

Original Research

It's about choice: Evaluating a transformative sport for development program for young racialized girls

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ABSTRACT

Research has identified barriers to sport participation among girls and women from systemically oppressed groups (e.g., Black, Indigenous, low-socioeconomic status). However, relatively little is known about the effectiveness of programs designed to ameliorate or remove those barriers and influence girls' attitudes and behaviors toward participation. To address this complexity and context-specific factors, Marra's theory (2015) suggests exploring participant experiences by focusing on how participants discuss program features related to interdependence, adaptation, and self-direction. Through focus group data collection, 30 participants from under-resourced, urban settings were asked to discuss their experiences within sport-for-development 9-week programs. Several overarching themes framed their experience within this development program. Participants expressed a desire to be consulted on program choices and see their choices come to life within the program (adaptation). Racialized coaching staff were identified as an important element of programming when creating relationships with and between participants, but an element that must be effectively managed (interdependence). Participants identified a need to clearly define role parameters and sufficient training regarding program deliverables related to life skills (self-direction). Findings indicate that program administration should consider investment in preparation, coaching, and incorporating participant feedback into programming to maintain sustainability.

Determinants of Sport Participation for Girls and Women

Recent participation trends among women and girls in sport activities are linked to several socioecological determinants. Key factors in participation are enjoyment (intrapersonal), motivation by peers and playing with friends (interpersonal), and barriers to such enjoyment that hinder the opportunities for girls and women to engage in activities (organizational/environmental) (Eime et al., 2020). At the individual level, enjoyment and overall health and fitness motivate children to participate in sport (Hull et al., 2021; Rowe et al., 2018). However, Eime et al. (2020) posited that perceived and/or actual lack of skills or competency is a common barrier to participation. As girls grow and develop both physically and mentally, many become more self-aware of their competencies and body image, which can pose obstacles to continuing to participate in sport programming (Newland et al., 2020). Moreover, these obstacles to participation become increasingly prominent for girls who identify as members of historically oppressed groups (e.g., Black, LGBTQ+, a person living with a disability) (Trussell et al., 2023).

To address obstacles and attempt to breakdown participation barriers, sport programs have developed across the globe to provide more inclusive opportunities for girls (e.g., Keeping Girls in Sport [Canada], Girls Just Wanna Have Fun (GJWHF) [Canada], Girls Active [United States], Women Leaders in Sport (WLIS) [Australia], and gIRLS [Canada]). These programs are designed to increase and maintain

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participation in sport and affect important outcomes (Bean, Forneris, & Fortier, 2015); however, relatively little is known about the factors for which the program is evaluated and whether program outcomes are achieved related to these factors.

Within Canada, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment Partnership (MLSE) owns and operates professional sport teams in Toronto, Ontario. Under the MLSE umbrella, MLSE LaunchPad (MLSE LP) was developed to create sport participation opportunities for youth within underserved populations of the city. MLSE LP operates out of downtown Toronto, with a leadership staff of four senior members who 1) coordinate the development of programs, 2) hire and train staff and volunteers who deliver the programs, and 3) evaluate the programs (and staff) on an annual basis. Within the development of programs, the senior staff members consistently analyze trends in the local Toronto community to determine which demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) are underserved and would benefit from increased access to sport opportunities. Specifically, one of the main foci of MLSE LP is to develop sport programs for racialized girls. Moreover, the programs are structured around four pillars: “Healthy Body, Healthy Mind, Ready for Work, and Ready for School” (MLSE LP, 2023a). Senior staff develop programs around these features and understand programs must include components of choice, healthy relationships, role models, and physical literacy to be successful in their goal to increase participation. However, to mark success, programs must be evaluated in an effective way (Bean, Kendellen, et al., 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to evaluate the MLSE LP sport for development (SFD) program developed to increase retention for girls in sport marginalized by their racial identity and socioeconomic status (i.e., gIRL).

Determinants of Participation at the Intersection of Race and SES

To understand the effectiveness of a program, it is important to understand the participants who engage with the program and the program itself. The following literature review outlines a summary of research related to sport participants who identify as racialized or experience low socioeconomic status. This review is followed by a summary of the literature pertaining to evaluation of programs designed to target increased participation and application of theory to program evaluation.

In sport, there are certain groups who have been oppressed and excluded from participation in programs. This

oppression is particularly poignant for individuals with low socioeconomic status (SES), and those who identify as Black or Indigenous (Raw, 2020; Stronach & Maxwell, 2020). SFD programming has the capacity to play a substantial part in communities and the social lives of the individuals within them. This form of sport programming offers opportunities to participants to develop physical competency, gain valuable life skills, and connect with peers (Raw, 2020). Despite the positive outcomes associated with sport programming, girls and women still face many barriers to participating in such activities, particularly those with low SES (LaVoi, 2018). SES comprises several indicators of a community or individuals, notably education, income and occupation (Baker, 2014). Intersectionality also occupies a critical role in SES as women and girls can belong to several societal groups. Those living in regional communities and living in poverty can have limited access to sport programming (Raw, 2020). These traditionally oppressed communities are frequently excluded from sport participation, and people with low SES are less likely to be engaged in recreational activities (Eime et al., 2013).

Along this vein, Raw (2020) highlighted the three influences on physical activity among women with low SES: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental. Research has suggested that several intrapersonal and socioecological factors can influence sport participation, including employment status (Casper et al., 2011), level of education (Powers et al., 2020), and income (LaVoi, 2018). Among adolescent girls, perceived lack of competence and self-esteem are also salient to their participation in sport. Girls may feel more self-conscious while engaging in activities, particularly in co-ed programming (Eime et al., 2015). Interpersonal influences include the education level and income of family. Findings from Eime et al.’s (2015) work indicated that increased engagement in sport programming was associated with parental involvement, assistance, and support. More broadly, environmental factors such as the community’s income and access to sporting facilities are critical in girls’ capacity to participate in programming (Casper et al., 2011). Populations experiencing historical and current discrimination face numerous barriers to participating in sport activities. Those with various intersectional identities are disproportionately excluded from sport and physical activity due to sociocultural factors that research has identified as a key future focus (i.e., McGovern, 2021; Raw, 2020).

