

Original Research

A programme evaluation of 'Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future': Making sport relevant to the educational, social, and emotional needs of youth

Meredith A. Whitley¹, William V. Massey², Kelly Farrell¹

¹ Adelphi University, Department of Exercise Science, Health Studies, Physical Education, & Sport Management, USA

² Oregon State University, College of Public Health and Human Science, USA

Corresponding author email: mwhitley@adelphi.edu

ABSTRACT

Community violence negatively impacts the educational, social, and emotional needs of youth, particularly those living in under-resourced communities. Social and environmental influences can help youth develop resilience to this pervasive, destructive cycle of community violence. A particularly effective approach is programming that fosters positive youth development (PYD), which prepares youth to successfully adapt and function in the midst of ongoing stress and adversity such as community violence. This study examined Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future, a sport-based PYD programme empowering middle school youth to engage in their own strength-based, holistic development through sport, with a particular focus on education and career exploration and development. The purpose of this study was to examine connections between participant outcomes and programme implementation of this sport-based PYD programme, which used the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model. This programme was evaluated through multiple methods, including observational field notes, interviews, and written reflections that were analysed with deductive and inductive analysis strategies. Results suggested that meaningful life skills were learned and transferred to other domains. This was accomplished through an intentional programme climate (e.g., youth-centred philosophy, and task-oriented climate), effective leader and mentor strategies (e.g., relationships and engagement), and valuable campus visits.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, community violence remains a major public health problem with causes including insufficient

institutional resources, pervasive substance abuse, firearm access, minimal collective efficacy, social cohesion, and social control.¹ Youth living in under-resourced communities are at high risk of witnessing community violence, which compounds the destructive effects of concentrated poverty.¹ This is concerning, as heightened levels of violence negatively impact the educational, social, and emotional needs of youth. Repetitive exposure to community violence can lead to cognitive impairments, resulting in lower academic achievement and higher rates of school failure.² Exposure to ongoing community violence is also a major risk factor for youth developing social, emotional, and behavioural problems such as internalizing behaviours and psychological problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder).^{2, 3} Additionally, repetitive community violence exposure can lead to the development of externalizing behaviours (e.g., aggression and antisocial behaviour) and eventual violence perpetration,^{4, 5} thereby continuing the cycle of community violence, particularly in under-resourced communities.

To combat this cycle, it is critical to help youth develop resilience, because evidence suggests that social and environmental influences are keys to adaptation and positive development upon exposure to violence.^{6, 7} These social and environmental influences include parental support, mentoring, and local organizations.⁸ Instead of focusing on deficit reduction (e.g., minimizing externalizing behaviours and reducing youth violence), which targets problems with short-term, narrow solutions, scholars recommend a focus on positive youth development (PYD) that addresses youths' long-term, holistic developmental needs.⁹ This prepares youth to successfully adapt and function in the midst of ongoing stress and adversity such as community violence.¹⁰ PYD can

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and should be integrated into the lives of youth at multiple levels, from their parents and other adults to their educational experiences. This includes PYD-based sport and physical activity programmes, which capture the interest, engagement, and motivation youth often bring into sport and physical activity settings,¹¹ while also developing the resilience that allows youth to maximize their educational, social, and emotional development.

The Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model is one of the leading sport and physical activity-based approaches for fostering PYD.¹² Intentional programming facilitates the development of personal and social responsibility, guiding youth through five progressive levels of the TPSR model. These levels and a sample session format are outlined in Table 1.

The TPSR model has been used with a variety of populations (e.g., gang-affiliated youth, girls from low-income families, and refugee youth) and settings (e.g., after-

school, in-school, community-based, and global), with research citing the model's effectiveness.¹³⁻¹⁵ More specifically, Bean and colleagues¹³ found that TPSR was particularly effective due to the inclusion of intentional leadership opportunities for female participants, support for participants' active engagement in various physical activities, and strong communication amongst the leaders. Buckle and Walsh¹⁴ cited the importance of taking a strength-based approach in their programming with gang-affiliated youth, along with developing mutually respectful relationships with the youth and continually challenging their use of newly acquired life skills in other domains. Through programming that created this environment, Buckle and Walsh reported that gang-affiliated youth developed positive cognitive, emotional, social, behavioural, and physical skills, along with increasing their internal assets (e.g., positive identity, self-control, and commitment to learning) and external assets (e.g., empowerment, support, and expectations).

Table 1 – Responsibility Levels and Daily Session Format

Five Responsibility Levels of Hellison's TPSR Model	Daily Session Format for the <i>Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future Programme</i>
<p><u>Level I: Respect</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to control behaviour enough to not interfere with others' right to learn • Right to be included and have cooperative peers • Right to peaceful conflict resolution 	<p><u>Relational Time (5 min)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on rapport building
<p><u>Level II: Effort and Cooperation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-motivation • Exploration of effort and new tasks • Getting along with others 	<p><u>Awareness Talk (6 min)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss goals of the day • Ask participants to lead discussion
<p><u>Level III: Self-Direction</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-task independence • Goal setting progression • Courage to resist peer pressure 	<p><u>Activity (45 min)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group activity stations • Youth participant-led sports and games • Youth participant-led 'check-ins' • Focus on youth participant voice and choice
<p><u>Level IV: Helping Others and Leadership</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring and compassion • Sensitivity and responsiveness • Inner strength 	<p><u>Group Meeting (5 min)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection on day's goals and activities • Reflection on integration into other life domains
<p><u>Level V: Transfer</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try these ideas in other aspects of life • Positive role model for others 	<p><u>Self-Reflection and Mentoring (14 min)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-reflection on youth participant's actions in the session • Individual goal setting for the next session • Individual goal setting for transferring lessons to other domains • Reflection and exploration of future educational and career paths

