from fieldwork and interviews with 12 male student-athletes and the head coach from one team. Results showed that the coach's philosophy involved building relationships and involving student-athletes in decision making. Issues relating to three life skills (initiative, respect, and teamwork/leadership) were identified. Although we observed little direct teaching of these life skills, we saw that players generally were producers of their own experiences that supported the development of these skills.

Key words: ecological systems, positive development

Les auteurs ont cherché à savoir si et comment les jeunes acquièrent certaines compétences de la vie courante en étant membres d'une équipe de soccer au secondaire. Les chercheurs ont colligé des données sur le terrain et interviewé 12 élèves-athlètes de sexe masculin ainsi que l'entraîneur principal d'une équipe. Les résultats indiquent que l'entraîneur avait pour philosophie de favoriser l'établissement de relations et d'impliquer les élèves-athlètes dans les prises de décision. Des problèmes reliés à trois compétences de la vie courante (l'initiative, le respect et l'esprit d'équipe/le leadership) ont été identifiés. Bien que les auteurs aient observé que ces compétences sont peu enseignées comme telles, ils ont constaté que

observé que ces compétences sont peu enseignées comme telles, ils ont constaté que les joueurs étaient les producteurs de leurs propres expériences, qui favorisaient effectivement le développement de ces compétences.

Mots clés : systèmes écologiques, développement positif

The World Health Organization (1999) has suggested that life skills are important for healthy development and preparing adolescents for the future. Sport psychologists have argued that life skills can be taught in combination with athletic skills in sport contexts (Danish & Nellen, 1997). From this perspective, life skills have been defined as the skills that are required to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life (Hodge & Danish, 1999). They can be physical, behavioural, or cognitive, and may be transferable to other life domains (Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005). Furthermore, sport is being viewed on a global level as a vehicle for promoting healthy development (Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, 2006).

Sport-based life skills programs have gathered momentum in the USA since the mid-1990s (e.g., Danish, Nellen, & Owens, 1996; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1995). Danish (2002) created the Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER) program, a sport-based intervention intended to teach youth life skills. Workshops are taught like sport clinics and include sport-specific skills as well as more general life skills. Although there has been little evaluation of the effectiveness of the SUPER program, recently Papacharisis et al. (2005) used a quasi-experimental design to evaluate a modified version of SUPER with Greek children. Children who received the intervention reported higher goal setting, problem solving, positive thinking, and sport skills compared to children in the control group. Another US sport-based life skills intervention program is the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model (Hellison, 2003). This model was developed to instruct teachers and coaches how to teach individual responsibility through sport and other types of physical activities. Case studies depicting the emergence of youth leaders have been reported (Martinek, Schilling, & Hellison, 2006), and the approach is growing in popularity across the USA, but formal evaluation research has been limited. Similar types of

sport-based, life skills intervention programs have been developed in the USA for golf and football (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005), but evaluations of adolescents' learning experiences through these programs have yet to be published. Overall then, a number of sport-based life skills programs have mainly originated in the USA, but few evaluations of the efficacy and effectiveness of these programs have been published. Thus, there is a need for further examinations of what and how youth might learn through sport (Holt & Jones, 2007).

Danish, Forneris, and Wallace (2005) suggested that high-school sport may be an appropriate context for teaching youth life skills in addition to athletic skills while simultaneously contributing to the educational mission of schools. Supportive evidence from studies of US youth have revealed associations between high-school sport participation and higher academic performance, greater likelihood of attending college, and greater autonomy and satisfaction in one's first job (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001), along with higher levels of self-knowledge, emotional regulation, problem solving, goal attainment, team work, and skill development (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). On the other hand, researchers have also associated negative outcomes with sport participation, including increased use of alcohol (Eccles & Barber, 1999, Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003), use of smokeless tobacco (Melnick, Miller, Sabo, Farrell, & Barnes, 2001), and adults modeling inappropriate behaviours (Hansen et al., 2003). Furthermore, it has been suggested that socialization processes in sport may legitimize aggressive action (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). Researchers have questioned the popular view that *sport builds character* (e.g., Fullinwider, 2006; Miracle & Roger Rees, 1994). Based on a recent review of this literature, Morris, Sallybanks, and Willis (2003) concluded that there is a lack of robust evidence for the direct, sustained impact of sport participation on positive developmental outcomes.