In addition to those with low SES, individuals who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color frequently experience obstacles to participating in sport (Stronach &

Maxwell, 2020). For instance, many of these individuals who live in low-income communities and attend high-minority schools may not have access to entry-level sporting opportunities and are limited by the increase in pay-to-play sport systems such that they may not have the means to join (McGovern, 2021; Powers et al., 2020). In general, sport has often been considered as a vehicle for confronting racism across various cultures and societies, and SFD programming can assist in mitigating economic barriers (Sherry & Rowe, 2020). However, the intersecting challenges of SES, race, and gender persist as sport opportunities are not as available and accessible to those not from traditionally white, privileged backgrounds (Maxwell & Stronach, 2020).

Significant cultural and institutional constraints limit the access for traditionally oppressed individuals (e.g., Black or Indigenous) as the legacy of colonialization often remains integrated into program design (Burnette et al., 2014), thus limiting these individuals from receiving equitable opportunities. Further, within some under-resourced communities (i.e., religious and/or ethnic minorities), cultural identity is especially salient as characteristics of gender and their relation to sport are deeply intertwined, placing constraints on the degree to which women and girls can participate in physical activities (McGovern, 2021; Sherry & Rowe, 2020). While racialized girls face many of the same barriers that all women face, low-income and multi-generational families also encounter some unique challenges with respect to sport participation. McGovern (2021) highlighted that in many immigrant families, traditional and cultural gender ideologies also impede engagement as young girls may be less encouraged or supported to join sport programs. Thus, the combination of historical oppression and exclusionary social systems lead women and girls with intersectional backgrounds to be even more disadvantaged to engage in sport (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020). Consequently, it is critical that SFD programming continue to address the many institutional constraints that limit sport participation among racialized and historically oppressed communities (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020).

Sport Programs to Address Barriers

Despite the challenges that women and girls from various intersectional backgrounds continue to face, Eime et al. (2020) highlighted recommendations that could reduce barriers and practices that could improve participation. To retain participants, SFD programming should continue to increase social aspects within the design and delivery so that participants may create connections that would improve their attendance levels (Whitley et al., 2019). Similarly, by keeping these friendship groups together within

programming, retention may increase due to participants wanting to continue being active with their peers. Strategies to improve sport participation for historically oppressed groups include prioritizing programming that is community-oriented and involved, increasing the opportunities for role models, and providing safe (and brave) spaces where participants feel comfortable to be themselves (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020).

SFD facilities and programs should also provide women and girls-only sessions to promote inclusivity and a space in which individuals feel confident to participate (Eime et al., 2020). Further, Newland et al. (2020) suggested that to increase the retention of girl participants, sports programs should promote athletic prowess and improve girls' confidence and self-esteem. There is value in reconsidering traditionally co-ed program models as the primary way of including girls in sport and that a "one size fits all" design may not be as effective (Hull et al., 2021). Girl-centered programming can help address the challenges that many girls experience in co-ed activities while also providing a more psychologically and physically safe environment where girls can express their voices, develop their sense of self, and connect with peers and adult staff (LaVoi, 2018). Despite these findings, relatively little is known about the effective structures associated with programs designed to increase girls' participation.

The research exploring the effectiveness of programs and interventions addressing girls' sport participation is limited. Eime et al. (2020) outlined that few studies exist in this space. In the UK, a systematic review reported mostly positive participation outcomes and identified the importance of consulting with girls about the aspects of their sport participation, such as who is a key factor in the enjoyment, the need for role models, attendance behaviors and program design (Allison et al., 2017). Moreover, Veldman et al. (2017) found that girls who participated for the entirety of the nine-week duration of a program experienced a gain in skills and resulted in increased perceived competence. Although specific programming offers many opportunities to girls that may previously have been inaccessible, LaVoi (2018) argued they are not without critique. While these girl-centered sport programs encourage confidence, life skill development, and individual-level empowerment, they can also be strengthened by consulting with families and communities to develop more culturally relevant programming that addresses more complex dimensions of girls' lives (Rauscher & Cooky, 2016). These studies emphasize the significance of continued research in SFD programming's reach to marginalized populations and the efficacy of these activities on participation rates and other program design outcomes (i.e., life skill development).

Evaluating Programs Related to Gender Equity

To serve the purpose of the study and align with the LP program goals of choice, relationships, role modelling, and physical literacy, Marra's (2015) dimensions for evaluating programs related to gender equity were adopted. Specifically, the evaluation of the MLSE LP program goals was defined in relation to adaptation, self-organization, interdependencies, emergence, and embeddedness (Marra, 2015).

Adaptation refers to the diverse complexities that individuals can learn, self-organize, and co-evolve with their social surroundings in non-linear ways (Marra, 2015). Within these complex adaptive systems, an organic social order can emerge from interactions, thus suggesting that progress does not need to be imposed by internal or external pressures. Marra (2015) further suggests that any intervention will always be locked into different social and institutional systems and individuals need to understand how these systems facilitate causal chains. Evaluation approaches utilizing the complexity lens of adaptation lend themselves to exploring how interpersonal relationships and organizational structures are influenced by the context around the program. As highlighted by Kerwin and Leberman (2022), the context where a program exists will alter how the program is delivered and received by participants. As an example, in program evaluation with respect to marginalized communities, it is adopting a critical understanding of racialized norms that need to be addressed for girls to feel welcome in the program.