These are examples of the growing number of sport-based programmes using the TPSR model in under-resourced communities. The need exists, however, for more rigorous evaluation of these programmes,¹⁶ including analyses of programme implementation through multiple methods (e.g., observation, self-report, interviews, and instrumentation), which allows for a more nuanced understanding of the connection between implementation and outcomes.^{17, 18} Importantly, for scholars and practitioners using sport-based PYD programming in the context of persistent community violence, more knowledge is needed regarding how programme structure and implementation can lead to outcomes that affect the educational, social, and emotional needs of youth. A recent integrative review of sport-based PYD literature reveals the following:

...research in this area tends to focus almost entirely on the skills and abilities that are influenced by sport participation, with less information on the characteristics of programmes or settings that influence the process (Coakley, 2011; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). As a result, while there is a wealth of knowledge on the youth development outcomes sport can influence, there is much less on how or why this development occurs (Coalter, 2010a). As noted by Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, and Nols (2013, p. 473), 'this has led researchers to refer to such practices as black or magical boxes, since little is known about the ways programmes are actually working in relation to their claimed but often hard-to-follow outcomes.'^{19, p. 3}

As such, the purpose of this study was to examine connections between participant outcomes and programme implementation of a sport-based PYD programme using the TPSR model in an under-resourced community.

METHODS

The methodological approach for the current study was grounded in community-based participatory research.²⁰ Within this, the authors embraced a philosophical stance of critical subjectivity,²¹ in which knowledge is interdependent and socially constructed. Further, multiple methods and points of data were used in an effort to better understand questions of how the programme was conducted, what the outcomes were, and the connection between programme implementation and outcomes.

Programme Description

The Southern Queens Park Association (SQPA) is a unique human service agency that has served the Southern Queens community in New York City for 40 years. An SQPA partner school that is representative of the population served by the SQPA and the Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future programme has a school wide Title I program, with 76% of the students eligible for free lunch and 5% eligible for reduced price lunch. Additionally, over 99% of students identified as racial or ethnic minorities.²² In regards to environmental risk factors, the police precinct in which this programme was held recorded over 1,500 crime complaints during a three month period about seven major felony offenses (i.e., murder, rape, robbery, felony assault, burglary, grand larceny, and grand larceny of automobile).²³

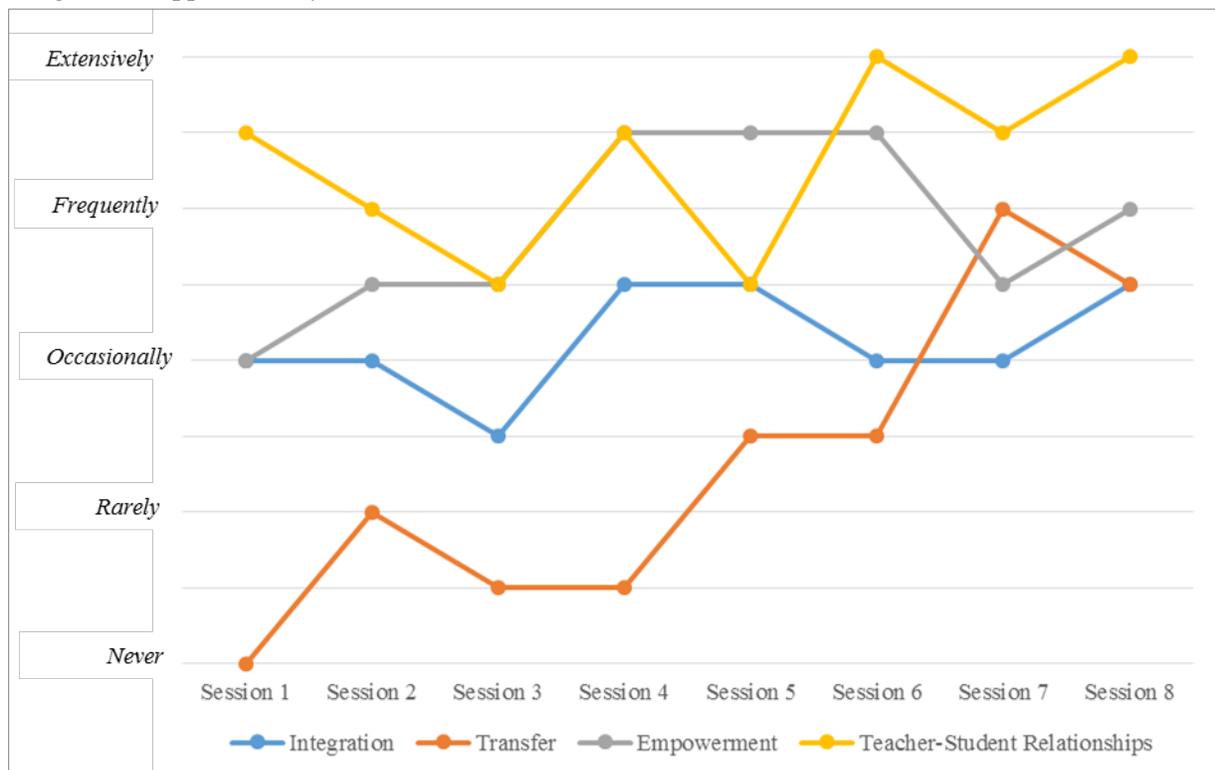
The Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future programme was developed as a collaboration between SQPA and the first author's university (Adelphi University). The TPSR model was used to develop the programme, with specific aims including: (a) empowering youth to take part in their own strength-based, holistic development through sport and physical activity, with a particular focus on the exploration and development of their education and career plans; and (b) introducing youth to higher education through mentoring and on-campus visits. The programme's leadership structure was scaffolded, with programme leaders including the first author, a leader from SQPA, and four university students (including the third author). These university students were concurrently enrolled in a service-learning graduate course entitled, "Youth Development through Sport and Physical Activity", where they learned about sport-based PYD programmes and the TPSR model. Additionally, time was set aside each week for a focused discussion on programme implementation, with further information detailing students' experiences found in an applied article by Whitley and colleagues.²⁴ Leadership meetings were conducted before and after each programme session to assist with programme planning, implementation, and evaluation.