To summarize, whereas there is some evidence linking sport participation with positive outcomes, researchers have also shown that sport can produce negative outcomes. In seeking to advance the literature in this area, researchers have called for more investigations that go inside sport contexts to establish whether, what, and how youth learn (Holt & Jones, 2007). Mahoney, Eccles, and Larson (2004) argued that the struc-

ture and context of the activity were important in determining whether participation led to positive or negative outcomes. Furthermore, in a discussion of research on youth involvement in after-school activities, developmental psychologists (Larson et al., 2004) suggested that researchers must assess “what goes on within programs; what youth experience, how development occurs, or what effective youth practitioners do to support development” (p. 541). Similarly, with reference to life skills and school sport, sport psychologists (Danish et al., 2005) suggested that researchers must establish “what sport can teach, how it can be taught, and where it best can be taught” (p. 48). Following these suggestions, the purpose of this study was to examine whether and how youth learned life skills through their involvement on a high school soccer team.

CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT

We approached this study from an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 2001, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The theory is based on four main concepts and dynamic relationships between the concepts (the person-process-context-time model): individual characteristics, proximal process, contextual variables, and the temporally evolving nature of relations between people and different levels of their environment. People interact with several different levels of human ecological systems, ranging from more proximal *microsystems* to more distal *macrosystems*. In the present study, we pursued an in-depth examination of the microsystem of a youth soccer team to understand whether and how youth learned life skills. Microsystems, the most proximal human ecological system, are considered to be the patterned activities, roles, and interpersonal relations a person experiences in a setting (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). A youth sport team can be regarded as a microsystem (García Bengoechea, 2002). Behaviours in microsystems are also indirectly influenced by more distal levels of human ecology, such as macrosystems of public policy, governments, and economic systems. Thus, in addition to specifically examining the microsystem of a youth sport team, we were also interested in some more distal policy influences.

Although it was beyond the scope of the present article to review the

history of the discipline, ecological systems theory represents an important cornerstone of modern developmental science (Lerner, 2005). Indeed, modern conceptualizations of Positive Youth Development (PYD) are historically grounded in an ecological systems perspective. Briefly, proponents of PYD view adolescents as having the potential for positive developmental change, regarding youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be solved (e.g., Lerner, 2005). Thus, researchers can examine how people engage in various contexts to gain a better understanding of how to promote positive development. Two modern conceptions include Lerner and colleagues (2005) 5Cs of PYD (competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion), and Larson and colleagues (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Hansen et al., 2003) "domains of learning experiences" that may be associated with PYD. These domains relate to exploration and identity work, development of initiative, emotional self-regulation, developing peer relationships and knowledge, teamwork and social skills, and acquiring adult networks and social capital. In designing the present study, we were open to the possibility that some of the 5Cs or domains of learning may represent the types of developmental experiences and/or life skills reported by the adolescents we studied.

METHOD

Context and Participants

We purposefully sampled a school with a good reputation for athletics and a coach who was regarded as an effective youth leader. Metro High (a pseudonym) was located in a Canadian city of approximately 1 million residents. Catering to grades 10 to 12, Metro was a large school that provided programs for students from diverse ethnic backgrounds (which are reflected by the demographics reported below). Data were collected from 12 male student-athletes and the head coach of the senior men's soccer team at the school. The average age of the participants was 17.1 years ($SD = 1.00$), and they had an average playing experience of 11.3 years ($SD = 2.1$). Mean self-reported GPA was 78 per cent ($SD = 7.0\%$). The student-athletes self-reported a variety of ethnic/racial backgrounds: Caucasian (4), East Indian (2), Slovakian (1), Italian (1), Japanese (1), Afghanistani (1), Kenyan (1), Moroccan (1). The team head coach

(to whom we assigned the pseudonym *coach*) was a 31 year-old male. He had been a full-time teacher for four years, and held a position with Metro High for two years. The coach had also played soccer at the highest amateur level and possessed several soccer coaching qualifications.