Self-organization recognizes that individuals and groups need to have the capacity to engage in programming. This dimension promotes understanding and constructive management of environmental systems in local contexts. Patterns of self-organization expose how people are influenced by structures and their capacities to accomplish given tasks (Marra, 2015). Evaluation from this lens is particularly relevant in understanding and observing organizational processes in various contexts. Whitley et al., (2019) outlined that within programs that allow for self-organization, youth are more likely to have enhanced personal relationships with those who run the programming. When making an evaluation an inclusive process, it is important to consider self-organization patterns and structures that offer individuals opportunities to engage with each other. By prioritizing collaborative opportunities in the design framework and/or the evaluation itself, participants may gain agency to share their opinions on the program being assessed with staff or role models with whom they feel comfortable. Further, including staff and those

delivering the program in the evaluation design may also add value as they may offer insights on the types of questions that should be asked, for different age groups, and specific areas of focus.

Interdependencies highlight that multiple individuals contribute to the outcomes that are desired. This dimension is comprised of the processes and social structures through which individuals and groups can interact, exchange information and interpret observations (Marra, 2015). By focusing on social norms and institutional processes, interdependencies can be assessed to determine the operational effectiveness of cooperation. The connections that are produced when creating programs related to gender equity allow organizations to share resources and enhance their capacity to offer quality programs (Kerwin & Leberman, 2022). Marra (2015) outlines the applicability of this dimension in the evaluation concerned with gender equity as it can assist in uncovering the social, political, and socioeconomic processes and imbalances that impose constraints on oppressed groups, such as youth girls and women.

Finally, emergence and embeddedness outline that programs require complex and recursive processes where sustained change (i.e., continued sport engagement) must be continually monitored and evaluated (Marra, 2015). Emergence highlights that existing components in systems can be combined to produce new components and thus, continually change the environment. Similarly, Marra (2015) highlights that it may also lead to change and produce new processes and systems so that institutions and organizations can engage in complexity and cooperation. Programs not only work to change behavior within the systems but also the conditions that made them initially effective. Evaluation of such processes promotes the understanding of how social interaction and engagement within systems can exhibit control over the expected or desired outcomes.

Embeddedness refers to the role of relationships in generating trust and sustaining desired behaviors in the contextual environment. The key piece discussed by Marra (2015) is that individuals choose to cooperate in anticipation of the choices of others and consequently, concrete social interactions and relations are integral in influencing their actions. From this perspective and the research context, it is important to critically explore how gender intersects with other points of identification to ensure that sustained change within a program is feasible.

Accordingly, guided by Marra's (2015) dimensions of complexity related to gender equity as well as MLSE LP's

program goals and strategic focus, four research questions (RQ) guided our evaluation:

RQ₁. How does choice (adaptation, self-organization) within a sport participation program influence girls' attitudes and behaviors towards sport participation?

RQ₂. How do established relationships (interdependencies) within a sport participation program influence girls' attitudes and behaviors towards sport participation?

RQ₃. How do role models (interdependencies) within a sport participation program influence girls' attitudes and behaviors towards sport participation?

RQ₄. How does physical literacy (self-organization) within a sport participation program influence girls' attitudes and behaviors towards sport participation?

METHODOLOGY

The authors sought to evaluate an SFD program developed by MLSE LP senior staff members designed to increase sport retention among young girls who face one or multiple barriers to positive development. To engage in this evaluation, we operationalized a pragmatic approach (Saunders et al., 2012) where program outcomes were the focus of the design, set in a case study (Yin, 2009) to capture the depth of the program elements related to participation and emphasize the importance of this particular case on sport participation for girls facing barriers. Specifically, the study focused on the MLSE LP and their "Girls In Real Life" (gIRL) program. This program and its program components were developed based on an internal MLSE LP, 2023a research and development team strategy that includes a commitment to choice, building relationships, fostering role modelling, and developing physical literacy. The research team was not involved in the development of the program itself; however, the authors were invited to engage in an evaluation of the program as a tool to increase sport participation.

Sampling and Recruitment

The gIRL program consisted of three 9-week cycles of programming designed to increase sport retention in the target population (i.e., underserved girls). Activities aligned with the MLSE LP's high standards of excellence in program design, implementation, and evaluation, which support physical and psychological safety for program participants. The three consecutive 9-week program cycles began in January 2022, with the participants engaging through a new program shaped by direct participant input designed to build social competence through sport, deepen

interpersonal relationships and connectedness to sport, introduce a wide variety of sport activities, and refine fundamental movement skills. Interestingly, the program ran immediately following the lockdowns and reopening due to COVID-19, highlighting back to play protocol.

The gIRL program consisted of participants from the local community recruited through word-of-mouth, targeted outreach in schools, and referrals from agencies serving diverse youth. This program occurred every Monday night during the MLSE LP programming cycles and was delivered by an only women staff (this includes one lead program staff member). The senior staff members developed the program, then hired and trained the staff and volunteers who delivered the program on the ground. One senior staff member was frequently present at the MLSE LP during programming and others checked in with the lead program staff member each week. Many of the staff used to be participants themselves.

We invited all participants in the gIRL program (total population of 37) to be part of the sample population. Based on historical experience at the MLSE LP, we anticipated substantial participation in the evaluation. The opportunity to participate was made available to all girls in the target population as defined above. To ensure participants felt comfortable within the focus group method of collection, a youth administrator research assistant (RA) from MLSE LP joined the RAs from the research institution in the data collection process. The two institution RAs identify as white women and, the MLSE LP RA identifies as a racialized woman and is connected to the racialized girls in the program through her staff position. Further, trained staff sought and obtained informed parental consent for each participant and assent from each participant, guided by the researchers' institutional ethical clearance.