In total, eight programming sessions based on the TPSR model took place across 10 weeks (see Table 1). Each session was video recorded to allow for independent analyses of programme implementation, with an initial welcoming session (not part of the formal programming) video recorded to assuage any potential Hawthorne effect.

The TPSR model is guided by four central themes: (a) integrating the responsibility levels into sport and physical activity, (b) developing strong relationships, (c) empowering participants, and (d) transferring lessons learned into other domains. The application of these themes within each session of Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future are graphed in Figure 1, while Figure 2 presents the use of responsibility-based teaching strategies in each session. In addition to the traditional TPSR session format, a mentoring component was added at the end of every session where programme leaders were matched with one to two participants for focused discussion and reflection. This mentoring component was based on the Kinesiology Career Club, which was designed, implemented, and evaluated by Walsh and colleagues.^{26, 27}

Along with the eight programming sessions, participants also visited Adelphi University during the third and the tenth week of programming. The first visit introduced participants to higher education through a campus tour, attendance and engagement in the graduate-level sport-based PYD class, and dinner in the campus cafeteria. The second campus visit included a culminating event where participants shared their experiences with leaders from SQPA and Adelphi University, an informational meeting with an admissions representative, and a varsity sports event.

Figure 1 – Application of TPSR Model Themes



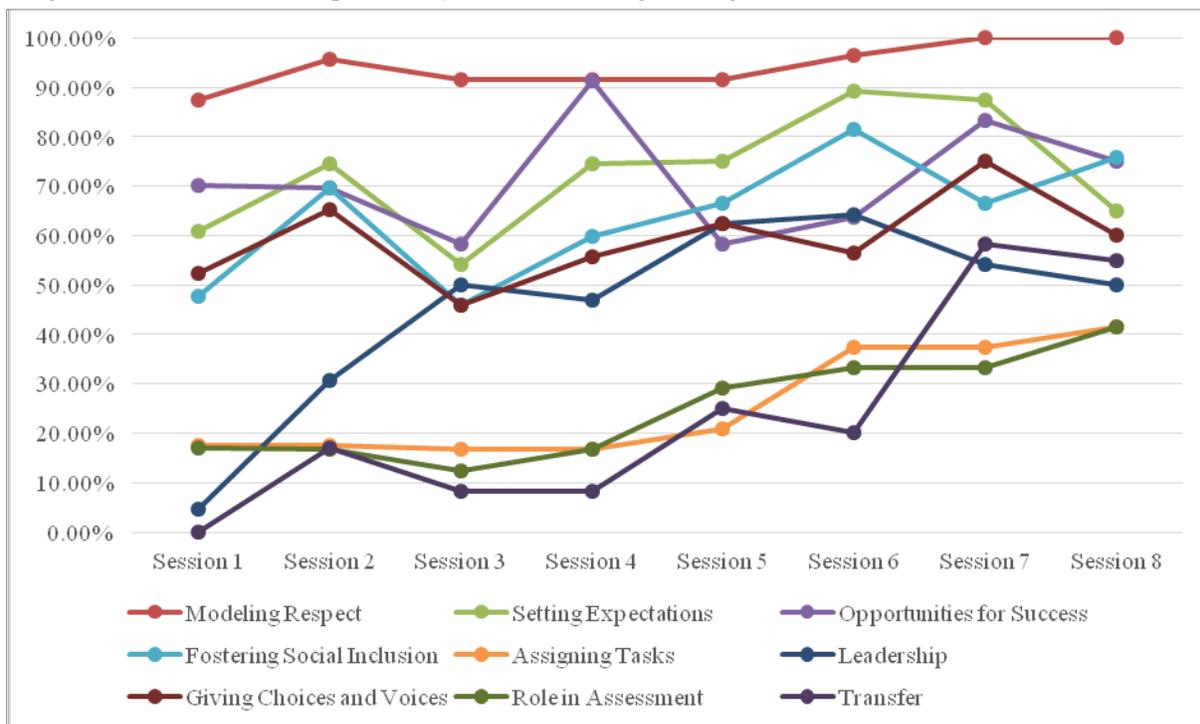
Participants

While 10 youth were recruited and participated in the programme, three did not complete the post-programme measures; therefore, this study had seven participants. There were five males and two females (Age $M = 11.86$, $SD = 0.69$); six identified as African American or Black, and one identified as Latino. All participants attended schools with a majority of students receiving free or reduced price lunch.²⁸ In an effort to provide a comprehensive evaluation that included multiple perspectives and voices, additional data were collected from the programme leaders, with the first author hereafter identified as PL1, the SQPA Programme Leader identified as PL2, and the four university students identified as PL3 to PL6.