Data Collection

We collected data over the course of a single season, which ran from April to June. The team held two practices and one game per week throughout the season. Research Ethics Board approval was obtained, along with ethical permission from the school board, the school principal, athletics director, head coach, and all participants (and their parents /guardians), who provided signed informed consent.

Fieldwork. This study was based on an ethnographic approach (Wolcott, 1994). Two researchers engaged in fieldwork. The lead fieldworker was a 33 year-old Caucasian male who had been a university and high performance soccer player and coach. He attended training sessions, occasionally helped the coach to organize drills (e.g., putting out the pylons), and generally helped out without specifically coaching the team. He stood with the coach during games and sometimes acted as a sounding board for the coach's ideas. The lead researcher had no involvement in team selection and did not make any strategic decisions. But, whereas the lead researcher was not formally a team coach, it was likely that he became viewed by the student-athletes as a full participant in the setting, and was probably regarded more as an assistant coach than a researcher per se.

The co-fieldworker was a 22 year-old Caucasian female who had received training in ethnography, observation, and interviewing. She attended training sessions and games, but she had fewer direct interactions with the student-athletes and coach than the lead researcher. Rather, she took a back-seat and her main role involved making notes about salient interactions among team members and specific incidents that occurred, and later conducting the interviews. Thus, whereas the lead researcher was more of a participant-observer (an insider) the co-researcher was more of a non-participant observer (an outsider), which helped to balance each researcher's individual biases and maintain the

type of analytic distance often associated with realist ethnographic accounts (Holt & Sparkes, 2001).

In total the researchers attended 10 practices and 10 games during the season, representing approximately 60 hours of direct observation. Information obtained during fieldwork included notes from direct observations, informal and formal conversations, and documents (i.e., national, provincial, and school policy documents). All data were recorded in a fieldwork log. Notes were initially made in notebooks immediately following games and practices, and the co-researcher made notes during games. After each game or practice the fieldworkers discussed their initial interpretations, then recorded fuller notes (electronically using laptop computers) the following morning.

As Wolcott (1999) explained, the observation process initially involves taking a broad look at everything before taking a closer look at some things. In the present study, the process initially involved describing all aspects of the situation (including diagrams of the physical layout of school, soccer fields, signs, profiles of each player, and descriptions of team interactions) before more closely exploring certain issues relating to the main research questions (i.e., specific incidents that appeared to be related to learning life skills). We focused on the coach's behaviours during practices and games as well as interactions between the coach and the student-athletes and among the student-athletes themselves. These data were useful for identifying psychosocial processes, interpersonal interactions, and participants' behaviours in detail over time (Wolcott, 1994).

Interviews. The co-fieldworker completed formal interviews during a two-week period at the end of the season. The interviews, lasting between 30 minutes and one hour, were audio-recorded. After completing a brief demographic questionnaire, participants were read the following explanation (based on Hodge & Danish, 1999):

We want to know about life skills you learned through sport. Life skills are the skills that are required to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life. They can be physical (e.g., taking the right posture), behavioural (e.g., communicating effectively), cognitive (e.g., making effective decisions), social (e.g., teamwork), or emotional (e.g., coping with anxiety). The life skills you learned may be different to the examples we have provided. There are no right or

wrong answers. We are interested in your own experiences. (directions for interview protocol)

They were then asked a series of questions about the life skills they learned through their involvement on the team (e.g., "What life skills have you learned through your involvement on this team?" "How have you learned these skills?" "Do these skills transfer to other areas of your life?"). These questions were modified for the interviews with the coach.