Participants

The MLSE LP serves a multitude of youth facing barriers. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of its members are born outside Canada, 56% have a parent born outside Canada, 87% are racialized, and 35% are Black (MLSE LP, 2023b). Those who utilize the MLSE LP facility face one or multiple intersecting barriers to positive development and experience early life factors that negatively impact their sport trajectories. Variables present at ages 8-10 predict sport dropout. Those who utilize the MLSE LP facility face one or multiple intersecting barriers to positive development and experience early life factors that negatively impact their sport trajectories. Variables present at ages 8-10 predict sport dropout. Social factors such as family dysfunction and parental attitudes also increase the risk of sport dropout

among girls (McGovern, 2021). Facility staff observe these phenomena regularly; girls who attend a 9-week sport program cycle are less likely than boys to register for subsequent cycles. Participation drops off considerably around ages 11-12. Girls are much more likely to leave programming during adolescence than boys with nearly identical demographic features outside of gender.

The staff members who were involved in the case were individuals who were paid or volunteering to help administer the sport program. A few of the paid staff members were labelled as “coaches” and led the activities within the program sessions. All program staff and volunteers were on the court and in program with the girls each week. They were involved in debrief sessions with the lead staff member of their program team and outside of program leads, as well as having limited personal contact with the senior staff members who were responsible for developing the program and requirements.

Data Collection

We collected data to understand Marra’s (2015) five dimensions of complexity related to evaluating the SFD program. In relation to the evaluation, research questions, and themes presented here, we collected focus group and observational data to capture the research concepts and assess the complexities of the factors within the program. Further, we explored the factors in relation to their influence on participation and retention. 23 youth participated across two focus group interviews. The three RAs conducted the focus groups on the last night of the final 9-week cycle, during the scheduled program time. Given the lack of time that parents could provide for youth to be engaged with the program beyond the program hours, it was determined that the focus groups would not be held at multiple time points with smaller groups, but rather with the aid of the three RAs to coordinate questions, responses, and take notes. By including the three RAs, participant engagement was managed, questions were focused and interpreted for clarification, and accurate notes regarding participant actions and attitudes toward the questions were taken.

The first focus group consisted of nine ($n = 9$) youth aged 7-10, labelled as “youth participant.” The younger girls’ program occurred in the first time block between 4:00-6:00pm and a 20-minute focus group was held at the end of this session. The gIRL program for 14 participants aged 11-15 was held between 6:00-8:00pm and we conducted a 25-minute focus group in the latter half of the session. We labelled participants in the gIRL program and those who participated in the second focus group as “gIRL

participant.” Many of the participants in both groups had participated in all three of the 9-week program cycles as well as attended other co-ed program nights at LP. For both youth participant focus groups, the LP staff were in the room to increase comfort levels of participants by including leaders with whom they were familiar.

A third focus group was conducted with all seven of the program leaders after all program sessions and youth participants left the MLSE LP. Within the findings these individuals are labelled as “Staff participant.” Participants in this focus group were both paid staff as well as community volunteers. The duration of this focus group was 25 minutes. This focus group was also held at the end of the 9-week cycle so the staff and volunteers could discuss their experiences throughout the cycle. We amended the focus group guide several times in the weeks prior in consultation with the RAs and MLSE LP senior staff to ensure the questions and language would be appropriate for young ages to understand, and that the separate guide for staff would be relevant. The focus groups explored factors related to complexity of the program, experiences in the program, subsequent sport trajectories, and factors within the program impacting continued participation or dropout, including variety and choice, long-term relationships, positive role models, and physical literacy. We designed the focus groups in such a way that anyone was welcomed to raise their hand to share their thoughts and, if some participants did not feel comfortable, they were not obligated to share.

Additionally, two RAs used reflexive journals and notes throughout the program cycle and discussed these regularly with the research team. These reflexive journals were a way to reflect on the dimensions of Marra’s (2015) framework in relation to what the RAs were observing in each program session. For example, when the RAs identified a volunteer who was able to adapt their activity to the group they were serving, the research team noted this was an example of adaptation that would shape the evaluation. Each reflexive journal entry was reviewed and discussed by the entire research team.

Data Analysis

We analyzed data using NVIVO 12, per Braun and Clarke’s (2019) guidelines. The first step of our analysis was data familiarization, where we dissected focus group data thoroughly (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We engaged in line-by-line coding to highlight important concepts that each participant discussed during the focus groups. Step two involved generating initial codes. Here, we used the MLSE LP’s values and Marra’s (2015) terms of dimensions of

complexity to code in two layered phases. We then grouped codes in the third step of the analysis, and cross referenced the focus group data of program participants and facility staff to ensure consistency and representation among all focus groups within the code groupings. During this step, we linked the coded text to Marra's (2015) dimensions (e.g., self-organization, adaptation) and outlined evaluation criteria for effective and ineffective program parameters. For accuracy, we reviewed preliminary codes as a research team and with the gIRL staff members, and once we were satisfied, we developed names and defining parameters for the themes. The final step of our thematic analysis was to build the analytic narrative and represent the data in a meaningful way (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Throughout the data analysis process, we established trustworthiness and credibility through research team dialogue, which also included the MLSE LP RA who provided intimate perspective of the program. Importantly, the MLSE LP RA and one member of the research team identifies as a person of color. Their perspectives were invaluable in mitigating any bias that may have resulted from the privilege of whiteness (Green et al., 2007), held by three of the other research team members (two RAs and senior researcher). We held several research meetings and engaged in consistent dialogue to debrief each week of observational data collection as well as to discuss themes and pertinent topics throughout the programming cycle. Here, we were challenged by the MLSE LP RA as she brought forth her perspectives to think more critically about the program topics we discussed. For example, the way in which we viewed choice in terms of self-direction was in a positivistic way, but the MLSE LP RA pushed back, outlining that choice was dependent on staff member capacity/limitations in their roles when compared to management. Although choice was seen as important for participants and staff recognized this, they were not always given the tools to self-direct. Our team dialogue was critical to ensure themes were true to the essence of the findings and consistent with the experiences of the RAs while participating in the programming.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There were several concepts that frame the evaluation of the gIRL program developed to increase retention for marginalized girls in sport at MLSE LP. In particular, we deemed the program to be effective in participants identifying their willingness and desire to continue sport participation. Below, we discuss the themes that were generated by exploring how Marra's (2015) elements

appeared in this program as well as how they are essential to creating effective SFD programming that encourages participation retention. The ability to adapt shaped by choice refers to the concept of adaptation, interconnected relations and role modelling which explore the complex interdependencies in LP programming, and self-organizing: the individual role was understood as the capacity of individuals to participate in and contribute to programming.

