Satisfaction and Perceived Benefits for Youth Participating in an MLS-Sponsored Urban Community-Based Soccer Program: A Formative Evaluation Integrating Coach, Player, and Parent Perspectives

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**Introduction**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies (e.g., self-awareness, relationship skills) are predictors of well-being, academic success, and for minimizing problematic behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Among school-aged children, research has suggested that well-implemented programs can teach SEL competencies and life skills (e.g., leadership, 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 only just begun to be applied within the context of sport (Jacobs & Wright, 2014; Wright et al., 2020). As a result, implementation and transfer of learning in SBYD programs designed to promote SEL merit further exploration.

**Purpose**

The specific aims of the study were to assess program satisfaction/perceived benefits and its short-term impact of an after-school soccer program, sponsored by a Major League Soccer organization, on players from their own personal perspective, as well as their coaches and parents.

**Data and Methods**

The present study employed multiple methods to develop a holistic assessment of this after-school sport program. Three stakeholder groups participated in the present study: parents (n=132), teacher/coaches (n=43), and youth players (n=372). The program was offered at 23 different urban, public school sites (located in a large, Midwestern metropolitan city). The mixed-methods design employed integrated data from customized quantitative feedback surveys and open-ended interviews.

**Results**

Findings from the present study found that nearly all parents, coaches, and players reported being satisfied. Specifically, parents believed their children enjoyed the program (97.7%) and that they would recommend the program to other families (98.4%). Similarly, coaches felt that the MLS organization communicated effectively (97.6%), the program was organized (87.8%), and the instructional materials were beneficial (95.1%). In addition to the parents and coaches, the players felt supported (96.8%), motivated (96.2%), and safe (89.5%) in participating in the program. Short-term impact from all three stakeholder groups were also quite positive. For example, coach perception revealed high levels of agreement with items such as student behavior (95%) and student attitudes about themselves (97.5%).

Based on the qualitative feedback from all stakeholder groups, the strongest themes were associated with learning life skills (especially responsibility and teamwork), increases in confidence and self-esteem, and learning to get along with others. Although not anticipated, the physical benefits of the program also emerged from the open-ended responses from all stakeholder groups.

**Discussion**

Overall, the three stakeholder groups associated positive benefits connected for the youth players participating in the after-school soccer program. Additionally, across stakeholder groups, findings indicate this program is successful in
creating an enjoyable, motivating climate with a clear structure in which the youth participants feel safe. Particularly strong findings related to players’ attitudes about themselves, their ability to get along well with others, and learning life lessons were also prevalent within all three stakeholder groups. Both qualitative and quantitative data presented here align with previous findings (Wright et al., 2020). Full quantitative findings, qualitative quotes, and other implications for researchers, youth sport programmers, and community/organizational stakeholders will be discussed.