Data Analysis

The original interviewer transcribed interview tapes verbatim, assigning each participant a code (P1 through P12). Data were analyzed using the *Description-Analysis-Interpretation* approach described by Wolcott (1994). Qualitative methodologists (e.g., Patton, 2002) argue that analysis normally involves a mixture of induction and deduction, and it is naive to assume that pure induction is possible because every study is guided by certain concepts. In the present study we were neither purely inductive nor purely deductive – rather, we were guided by certain principles (i.e., the work of Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2005), but sought to be sensitive to unanticipated issues that arose from conducting research in a naturally occurring setting.

According to Wolcott (1994), *Description* addresses the question "What is going on here?" and it provides the foundation for the subsequent analyses. To obtain a complete description of the life skills reported during the interviews, we used content analysis to understand these data according to the steps provided by Tesch (1990, pp. 142-145). Once these themes had been identified, we created a data matrix to summarize the data and facilitate the comparison and further analysis of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Analysis involves the identification of essential features and patterned regularities in the data and the systematic explication of interrelationships among them. Analysis involves answering the question: "How do things work in this setting?" Interpretation involves asking questions about the meaning and context of the data. Whereas analysis is concerned with specific features and exploration of the data transformation process, interpretation is how we construed the transformed data. The key question during the interpretation was: *What does it all mean?*

Trustworthiness

A typical concern in this type of research is that the fieldworkers' entrance into a sub-culture may influence participants in an unanticipated manner (Patton, 2002). This problem made it important that we conduct the research in a responsive and critically reflective manner. Accordingly, both fieldworkers maintained reflexive journals and regularly de-briefed with each other to help monitor how our personal biases may have been influencing the research process (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). The triangulation of data sources (i.e., student-athletes' and the coach's perspectives) and data collection techniques (i.e., observation and interview) helped to establish the trustworthiness of the analysis and findings (Patton, 2002). An on-going member-checking process with the head coach was also completed. During these member-checking discussions the lead investigator discussed his interpretations and understanding of the data with the coach throughout the study (including at least eight specific conversations that were recorded in the fieldwork log). The head coach also received a full, written copy of the results, which he discussed with the lead researcher. These member-checking interviews helped establish the accuracy of our interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

We produced a realist account of our findings (Sparkes, 2002). Accordingly, following Holt and Sparkes (2001), readers are invited to ask some of the following questions of a text: Is enough evidence presented to enable the reader to judge the researchers' interpretations? Are interpretations made in a fair and balanced manner? Does the account represent a coherent and meaningful picture about participating on the team? Do the findings of the study meaningfully connect to previous research and theory?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Framing our findings from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), we begin with more distal issues before discussing more proximal issues. Accordingly, we first present policies related to school athletics on a national, provincial, and school-level. We then describe the coach's philosophy and some salient aspects of his coaching approach. Finally, we present data relating to three life skills (initiative, respect, and team-

work), and discuss the extent to which these skills were learned through soccer and may have transferred to other life domains.

Athletics Policies

Documents obtained during fieldwork revealed that high school sport in Canada is promoted as an extension of the classroom. At a national level, the Canadian School Sport Federation (n. d.) has embedded values such as friendly relationships, good sportsmanship, citizenship, cross-cultural understanding, and respect as part of their *Code of Ethics* for all members of a school community involved with school sport. Provincial school sport organizations reflect similar values. For example, the Alberta Schools' Athletic Association (ASAA, 2006-2007), a non-profit voluntary organization governing high school sport in the province, promotes the following mission statement: "To advocate involvement in school sport as an integral part of education and to provide governance of interschool sport activities for high school students through fair play and equal opportunity" (n. p.) Some of the ASAA's specific objectives include maintaining good sportsmanship, integrity, and goodwill within and between high schools participating in interschool athletics, and promoting awareness among students that the primary aim of school is education, but athletics provide significant physical, social, cultural, and emotional values. Beyond this rhetoric, it seemed that the main function of the ASAA was to organize provincial championships for various sports (which was actually the reason why the organization was first established in 1956).