The Ability to Adapt Shaped by Choice

Based on participants' discussion of their perception of the program, choice became a key pillar to adapt. Using Marra's (2015) theory, adaptation referred to agents who can learn self-organization and co-evolve with their environments where order and progress can emerge naturally from interactions within complex adaptive systems. In response to RQ₁, we found that choice was an important aspect of programming that offered the potential of staff having the opportunity to revamp weekly discussions after engaging with girls' wants and needs in the program. This further included building sport confidence when playing amongst boys, developing life skills that build off each other and implementing suggestions they receive from girls about programming were labelled as adaptation. This was seen through this staff member's response,

...when it comes to creating aspects of a program, it's important to have discussions between the coaches and participants, especially when it comes to those older girls, have discussions surrounding the rules of the program and the content of the program, so we can get a compromise so they aren't just blindly following rules but there's a sense of okay, you have some input into the program into the rule making so it's not just what we want but also what you want. Which kind of gives them some incentive to follow the rules.

Participants viewed having input as an important aspect of programming in both structure and activities. This sentiment is echoed by Hull et al. (2021), that designing and delivering programming is complex and multi-faceted. There is an increased need for choice and the integration of social elements as continued participation is influenced by factors such as fun, friends, and self-efficacy (Hull et al., 2021). Eime et al. (2020) highlighted that choice components have been found to produce strong intervention effects on behaviors for adolescent girls. The staff member's comment above indicates consistency with Allison et al.'s (2017) work that when participants are consulted, they may increasingly engage because they also had a stake in the program design.

After reviewing the transcripts, the staff's acknowledgement of pivoting during program became evident. We interpreted this as actions or outcomes that could be enacted naturally throughout the sessions rather than program leaders adopting a more rigid, structured delivery. This was highlighted in the RA observational and reflexive notes that participants appeared to be most excited for the open-gym and more flexible "free time" point of the program. Girls could decide which activities they wanted to partake in, which often involved activities that were not part of the structured programming, like rock climbing. Additionally, participants in the staff focus group mentioned the value of adapting and pivoting during activities to keep girls engaged. This included incorporating more fun-focused aspects into the sport skill that was being taught such as practicing dribbling and shooting a basketball while playing free throw games. Concomitantly, the gIRL participants also explained their desire for more variety in the sports offered and that MLSE LP focused mainly on basketball. Instead, the girls wanted to have more sporting activities brought in like gymnastics, rugby, and tennis. Flexibility throughout programming promotes organic interaction. Raw (2020) outlined that different social and environmental factors can influence participation for historically oppressed communities. Program structure is particularly salient in this context as focusing on the needs of participants can encourage engagement rather than an extremely rigid design.

Examples of participant adaptation included gIRL participants sharing how they feel about playing sports with boys, how they feel about the life skills taught and how they feel about developing sport skills. For example, one youth participant said, "playing with the boys is really annoying but coming to MLSE and teaching us social competence and other stuff it shows me to never give up." Girls in the program expressed their discontentment when participating with boys on other nights that are not girls-only. Instead, they prefer to have dedicated activities to shift the gendered power dynamics as well as have the opportunities to participate and feel comfortable doing so. Empowerment can be multi-levelled and it is important here to recognize the different ways in which shifts occur, even if they are not explicitly expressed (Seal, 2020). In this context, when dedicated programming is offered, girls feel they can play sports and learn life skills without the fear of gendered power dynamics. For this reason, the gIRL program and the LP dedicating a weekly evening is important because it provides participants with the opportunity to play in a way that they may not get to during co-ed programming throughout the week.

Opportunities to adapt through the program were present in several program features. Some participants, both youth and

staff, were critical of some of the life skills taught. Many youth participants enjoyed discussions on life skill development and its integration throughout programming, but they also identified related elements that would be valuable to include. A core pillar of the life skills discussed within programming included grit. When girls were asked weekly by coaches about grit, the idea of improving your skill set and to keep trying after failing at an activity were discussed. The coaches tried to define grit in a similar way to how the girls described it, but a concrete or formal definition was never given to explain grit (hence answers from girls were repeated every week with no differentiation of scenarios). All participants in the focus groups agreed grit was overly discussed and that repetition negatively impacted both the program and focus of girls during discussions. Moreover, girls and staff members shared thoughts on discussions in programming and revealed the topics they would like to learn about in more depth, such as confidence, social competence, and communication skills. Discussing other community aspects aside from sport was additionally expressed as an interest from a participant, "it's important to learn about other peoples' cultures too" (youth participant).

The commentary that implied the need for further life skill development was also interpreted as learning opportunities for both youth participants and program designers. For example,

maybe not even focusing on one life skill but asking them which life skill they thought they showed that day. So, it's forcing them to remember other skills too, such as social competence or whatever. They have the capacity to remember them, we just have to ask and prioritize it (staff participant).

The programming structure does prioritize life skills and social competencies in which participants may engage in discussions related to them. This is particularly valuable for the population the SFD facility serves as it encourages girls to take the life skills taught in programming into their communities and personal lives. Seal (2020) outlined that unique sessions, such as the gIRL life skill workshops, can facilitate consciousness-raising experiences for participants and promote critical thinking. Therefore, it is worth considering further how life skills and social competencies are built into program design.

Youth participants and staff members developed recommended improvements to highlight ideas within this theme. One improvement noted was,

I think there should be an aspect to every program or a program in itself where people can enroll into or sign up

themselves where we enforce that life skill and really get in-depth in it, how they can show it, and do activities that are centered around showing that life skill (staff participant).