Measures

The study measures were selected in response to the call for evaluations of TPSR-based programmes that analyse programme implementation and fidelity to the TPSR model through multiple methods (e.g., observation, self-report, interviews, and documentation), allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the connection between implementation and outcomes.^{17, 18} The methods utilized in studies by Walsh, Veri, and Scobie²⁷ and Wright, Dyson,

Figure 2 – Observable Responsibility-based Teaching Strategies



and Moten²⁵ guided the selection of the measures outlined below.

Documentation

Along with attendance records and basic demographic information, observational field notes were taken during the leadership meetings before and after each programme session. Additionally, participants and programme leaders completed reflection sheets after each programme session and campus visit to encourage reflection and learning.^{26, 27}

Tool for Assessing Responsibility-Based Education (TARE)

The TARE: Observation Instrument, a validated and reliable measure for TPSR programmes,¹⁸ was completed by the second author after viewing every videotaped session. The first author also completed the TARE: Post-Teaching Reflection immediately after each live session.²⁹ These instruments include the following sections: (a) documentation of basic information for a programme session (e.g., programme leader information, youth participant number and gender, and brief overview of session); (b) programme leaders' use of nine responsibility-based strategies connected to the TPSR model (e.g., modelling respect, fostering social interaction, and giving voices and choices); (c) programme leaders' application of

personal and social responsibility themes (e.g., integration and empowerment); (d) youth participants' behaviours related to responsibility (e.g., self-control, effort, and self-direction); and (e) an open comments section. These instruments have been used effectively to document and evaluate programmes in their implementation and fidelity to the TPSR model.³⁰

Interviews and Written Reflections

The first author conducted semi-structured individual interviews with participants after the programme concluded, with topics including: (a) their experiences in the programme (e.g., Describe your experiences as participant in the programme; What do you think were the most/least effective programming strategies? Why?); (b) their relationship with programme leaders, specifically their mentor (e.g., Describe your experience with the university students as programme leaders); (c) ways the programme may have impacted their growth and development (e.g., Did you learn anything from participating in the programme? If so, what and how did you learn this?); and (d) their perceptions about their future (e.g., Do you believe what you learned from the programme will help you in the future? Why or why not? How?). The second author also conducted pre- and post-programme interviews with all programme leaders, with the topics discussed including: (a) the programme leaders' expectations of the programme, (b)

their experiences in the programme, (c) their beliefs about the efficacy of the programme, and (d) their beliefs about the growth and development (or lack thereof) of the participants in the programme. Specific to the final set of questions, these included: (a) Describe your experience with the participants, and (b) Do you believe the participants benefited from the on-campus visits? Please explain why or why not. The first author answered the same pre- and post-programme interview questions as written reflections.

Data Analysis

The observational field notes, reflection sheets, interviews, and written reflections were analysed through deductive and inductive analysis strategies, using both constant comparison and critical reflection.³¹ Through open coding, meaning units were identified and then organized into lower and higher order themes. After each level of analysis, the first and third authors engaged in an iterative consensus process, reviewing and discussing the transcripts when differences arose until consensus occurred.³² The second author served as an external auditor and peer debriefer at each level of analysis.

Additionally, both TARE instruments were analysed separately, beginning with the programme leaders' (combined) use of the teaching strategies associated with the TPSR model. Because the TARE: Observation Instrument required the second author to indicate the presence of nine responsibility-based strategies associated with the TPSR model over five-minute intervals, these data were analysed based on the frequency of each teaching strategy during each session, with percentages calculated for each session (e.g., respect was modelled by the programme leaders 92.86% during the sixth session). The TARE: Post-Teaching Reflection required the first author to assess all teaching strategies after each session through a five-point Likert scale (0 = *Never*, 4 = *Extensively*), with these data converted to percentages (e.g., respect was modelled by the programme leaders 'Extensively' during the sixth session, with a 4 on the Likert scale, which was converted to 100% for that session). The analysis of the remaining subsections of the TARE instruments was less complex, with the rating of personal-social responsibility themes and student responsibility behaviours assessed through five-point Likert scales. The means for all subsections were then computed between the two TARE instruments.

After these analyses were completed, the first and second authors compared the results to identify connections and disparities between the findings. They also carefully reviewed the findings from the observational field notes, reflection sheets, interviews, and written reflections for explanations of the observational data from the TARE instruments. The third author served as an external auditor and peer debriefer for this process.

RESULTS AND SPECIFIC DISCUSSION

While both implementation and outcome variables were evaluated, the overarching focus of the results section is on *how* skills were developed through Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future (e.g., implementation variables) because the connection between programme implementation and participant outcomes is often overlooked.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ By examining implementation and outcome variables concurrently, a more nuanced understanding of sport-based PYD programmes is possible, allowing researchers and practitioners to have a greater impact on the educational, social, and emotional needs of youth through sport-based programming. As such, the following sections contain an overview of the skills learned, transferred, and intended to transfer through the Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future programme (e.g., outcome variables), followed by a discussion of programme implementation that highlights how the programme climate, leader and mentor strategies, and campus visits contributed to these outcomes.

Skills Learned, Skills Transferred, and Intention to Transfer

The specific themes related to skills the participants learned are explored in Table 2, along with participants' intention to transfer these skills into other domains (Level V of the TPSR model). Additionally, Figure 3 represents the holistic rating of participant responsibility observed over the eight sessions, with the growth of participant responsibility demonstrated. Thus, in addition to participants' self-reported outcomes, independent observers also noted positive changes throughout the programme. Given the purpose of the current study, an understanding of how the programme facilitated these changes is necessary. These connections are explored in the following section.

Programme Implementation

In examining programme implementation, the programme climate, leader and mentor strategies, and campus visits were identified as critical features that led to participant outcomes.