The athletics program at Metro High was consistent with these national and provincial policies. The mission of the Metro High Athletics program (which will be referred to as 'the Cougars') was to provide opportunities for student-athletes to learn life skills and become responsible citizens. Some of these life skills included respect, responsibility, and integrity.

Our fieldwork showed that these character virtues were communicated through the semiotic system rather than through direct teaching. The semiotic system, part of a microsystem, represents people's interactions with the world of symbols and language (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). At Metro High, a wall of the school gym adjacent to the

soccer team room and visible from the main hallway was covered with large signs depicting the Cougar character virtues. These virtues included honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, and integrity. Student-athletes would see these signs every day. Additionally, the athletics handbook was available to the students through the school website. We did not, however, observe any examples when these character virtues or the mission statement were verbalized to the student-athletes. The coach admitted that he was aware of the virtues but did not directly seek to reinforce them on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, the last interview question asked of the student-athletes was "Can you list the Cougar character virtues?" Although all the student-athletes were able to recall a couple of the virtues, only one was able to list all of them.

Another policy issue was that the coach could enforce a variety of measures if student-athletes were performing poorly in school. For example, if student-athletes' marks were poor they could be placed on a probationary period, which initially involved having their class attendance recorded. If their academic performance did not improve, and/or their attendance was unsatisfactory, they could be suspended from the school team. Although no one was suspended for poor grades, one student was suspended during the season for one game because the coach learned he had been skipping classes. The student in question had a very high GPA, and the coach had been contacted by another teacher about the student's erratic attendance. The athlete was told that if he stopped skipping classes he could play soccer again. The coach told the researchers that this was an unwritten policy, which was not employed uniformly across the school or other local high schools (fieldwork log, May 20). Thus, sport participation was used as an indirect means of controlling students' academic achievement.

Coach's Philosophy and Approach

The coach's general philosophy was that "[Metro] is considered a sports school where excellence in athletics is at the core of the school's reputation. . . . My main focus is to have the players appreciate that they are part of a tradition of excellence and that they do their best to represent that tradition." In addition to his performance-orientation, Coach also believed that:

. . . soccer itself can teach many things. I tend to talk about the tools that we are given to complete tasks and I often refer to elements of adversity. My hope is that students can [get] better at accepting new challenges even if failure is a possible outcome. I want them to adopt an attitude of perseverance. Ultimately it goes back to a little quote by Victor Frankl [coach then read the following quotation]: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” I do believe that if the freedom to choose [one’s attitude] is still there then a chance to fight and overcome still exists. (Coach’s interview)

The coach’s philosophy played out in soccer by his telling student-athletes that, although they could not change the situation (e.g., the referee’s call), they could change their attitude in that situation. He believed that this provided the student-athletes with a sense of freedom.

The first thing we noted about coach’s approach was that he went out of his way to develop relationships with each of the student-athletes on the team. Mostly, this involved interacting with student-athletes before or after games/practices, and (as he told us) during breaks throughout the school day. He would use humor, join in with the student-athletes’ banter, and often ask them about their lives outside of school. In particular, he would talk to student-athletes about their club teams, other coaches, and other student-athletes. Rarely did he talk to student-athletes about their schoolwork. However, we discovered that many of the student-athletes had chosen to take coach’s classes. He thought that this was due, in part, to the fact that they knew him from soccer.