This recommendation focused on having more structured life skill development. Previous studies have discussed the transferring of life skills learned in sport programming to other settings (Whitley et al., 2019). The findings here support the ongoing need for SFD program staff to design and implement curricula with opportunities to practice life skills outside intervention contexts.

Interconnected Relations and Role Modelling

Participants valued dedicated girls' programming on the certain days this was done so they may engage with individuals like them and have opportunities to participate in ways they may not be capable of on other nights when boys attend the SFD facility. To address RQ₂, interdependencies focused on social norms and institutions that can affect actors operating in delimited contexts as well as social groups and organizations in broader environments. The social norms we found included, 1) gender social norms such as how girls engage in sports with boys, 2) the way participants act with female coaches versus male coaches, 3) behavioral differences amongst age groups, and 4) the participants' views of cultural norms.

It is important to note here that the girls in this program may also participate in other co-ed programming, but these findings were discussed in relation to the girl-only programming. A gender behavioral norm that was mentioned by a youth participant was “when you're playing with boys, like playing anything, they don't pass you [the] ball.” Participants collectively agreed that they preferred girls' night compared to other activities with mixed genders. The girls felt that they did not enjoy participating in other programming as much because of the lack of opportunities and interpersonal factors related to gender norms. This is consistent with Eime et al. (2020), as boys can often dominate the activities or games and fail to engage with the girls. This is also problematic as Zarrett et al., (2020) argued that negative experiences with both coaches and other program participants are more likely to cause drop out among girls. These factors additionally lead to a decrease in sport enjoyment for girls (Rowe et al., 2018) thus, dedicated programming has been a way to promote participation for individuals in this community.

We explored the various interdependencies within MLSE LP's gIRL program from several lenses. The first was to understand the relationships among the different levels of

staff and volunteer leaders as they related to direction and support to deliver the programming. These interdependencies often influenced the sports chosen in programming and underscore the power dynamics between coaches. For example, one experience revealed,

...in general, I feel that the dynamic between leads and assistants could be improved. It does show in programming, because people, coaches that are usually taking the lead and they don't allow the assistants to step in and help out, but they do to a minimal (staff participant).

Power dynamics between staff were commonly discussed among those who participated in the focus group. They noted that often, only a few coaches would lead programming, and others would not actively contribute, simply serving as supervisors rather than engaging in the activities. Conversely, some staff and volunteers explained that they wanted to lead activities but were not given the opportunity as one “head” coach did most of the facilitation. It was interesting that this topic was brought up in the discussion as that lead individual was not present on the night of the focus group. This further indicates that there are power relations among the staff that contributes to coaches' capacity to facilitate programming. Literature on the dynamics between SFD programming staff is limited, therefore further attention should focus on how role parameters are developed and how to improve relationships among leaders with respect to program delivery.

Similarly, our sub-theme “connection related to embedded power” related to the topic of power dynamics in which we looked at comments linked to how girls behave with female and male coaches. Power dynamics also referred to hierarchical levels of staff and who could have the most power and authority to implement changes in programming. As stated by a staff participant,

I feel that the guy coaches do have more authority, they use their voices more than us female coaches. So, us as women, we don't have to yell as much on Mondays [gIRL programming]. The guys enforce it [rules] more [on other program nights], and yes, I can see how it can be a weakness for us.

Despite the opportunities for female coaches to have girls-only programming to lead, the residual gender imbalance remains in how participants engage. Thus, further consideration should explore how gender inequity continues to exist within various levels of sport, including resources like training and development for coaches (Eime et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant as coaches have a

significant influence on participant experience and the likelihood of them staying engaged in sport (Zarrett et al., 2020). As such, a greater emphasis should be in the investment of time and resources into strategic coaching education like how to specifically coach girls and unique approaches to girl-centered programming.

Gender influences were prominent in all focus groups and here, we focused on gender norms and the girls' personal experiences in sport. We explored the concept of connection related to gender to highlight challenges that staff have experienced and quotes pertaining to gender differences among sport coaches. For instance, one staff member said that “you see more guys on staff, which means more authority of course,” which emphasized the social roles adopted by coaches during sport programming at the MLSE LP. Another staff member explained,

She [youth participant] doesn't take us seriously and that she used an example of the guy coaches, like they would yell at them [participants] or talk to them. When he speaks to them, they listen because he makes them run suicides, but she can't take us seriously, people who aren't strict but try to be strict.

Some staff members described their perceptions of the difference in how participants responded to them compared to male coaches and that there were discrepancies in behaviors between co-ed and girls-only programming. Many female staff for the gIRL program noted these changes in engagement to which Eime et al. (2020) argued can be a common challenge as male-dominated cultures often perpetuate barriers for women, extending to leaders as well. In this case, the female coaches discussed having difficulty with gaining authority because when participants also attend co-ed programming at MLSE LP, the male coaches are perceived as stricter and more respected. Thus, the embedded social culture in both broader society and within the facility itself poses increased challenges for female staff to facilitate effective programming. Linked to the concept of self-organization (Marra, 2015), in this context, participant experiences involve simultaneously breaking away from norms and perpetuating norms at the same time.

Societal gender norms included boys being more vocal in sports, and how this can discourage females from participating in sports. “I don't like playing because when the boys say that you don't know how to play, I know how to play” (youth participant). Consistent among participants was the frustration of traditional gender norms in which discourse pertains to girls' lack of competence in sport. Female-oriented programming promotes empowerment by

challenging conventional binaries and allows girls to develop skills through inclusive participation (LaVoi, 2018; Seal, 2020). Fostering new perceptions of gender roles and sport can enhance confidence and self-esteem and promote engagement in these safe spaces. Moreover, individuals at the executive level in SFD facilities need to consider how female staff are supported, feel capable to assert their leadership roles and feel confident in their leadership abilities in programming. With these considerations, self-organization (Marra, 2015) could be enhanced and effectiveness within the program may be more closely aligned with pillars of “ready for school, ready for work” (MLSE LP, 2023).