Programme Climate

With high fidelity to the TPSR model (see Figures 1 and 2), a programme climate was created that met the needs of the youth and helped facilitate intrinsic motivation towards participation. This was accomplished through TPSR-based strategies that were designed, implemented, and critiqued in an intentional, reflective manner. Intentionality, a hallmark of both TPSR-based and PYD-based sport programmes,^{13, 30, 33, 34} was achieved through: (a) detailed session plans that were critiqued and revised by programme leaders before each programme session, (b) preparatory meetings before each session, and (c) personal and group reflection after each session. Participants were aware of this intentionality, with one participant (P2) highlighting this in her explanation of the awareness talk at the beginning of each session: ‘When we sat down after the warm-ups, we kinda talked about all the words and stuff instead of just rushing into the games.’

Not only were the sessions purposefully designed to teach and/or reinforce specific life skills, but the lessons were purposefully integrated into the activities and games instead of being taught separately. PL3 believed that ‘instilling the life skills...into the activities themselves...worked out pretty well.’ Additionally, P2 explained that ‘instead of [the programme leaders] just talking to us and writing stuff down, you taught a lesson through when we were playing games...so we had fun while we were being taught.’ These results reinforce the need for sport-based PYD programmes to integrate life skill development into the activities and games themselves; it can lead to greater interest and engagement.

Within this intentional approach, programme leaders focused on the participants and their experience in the programme, getting to know participants and designing the programme around their needs and interests. This youth-centred philosophy was recognized by P1, who believed that the programme leaders truly cared about him and wanted to get to know him. In his words, ‘You understand me. The outside world, they don’t understand me. They think I’m just a kid that doesn’t do any work and doesn’t put effort in.’ For P1, this was important because he was new to sport and physical activity, and so he was initially hesitant to take