We also paid attention to the behaviours coach displayed during practices and games. We described him as a “quiet sort of coach” who rarely raised his voice to the student-athletes. For practices he arrived early to set up drills and prepared his sessions thoroughly. He began practices by explaining what was going to happen. Although we did not systematically assess this, a feature of his coaching was that he consistently provided performance-contingent feedback. That is, after a player made a mistake, coach would provide corrective information. Coach also demonstrated the same types of behaviours during games. However, during games he was more animated, and he was mindful of this. During an informal conversation, he told the lead researcher that he tried

to make sure that he did not talk too much during games because he did not want to become a distraction to the student-athletes, and he tried to ensure that his comments were helpful rather than “just descriptive” (note from fieldwork log, June 3). Research has shown that coaches who provided more mistake-contingent technical instruction, less general (non-specific feedback), less punishment, and engaged in fewer controlling behaviours had athletes with higher levels of sport enjoyment, perceived competence, and interest in sport participation in the future (Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979). Consequently, we thought that coach displayed many of the characteristics associated with effective youth sport coaches.

Life Skills Associated with Participation on the Team

Initiative. Nine student-athletes (75%) reported behaviours/attitudes that were consistent with the concept of initiative (Dworkin et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2003; Larson, 2000), which involves learning to set realistic goals, learning to manage time, and taking responsibility for oneself. Student-athletes were not directly taught any of these skills in sport. Rather, our data were primarily about how the student-athletes demonstrated personal responsibility. P7 explained how student-athletes had learned to be responsible to adhere to the structure coach created:

You have to get there on time [to games/practices]. You have to be able to be prepared, ready to go. If you can't go you gotta let the coach know what's going on. If he tells you to put up the net you gotta go put up the net, it's your responsibility. If you gotta go pick up the balls it's your responsibility. And being on the team is a responsibility from yourself to the school. (Interview, Student P7)

These responsibilities were markedly different to the student-athletes' experiences with their club teams because all the club teams had several coaches/parents (often including an equipment manager) to take care of such details (fieldwork log entry, based on discussion with P10, May 17). By contrast, parents were rarely involved with the high-school soccer team.

Coach explained that he looked “for input from players, whether it's one on one or with the group. I hope that the way I do things will allow players to ask me questions.” Indeed, in one instance during the early part of the season, the opposition cancelled on the Thursday for a prac-

tice game scheduled for a Friday. Coach informed the student-athletes of the cancellation at the end of practice on the Thursday. This announcement prompted two grade-12 student-athletes to ask if instead of the game the team would have a practice session. Coach responded by saying, "I'll be here if you want me to be here, but it's up to you guys because there is no point running a session for a couple of guys" (fieldnote entry, April 20). At this point the two grade-12 student-athletes took a straw poll of the team and it was agreed that there would be a practice the next day. This example reflected a situation whereby the coach provided an opportunity for the students to show responsibility, but we would argue that he did not specifically teach the students about this life skill (or discuss how it may transfer to other domains).

No student-athletes reported that they learned initiative directly from playing on the soccer team. Rather, it seemed that they expressed initiative through soccer. However, we were unable to establish just how, why, and where the student-athletes did learn about initiative. We speculated that the idea of taking personal responsibility and working hard to achieve goals may have been prerequisites for soccer involvement at this level. We also thought that the coach created a structure for youth to display these qualities, rather than specifically teaching these qualities.

Respect. The second main life skill we identified reflected the Lerner et al. (2005) concept of Character, which involves learning respect for societal and cultural rules. However, we did not find examples of student-athletes demonstrating respect in the context of broader society. Rather, they talked about respect in regard to the sub-culture of soccer. Eleven student-athletes (91.7%) reported data consistent with this theme. P11 said that he had learned to "respect other student-athletes. . . . After the game when we go out and shake their hands even if we lost, we still have to shake their hands and be respectful." Interestingly, this behavioural manifestation of showing respect after games (i.e., shaking hands) has been a problem in some Canadian high-school soccer teams. In the Ottawa area, the athletics board actually banned post-game handshakes after males' games because it was causing too many fights (Egan, 2006).