The topic of diversity was included as an interdependency and revealed how girls felt more comfortable with coaches who came from similar backgrounds as them (i.e., being Black), and girls revealed this as an influence for sport participation: “I look up to the Black staff here, 'cause, they're like me, funny and they relate to us” (gIRL participant). Participants expressed the importance of representation and relatability among staff. In SFD programming that services marginalized communities, it is highly valuable to have leaders reflect the backgrounds of participants as it promotes empowerment to see others like them in leadership roles and contributes to building trust from shared understandings and experiences (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020). Race was seen as an influence for many girls in programming as coaches who shared the same ethnicities and race as participants were seen to be more influential on the girls' participation levels (Kraft et al., 2022). The girls indicated they liked having Black staff as they felt included and more comfortable in those settings and labelled them as role models. One youth participant said that she looks up to the Black staff because they are more like her and left her “feeling accepted.” Leaders representing various intersectional backgrounds serve as positive role models for participants (Maxwell & Stronach, 2020).

Self-Organizing: The Individual Role

Everyone involved in the program plays an integral role in the group dynamic and contributes to how the program runs each week. When one key individual such as a participant or coach does not attend, the programming looks incredibly different. Responses analyzed as self-organization referred to items that showed how people interrelate, are influenced by others, and how they can most effectively complete tasks given available resources and contexts (Marra, 2015). This is important because within a program evaluation, if program elements look different with different leaders, this may alter the ability of the program to meet objectives.

Therefore, this inconsistency is important for MLSE LP senior staff to consider. This included positive and negative cases where girls and coaches interrelated due to diversity and age, the influence of role models, girls' behaviors during programming and how repetitive lessons throughout the program cycle influenced disengagement.

The continuous participation was a benefit for participants in some cases, however, repetition was noted as an issue. For example, one gIRL participant indicated,

I mean the life skill, we got like how many months, 6 months? Like once a month we can do it. But when we stop every time like 20 minutes before, just to explain a little thing and giving shoutouts or whatever, it's just taking off our time playing the game we actually enjoy.

The girls would rather keep playing: “shoutouts are good too, you can boost other people's self-esteem and sometimes it can be a little bit annoying because if you have a long day, you have to sit there, and just hear some people talk” (gIRL participant). Embedding life skills into program design is important to both participants and facility management (Whitley et al., 2019). Here, participants noted the value of life skills within programming, but when too repetitive, it would cause disengagement. Continued evaluation on the implementation of such program features is therefore salient to ensure that the program is effectively highlighting those life skills and not causing adverse effects.

In connection, role models were generated as a sub-theme of self-organization, and explored who girls look up to most and how they chose those individuals thus, addressing RQ₃. Focus groups revealed that they look up to their friends, coaches, family members who are high-performing athletes, and other females. One youth participant labelled her friends as important role models, “some of my friends that play sports because, they kind of teach me a lot and it's a role model because they teach me stuff.” Support from peer groups is an important factor to enjoyment and continued participation in physical activity throughout life (Eime et al., 2015; Scheerder et al., 2007). When girls are supported and encouraged by their friends both in programming and outside of the SFD facility context, they may feel more empowered to join activities and continuously participate in them.

Similarly, a gIRL participant stated, “my sister because she plays in the Olympics for Women's Rugby. So, I just think she is a role model.” In both focus groups, the social norm of high-performance athletes being seen as role models was discussed and linked to sport development.

I look up to my brother because he plays soccer and he's going into the TFC [Toronto Football Club] Academy and like, I want to play for the TFC too and I look up to him and his skills and how he plays (gIRL participant).

Having positive role models is important for participants to continue engaging in sport activities. Participants may also be increasingly motivated if those whom they look up to are family, friends or other peers they feel connected to, including shared backgrounds or social identities (Stronach & Maxwell, 2020).

Sport competency development focused on answering RQ₄, that related to building sport-specific skills and emphasizing the idea of being good at sports (i.e., becoming athletes). Since the girls each had varying sport abilities, there were several references to the idea of fun-focused programming. In addition to skill development, many girls continued to want to play sports as they found them fun, interactive, and helped improve physical and mental health. “I want to continue playing sports when I'm older because, sports are fun, and they keep you active” (gIRL participant). Furthermore, they expressed playing sports as a “fun hobby” (youth participant). Universally, participants agreed that engaging in programming taught them the importance of living healthy lifestyles and expressed their interest in continuing to be physically active as they mature. SFD programming can promote lifelong participation for marginalized populations by providing access and teaching the skills necessary to continue at different life stages (Newland et al., 2020). It is therefore critical that programming offers enjoyable activities and teaches participants fundamental skills that they may take into their adult lives (Hull et al., 2021).

In Marra's (2015) terms of self-organization, in which we focused on situations where girls were not actively participating or activities and behaviors that hindered girls' engagement, we created the sub-theme of program disengagement. For example, “when someone's doing something funny, it just, I just end up looking at that instead of paying attention” (gIRL participant). The propensity of literature pertaining to disengagement in girls' sport programming is limited. The majority of research focuses on how to promote participation but lacks the recognition of behavioral aspects that impede engagement in activities. RAs observed disengagement throughout the program cycle and noted that when friends gravitated towards each other during programming, side conversations often occurred which distracted girls from actively participating or contributing to the activity. Here, motivation to participate through participant input in the design of rules and structure could serve as a mechanism to mitigate these behaviors.

Moreover, it is important to consider how and why girls may be disengaging. The structured nature of the program should be considered. The discussion of questions about disengagement was emphasized by staff sharing that,

...a lot of the old, like 13/14 girls aren't engaged, so a lot of the times they'll come in, see what we're doing and if it's boring then they'll leave. So, I feel like even though the gIRL program is 11-14, it's a lot more of the 11-12-year old's, it's only one or two girls that are 13 or 14, so that would be one of the weaknesses (staff participant).