Figure 3 – Holistic Rating of Participant Responsibility

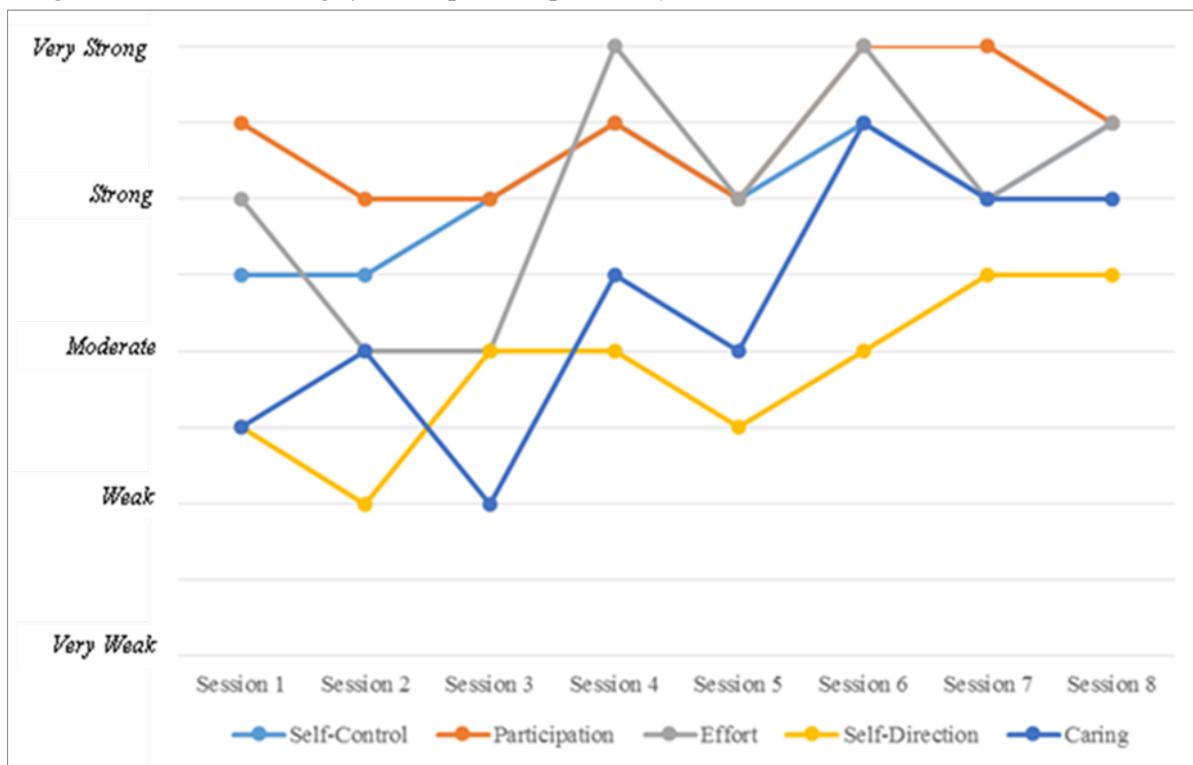


Table 2 – Skills Learned, Skills Transferred, and Intention to Transfer

Higher Order Themes	Lower Order Themes	Skills Learned	Skills Transferred and Intention to Transfer (TPSR Level V)
Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR Levels I & II)	Teamwork Respect Responsibility	P2: 'Now I know what it is to be [part of] a team and so I know if I join a team [in the future], I'll know how to treat them.' PL2: 'They learned how to be a team.' P7: '[The programme] taught me a lesson about being respectful.' PL3: 'The kids were a lot more respectful as the programme went on.'	P6: 'I could help my family more often, take care of my sister and help my mom. This [programme] helped me learn that [responsibility].' P1: '[I already demonstrated responsibility learned through programme] at home, school, in or around the borough.'
Effort (TPSR Level II)	Effort	P1: 'I never put a lot of effort, I'm like five percent or ten percent, but when I was [in the programme], I put like 50 percent.' PL5: '[They] got to learn a lot about how their hard work can pay off.'	P3: 'When I set goals [in future], I push myself to do good, [which I learned in the programme].'
Self-Regulation (TPSR Level III)	Self-Control Self-Direction Goal Setting	P4: 'Now I know how to control myself, I can do anything without getting someone who's telling me that I'm ugly or something. Because of this programme, I can just ignore what they say.'	P3: '[I] didn't set as much goals as often [before this programme], but now I do set goals in school.' P4: 'Now that I know how to control myself, in the future I won't get expelled from school.'
Leadership (TPSR Level IV)	Encouragement Caring for Others Leadership	PL2: '[They] worked on cheering each other on, encouraging each other' P3: 'I learned to push others to do their best.' P7: 'I learned how lead a station. I got to change up the rules.' PL2: 'They learned how to manage groups. They learned how to lead.'	P2: 'Now I know what it is to be...a team and so I know if I join a team, I'll know how to treat them and encourage them.' P6: '[Skills learned will help me when] leading [a] company, taking charge for whatever happens.'
Empowerment	Positive Outlook Courage Self-Belief	PL6: '[One YP] seemed timid in the beginning...but once we introduced the idea of kind of coming up with ideas and games to run the programme, every week he had a suggestion. So he became more talkative and more confident to share his ideas.' PL4: 'One positive aspect definitely for me was just seeing the shy kids or the less skilled kids coming out of their shell.'	P3: '[I learned] to be positive... if I push myself [in the future] to do good and not down myself on anything, I can actually achieve what I need to.'
Increased Physical Activity Interest and Experience	Increased Interest in Playing and Being Active Wider Sport Experience	P1: 'It's a fun programme. It's a programme where you can stay active.' P2: 'We didn't [play] just basketball...we was doing other sports.'	P1: '[I] feel like playing a lot more sports than I used to.' P1: '[Before this programme], I wasn't interested in anything, just the [video] games. But now I'm interested in just going outside.'
Improved Physical Abilities	Improved Basketball Skills Improved Activity and Fitness Levels	P6: 'I'm starting to get a little better at basketball because of the programme.' P3: '[The programme] helped me be fit.'	PL1: 'A few youth were not very active and by the end of the programme, they were very active in the programme and were considering ways to be active in the future outside of the programme.'

part in the programme. This was partially related to his level of inactivity, but it was also related to his ability to understand what was expected of him. He explained how ‘When I’m outside, it usually be I don’t get it, I don’t know it. But when I’m in here, when I say I don’t get it, I don’t know it – they usually show me.’ For P1, the programme leaders were focused on his experience in the programme and his level of understanding for each game and activity, allowing him to try new things that he had not previously tried. This led to increased courage and self-belief (see Table 2), along with an increased interest in the programme over time, as he explained: ‘I started to come to the programme, started to get hyped, and so I would try to start coming to the programme early.’ This is just one example of how programme leaders embraced a youth-centred philosophy promoting growth and change. By investing in the participants, programme leaders helped them feel valued and connected to the programme.

Additionally, the programme was continually adapted to respond to participants’ suggestions and interests. Strategies included listening to the youth voices (cited 10 separate times in the reflection sheets) and creating opportunities for them to make meaningful decisions. PL5 shared how ‘Each kid felt like they had a part in the programme and they had a say in what we were doing.’ This resulted in the participants feeling empowered (see Table 2). For example, during the fifth session, the programme was adapted to include a game requested by participants the previous week, with P1 writing that ‘I am glad that we play the game we told [the programme leaders] last week.’ That session’s debrief meeting field notes highlighted how ‘The kids having a choice in activities [worked well].’ This included leadership opportunities for the participants, with previous research showing a connection between leadership roles for participants in sport-based PYD programmes and learning specific life skills.^{30, 33} Moreover, because the participants were provided with formal leadership opportunities, choice and voice in programming, a role in assessment, and peer teaching opportunities (responsibility-based teaching strategies; see Figure 2), they were more engaged in the learning process (including learning responsibility and leadership skills; see Table 2). Similar findings have been reported in both the sport and physical education literature, as autonomy-supportive environments (i.e., environments that encourage initiative, decision making, choice, and task engagement) are shown to increase participants’ intrinsic motivation.^{35, 36}

Concurrent with autonomy support, a task-oriented climate was established,³⁷ where giving effort and learning new games and skills were reinforced (see Table 2). This was created through responsibility-based teaching strategies of fostering social inclusion, giving choices and voices, and creating opportunities for success (see Figure 2). In doing so, youth engagement increased. PL2 explained: ‘The kids was engaged...they was determined to do it. They was excited to do it.’ The programme leaders also noticed that the participants even gave effort in new games and activities, with P4 explaining how, even ‘if we don’t know how to play a game,’ the programme leaders encouraged us to give ‘effort’ and ‘just try it out.’ This task-oriented climate encouraged less-active participants to become more active within and outside of the programme, while providing a structure that associated their efforts with enhanced feelings of competence. Previous research has demonstrated similar findings. A positive association exists between task-oriented climates and feelings of perceived competence, and those perceived competence and task-oriented climates both independently predict intrinsic motivation.³⁸ Moreover, this inclusive environment also allowed youth to feel safe and comfortable trying new games and activities, learning new sport and life skills, and showing vulnerability in front of their peers. The encouraging nature of this climate led to a sense of belonging amongst the participants, with P2 explaining ‘I have never been on a team’ before, while P7 wrote after the sixth session how ‘It felt good to be part of something.’ This created an opportunity for the participants to become better teammates, which was one of the life skills learned in Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future (see Table 2). Thus, while previous sport-based PYD researchers connected inclusive yet competitive opportunities to positive personal development indicators (e.g., self-esteem, leadership),²⁸ these findings highlight the importance of a task-oriented climate where the focus is on individual effort, learning, collaboration, and development.