P8 explained how coach modeled respect:

[H]e never ever like looks down at any other teams. He always shows them

respect He always teaches if like a ref is reffing a game, as poorly as he may be reffing, as poorly as he may be doing, regardless you're always respectful of him and you're never talking back. And the second you make a mistake and you do something that like affects the overall image of [Metro] High on the pitch he'll take you right off no matter who you are. (Interview, P8)

Despite interview data describing the coach modeling respect, our observations revealed some contradictions. During a game (which the Cougars won) against the team which eventually beat them in the city final, the following entry was made in the fieldwork log (May 8):

[Coach] was also getting frustrated, and yelled at the ref a couple of times. He didn't say anything rude. . . , [but] he yelled things like "what is the call?" and he walked about 15 yards down the touchline to ask the ref about an inconsistent yellow card he had just 'not given' for shirt pulling. (Fieldwork log, May 8)

Modeling is a powerful means of transmitting values and attitudes; learning can occur vicariously when adolescents observe models (Bandura, 1986). Thus, rather than the coach directly teaching the student-athletes about respect, he tended to model respectful behaviours. However, because the coach did not consistently demonstrate respect for the referee, the fact that the student-athletes were also inconsistent in this regard is not surprising.

We found that the student-athletes could be punished for failing to demonstrate respect. P6 recalled:

Last year in the City final game I got a yellow card and I got called down by the athletic person here, Ms. H. and she sat me down cause she said she was gonna suspend me from school cause she thought I swore but I explained the situation and she obviously forgave me but at the same time like those little things like that you have to watch when you're a [student]-athlete rather than just a flat out student so I mean they are not lenient I guess you could say. (Interview, P6)

Another example of student-athletes being reprimanded for failing to show respect was obtained during a game when one of the Cougars' star players was getting frustrated with the opponent's physical play and the referee's calls. Coach pulled the player to the touchline as play continued and sternly told him to calm down and stop arguing or he would be substituted. It is possible that other student-athletes learned through these examples that they should act with respect. But, we found no evid-

ence to show that respect was directly taught or positively reinforced (e.g., student-athletes being commended for showing respect). Furthermore, we found no evidence to show that respect transferred out of the immediate soccer context. Rather, respect was a policy valued by the school athletic program and students were reprimanded if they did not demonstrate respect in sporting situations.

Teamwork/Leadership. Our third theme related to how student-athletes learned to work together as a team, and learned about leadership and communication (Dworkin et al., 2003; Hansen et al., 2003). This theme also reflected the “C” of Connection (Lerner et al., 2005). Whereas Lerner et al. characterized connection as bidirectional exchanges between the individual and peers, family, school, and community, our data focused more on exchanges between student-athletes rather than connection to wider societal influences. Therefore, for this particular team, connection occurred at the peer level, rather than at wider institutional and community levels.

All 12 student-athletes reported that they had learned about teamwork and leadership through their involvement in the team. P6 said: “I know a lot of my teammates will listen to me so I try to kinda take that on my shoulders a bit and try to lead [and] lend a helping hand.” P12 said,

To make it in life you actually have to cooperate with other people sometimes, like maybe co-workers or like students in your class or whatever cause not everything is individual so helps out . . . in terms of learning to work together as a team. (P6 interview)

In fact, teamwork and leadership were the *only* concepts that student-athletes thought transferred to other areas of their lives. However, rather than the coach directly teaching the student-athletes about teamwork/leadership, they seemed to be producers of their own experiences in this respect (Larson, 2000).

These findings mirror results of a recent survey. Berrett (2006) found that 76.6 per cent of Alberta’s top 100 corporate Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and 80 per cent of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) participated in high school sport. Fifty-four per cent of these individuals reported that their high school sport participation had a significant or extensive effect on their future career development, with teamwork

being the skill that they associated most with high-school sport participation. Teamwork and leadership skills may arise from sport involvement because of the unique demands of team sport. That is, individuals must learn to work together to achieve team and personal goals (cf. Hansen et al., 2003).