Throughout the focus group, program staff indicated they were aware of girls disengaging but were unsure how to solve this. For instance, it was discussed that as girls got older, they would become less interested in attending programming at LP such that several of the older girls would leave the facility to meet up with friends or older siblings at the mall. As a strategy to attempt to mitigate this behavior, the LP staff tried to offer different types of activities in programming and asked participants what they want to do so that they are less persuaded to leave. This finding is consistent with the literature on the challenges to sport retention among adolescent girls (Newland et al., 2020). As other social factors become prominent in their lives, participants may feel less inclined to attend programming (Sherry & Rowe, 2020). This notion extends the nuances of participation decline or dropout, revealing factors other than previous research has discussed, such as girls losing interest in activities offered because programming does not appeal to their wants or needs (LaVoi, 2018; McGovern, 2021).

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

A major strength of the current study is that it highlights the importance of flexibility and choice within SFD programming to increase participant engagement. Raw (2020) identified that future investigations should focus on the differences and effectiveness between more structured forms of sport compared to leisure activities. We argue that SFD programming centered around recreation ought to embed flexibility within its design so that the enjoyment of participants is at the forefront and thus, promotes participation. Life skill integration is important for programming targeted to racialized youth from under-resourced areas as it encourages participants to practice those competencies outside of the MLSE LP. However, when life skills are too repetitive within programming, the continuous reiteration diminishes their effectiveness. Too much repetition of life skills can also increase behavioral issues within programming and can cause disengagement.

Participants may get bored from the constant discussion of the same topics and not engage. Along this vein, although literature suggests keeping friend groups together in programming to promote engagement, this can also be problematic as peers shared that it can be a distraction to program engagement and can create a divide amongst peers (e.g., bullying). Thus, staff should continue to be actively engaged in activities to mitigate disruptive behaviors and continue to unpack the source of disruptive behavior (e.g., boredom or need to socialize). Additionally, the present study provides deeper insights into reasons for drop-out among adolescent girls in relation to program elements that were problematic within the evaluation frame (e.g., self-organization, adaptation). Previous research has outlined that participation rates decrease significantly among adolescents, but this work extends our knowledge of program evaluation criteria comprehension, which may help explain where program gaps exist in relation to goals. Among participants of this study, contributing factors to disengagement and decline in participation included the lack of interest in program offerings. If participants are not interested in the activities, we need to explore the program features that lead to that disengagement. This was a feature of the program that we noticed and could be a concern for long-term participation if disengagement leads to participant drop out. SFD programming has the opportunity to retain girls at the cusp of dropping out if program evaluation includes participant consultation regarding activities they enjoy most, and those ideas are implemented into programming.

This study does not come without its (de)limitations. First, the present work only focused on one program at one SFD facility: MLSE LP. The findings from this study reflect the experiences of 23 youth and seven staff which may be different from other participants of the MLSE LP, such as girls who attend other co-ed nights but do not participate in girl-only programming or chose not to participate in the research. Similarly, given that this study's participants were youth, obtaining consent presented the limitation of guardians not wishing for their child to participate resulting in missed views from the work. It is also possible that the youth participants did not fully understand the focus group questions and this could have skewed results. Next, during the programming cycle, there was a staff turnover. Given the coaches were a combination of paid staff and volunteers/interns, this turnover was anticipated as volunteers' presence at MLSE LP was dependent on their availability. Some staff were present throughout the entire cycle, however, there were new coaches that were added towards the end which may have influenced participants' attendance or willingness to share their experiences if they were not fully comfortable around those new individuals.

Inconsistencies among the staff may have disrupted the group dynamic and altered potential discussions in the data collection. Along the same vein, group dynamics played an important role in the program. Participants who were unconsciously deemed the natural leaders of the group had a significant influence on the entire group and thus could take over the conversation. This notion is particularly salient during the focus groups as the group dynamics influenced the quality of conversation as there were often influential participants changing the discussion away from the topic questions. It is important to reflect on the role of these influential peers and how their referent power may be leveraged to help engagement in the group (e.g., peer-to-peer mentor).

Thus, this study raises several future directions. It would be valuable to explore community-oriented programming further to gather a deeper understanding of what communities need and tailor specific activities that meet them. Additional exploration focused on female adolescent age groups would also be beneficial to expand research pertaining to sport participation decline and the potential ways to mitigate such dropout rates. Future work should continue to look at how life skills and social competencies are built into SFD programming. If SFD facilities, like MLSE LP, want to bolster their activities, further examining how to effectively integrate and refine life skills and social competencies into program offerings is recommended. We also encourage further research on how organizational values are reflected in staff structures, policies, and practices related to evaluations within program delivery. Finally, it may be valuable to investigate staff group dynamics among SFD facilities. Relationships between staff are important to the overall functioning of programming and thus, understanding the complex dynamics between staff should be considered. Future research should be concerned with how role parameters are defined by both institutions and interpersonal practice, as well as how they are implemented into programming. From a participant-staff perspective, it is critical to explore how roles are built such that if coaches are meant to be role models for participants, they receive adequate resources to perform such a role. Given that staff are from marginalized communities to provide representation for participants of those same communities, these female coaches should have access to training for that leadership position.

CONCLUSION

This study explored a transformative SFD program, gIRL at the MLSE LP, designed to serve youth from historically oppressed groups. Adopting Marra's (2015) theory, the research outlines the presence of several determinants within

programming. Findings suggest that programming created to provide sporting opportunities for girls from under-resourced communities effectively fosters enjoyment, life skill development, and interest in continued participation among these individuals. SFD facilities have the capacity to provide positive and meaningful experiences to their participants if staff are equipped with the necessary tools to deliver such recreational programming. Continued work should focus on program evaluation centered around underserved communities so they may receive equitable resources to provide access to sport participation for youth.

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