Overall, the intentionality and reflection involved in creating the programme climate led to a supportive and task-oriented climate that facilitated participant motivation. The responsibility-based teaching strategies in Figure 2 were critical to achieving this climate, creating space for the participants to develop personal and social responsibility (Figure 3), learn life skills (Table 2), and explore their strengths and future.

Leader and Mentor Strategies

Cultivating strong, meaningful relationships through the responsibility-based teaching strategy of social inclusion and the TPSR theme of teacher-student relationships was critical for the programme leaders. PL1 wrote after the second session ‘We really focused on building relationships, treating them with respect, showing that we care about them as individuals.’ Similarly, P1 explained: ‘I think of [PLs] like family...they understood me.’ Similar to other sport-based PYD programmes,^{13, 15} the cultivation of close, meaningful relationships between programme leaders and participants was critical. This helped participants feel safe and connected to others, which has been shown to influence engagement levels.^{36, 39} This resulted in more diligent efforts towards being respectful to their teammates, controlling their emotions, and encouraging their teammates, as well as a greater interest in playing, being active with their peers, and learning new skills (see Table 2).

These relationships also helped the participants feel safe discussing their strengths, weaknesses, and possible future selves. This was particularly powerful during mentoring time, with P7 learning ‘that you have to keep your grades up in high school in order to go to college’ and P2’s mentor showing ‘me colleges...I want to go to and talk[ing] about goals.’ In terms of exploring their potential career options, P4’s mentor ‘told me all the things that I needed to do to become robotic engineer,’ which was his dream career. P3 realised there were multiple career options, as her mentor ‘helped me research about the Marines, just in case I wanted to go there if I didn’t want to go – or didn’t make it to the WNBA or nothing.’ Mentors also encouraged the participants to consider their fears as well as their hopes in life. Below are quotes that highlight this finding:

PL3: His [P6] fear is that he won't be able to afford college.

PL4: We talked about things that would hurt the chances of going to college and playing professional basketball. P3 came up with all of them...P3 came up with a list of hopes and fears.

PL6: P2 said she was afraid of becoming a janitor. We discussed working hard and excelling in school.

These quotes demonstrate the impact that this focused mentoring time had on the participants’ understanding of their possible educational and career paths, and supported

the development of self-direction and goal setting (see Table 2).

Other leader and mentor strategies included programme leaders’ engagement and investment. In P2’s words:

When we were playing games, I was only expecting the kids to play games but also the [PLs], they also play games and the college students, they played games with us and they also taught us strategies and they gave us a chance.

The participants appreciated the programme leaders’ active engagement and participation in the programme itself. This helped minimize perceived power differentials and facilitated a youth-centred approach where the participants felt empowered to share their ideas, reflect on their experiences, and talk about their lives. Additionally, programme leaders were invested in the programme and the participants, with P7 explaining how meaningful it was that the programme leaders ‘wanted to be here. And they wanted to help us.’

Overall, these leader and mentor strategies helped Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future achieve an environment where meaningful conversations occurred in one-on-one, small group, and team settings. This was a critical component to the programme’s success, as engaging the youth in a way that they felt respected and heard facilitated an adaptable programme that met the participants’ needs, strengths, and interests.⁴⁰

Campus Visits

The two visits to Adelphi University also enhanced understanding of higher education (cited 14 separate times in the reflection sheets), with the participants identifying different components as particularly meaningful (e.g., attending sport events, meeting student-athletes, taking a campus tour, and engaging in a college course). According to PL2, ‘For some, the first on-campus visit was their first time on a college campus, and so I believe it enhanced their understanding of the life of a college student.’ The second campus visit was especially meaningful, with PL4 sharing, ‘College was kinda just this concept we were talking about [in our mentoring time], but I think having the second visit be our last event of the programme definitely made it more concrete.’ PL4 continued by identifying the specific components of the second campus visit that had such an impact: ‘having the admissions rep there, the coach of the

women's team there, some of the players, seeing the game, seeing everything in front of them, I think, really put it all into perspective and made it real.' Here, PL4 identified the connection between the focus on their possible future (e.g., education and career) during mentoring time and the campus visits that made it 'tangible' for participants. P2 highlighted this, sharing, 'I now understand all of the good things that come with college; but also the challenges that come with college and doing the things you want to do.'

These campus visits resulted in an increased interest in attending college for some participants, with P1 sharing how the campus visits 'makes me more interested 'cause it looks like college to me is fun. College actually looked better than middle school, high school, elementary school.' P2 reiterated this in her post-programme interview, explaining, 'I wouldn't know how fun' college was if she did not attend the campus visits.

When we were talking to the players, I knew what you had to do to in order to be on a college team which they said was grades, to keep your grades up and it starts very early... 'cause I thought you start late and then you could like get your A put in, but...they go through your middle school records and high school records.

P2 gained a better understanding of the path to higher education, realising that her grades in middle school and high school would impact her future education plans and her dream of being a college athlete. Not only did the campus visits help participants understand what they must do today in order to pursue higher education, but PL2 also highlighted how it gave 'them a lot to look forward to growing up.'