One particularly salient aspect of the team we studied was that the student-athletes were drawn from a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds. However, they did not talk about learning to bridge ethnic or racial differences through their involvement on the team. Rather, they talked about developing friendships with younger (or older) students. For example, P10 said,

I think soccer like bonds you . . . I don't think I'd interact a lot of the grade 12s I talk to now, but a lot of them are like more close friends now [because we are on the soccer team]. So it's like we have a common interest and common goal I guess. (P10 interview)

Other qualitative work of adolescents' experiences in ethnically diverse community programs has found that peer interactions provided youth with opportunities to bridge individual differences (Watkins, Larson, & Sullivan, 2007). The fact that we did not obtain data about youth learning to bridge ethnic differences may reflect the idea that it is not the presence of diverse peers in a setting but the conditions under which youth interact that influence their behaviour and attitudes (Hansen et al., 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). That is, the coach did not create conditions that promoted understanding of individual differences.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine whether and how youth learned life skills through their involvement on a high school soccer team. By adopting an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), we were able to categorize data at more distal and proximal levels. Overall, we found that policy issues reflected the importance of student-athletes' learning life skills through their involvement in sport. The coach developed relationships with athletes and sought their input on decision making. We did not find evidence that the student-athletes were directly taught about the life skills that were reported (initiative, respect, and teamwork/leadership). Rather, the structure the coach created provided

opportunities for the students to demonstrate initiative. Students were punished or reprimanded for failing to demonstrate respect. Finally, youth appeared to be producers of their own teamwork/leadership experiences. They thought that only this skill transferred to other domains.

In developing our interpretations of these data, we were cognizant of two important limitations. The first related to the sample being a self-selected group of healthy youth for whom their involvement in soccer worked. There was no drop-out from the team, and the student-athletes had played in previous years. Thus, we may have studied an already resilient group of adolescents because they had been able to graduate to their current position as high school student-athletes. This concern limits the generalizability of any interpretations to contexts beyond similar types of high school soccer teams. Future research that assesses whether youth who dropped out of sport learned any life skills would be an important addition to the literature. Our second concern related to social desirability response bias. That is, the participants obviously liked coach and may have attempted to portray him in a positive light during the interviews. To this end, it was important to have observational data to establish the coherence between the student-athletes' words and their actions.

As Danish et al. (2005) have suggested, nothing magical about school sport will teach adolescents life skills. Rather, how sport programs are structured and delivered is likely to influence adolescents' experiences (Mahoney et al., 2004). The current findings provide some information about how one school sport team was structured and delivered, and how this experience related to students' acquisition of life skills.

We suspect that some policy level claims for the benefits of school sport may be overstated. If school sport programs are truly designed as an extension of the classroom, then it seems that sport programs should embrace direct instruction and curricula designed to teach life skills. To this end, intervention programs like SUPER (Danish, 2002) and TPSR (Hellison, 2003) may provide some useful guidelines. However, further evaluation work is required to establish the efficacy and effectiveness of these interventions (Holt & Jones, 2007). Additionally, our findings about how the coach developed relationships with the student-athletes may

provide useful information for other teachers or coaches.

Strengths of this study were that we examined a single team over the course of its entire season. We were able to assess some aspects of interactions between student-athletes and their context. We were able to provide a description of proximal and distal influences on the student-athletes' involvement in the microsystem of a youth sport team. As such, this study contributes to the literature by looking inside youth sport systems and assessing some characteristics of these systems that could be manipulated to promote PYD. However, adolescents engage in a range of microsystems in addition to school sport, including peers, family, and work. We were unable to show any connections between their involvement in these different contexts. To build on the present study, longer-term evaluations are required, and it is important to establish how sporting involvement fits into the wider social milieu that youth experience. We need to understand more about what adolescents learn from their parents, peers, and through interactions in different contexts. Such studies will enable researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers to obtain a better understanding of the role of high school sport in the lives of adolescents, and to assess if it helps some people become productive members of adult society.

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NOTES

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