These campus visits, along with the mentoring time, were maximized because of the foundation of Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future: (a) a youth-centred philosophy; (b) the creation of a task-oriented climate; and (c) the focus on possible and ideal future selves. These foundational components broadened the participants' perspectives on how they can transfer the skills they learned in the programme to other domains (see Table 2), with time reserved for the youth to observe, listen, share, question, reflect, and plan how to use these skills in the future.^{41,42} Participants also appreciated hearing about their mentors' own education and career plans, as well as learning from university admissions representatives, students, student-athletes, professors, administrators, and coaches during

their campus visits. These interactions and relationships reinforced their learning and development. Additionally, the foundational components created safe, supportive spaces for participants to explore and develop potential pathways for their education and careers, with structured, experiential opportunities to learn more about higher education, as well as what steps they need to take to pursue their career plans.²⁶ During the campus visits and mentoring time, the participants were challenged to set goals they may not have considered before, with programme leaders demonstrating their belief in the participants. This positively influenced the participants' belief in themselves and their ability to achieve these goals. Similar to the findings from Whitley, Wright, and Gould,⁴³ many participants did not have dreams and plans related to their educational and career paths, aside from becoming professional athletes, so this programme challenged them to go outside of their comfort zones when setting their education and career goals.⁴³ When they visited Adelphi University's campus, these goals transitioned from conceptual to realistic, with some reflecting on how this made their discussions and planning during the mentoring time 'real.' Thereby, the namesake of the programme – Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future – was actualized through the programme climate, leader and mentor strategies, and campus visits.

Lessons Learned

Along with the positive outcomes of the programme, some negative aspects emerged from the data, highlighting specific areas for improvement. Two participants shared their dissatisfaction with activities, including an interest in playing more basketball, even though other participants appreciated the variety of activities and games. Programme capacity was another concern. Though the programme was originally supposed to be held in a large gym space, it was restricted to a small room in the community centre's main programming space, highlighting the need for an appropriate space for the programme activities. Another area for improvement included the amount of paperwork required, with PL1 sharing how there should be "less paperwork because it's really hard to...keep [the youth participants] engaged." Despite these concerns, however, PL1 understood the meaning associated with these assessments for the quality of programming. In her words:

Honestly, it was a lot of paperwork that go along with it...but it was helpful because the first day when you come and you just throw things out there, people don't really

know who you are or what to expect. So [the assessments] gave us a little background of what we expect as leaders and what we expect from the kids.

This concern indicates a need for a more concise assessment that both collects adequate information for programme evaluation efforts and encourages the youth participants to reflect on the programme and their own personal growth, while still maintaining engagement in the programme.

Implications for Future Practice

By connecting the participant outcomes from Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future with the programme's structure and implementation, the research team gained knowledge about how to affect the educational, social, and emotional needs of youth living in under-resourced communities so often plagued by community violence and concentrated poverty.¹ While research suggests that youth who have been exposed to community violence are at risk for experiencing educational failure and developing social, emotional, and behavioural problems,^{2, 3} the participants in Exploring Our Strengths and Our Future were actively engaged in their educational, social, and emotional development. This was due in part to the task-oriented climate that focused on individual learning and development as well as guided discovery of possible future selves, which helped the participants learn how to regulate their own behaviour (e.g., self-control), set educational and career goals, and understand how to take responsibility for one's actions, be part of a team, and lead others. The participants also learned how to put in effort when faced with challenges, and they felt empowered to take control of their future educational and career paths. Within resiliency research, these skills can be considered promotive and protective factors that help youth develop the resilience needed to maximize their educational, social, and emotional development.^{44, 45}

The findings related to programme implementation (e.g., youth-centred, adaptation, and relationships) can also be considered promotive and protective factors that help youth successfully adapt and function in the midst of ongoing stress and adversity, along with exploring and planning for their future pathways.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ Given these findings, programmes should foster autonomy-supportive environments that encourage youth to take initiative, make decisions, and take on leadership roles. For example, inviting youth to suggest activities, change rules of a game, lead activities, and continuously assess the programme are all factors that can maximize engagement, empowerment, and intrinsic

motivation.^{35, 36} Programmes should also consider adding a mentoring component where youth can build close, meaningful relationships with programme leaders. This helps create a safe, supportive climate in which youth feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly about their lives and their futures, enabling a more nuanced understanding of each participant and their educational, social, and emotional needs and development.

Implications for Future Research

This study is not without limitations, including the immediacy of the evaluation of participant outcomes and a lack of evidence regarding the transfer of life skills learned in the programme. These limitations could be addressed in future research efforts by evaluating multiple programmes and tracking participants through longitudinal study designs, although longitudinal studies with a population such as this one do present challenges. Future research directions could also include observational data in multiple domains and data from parents and teachers, which would enable verification of participants' transfer of life skills. Additionally, the methodology used to complete the TARE was limited to what could be captured on video camera and reviewed post hoc. The researchers were not able to videotape the mentoring time. This created limited results as related to roles in assessment and transfer of skills because mentoring time focused predominantly on participants assessing the programme, assessing their experience and performance, identifying skills that could be transferred to other settings, and discussing their future educational and career options. Therefore, when TARE instruments are being used, additional methods of measurement should assess programme components that cannot be analysed by the TARE instruments. Another limitation of this study is the use of the original TARE: Observation Instrument, as the TARE 2.0 was published after the conclusion of the data collection period.⁴⁷ Using the TARE 2.0 will be a meaningful addition for future sport-based TPSR programmes as they pursue formative and summative evaluations, which will add to the knowledge base for the PYD field.

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Additional Information

For a more detailed programme description, please contact the first author.

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