Association Between Participation in Organized Sports and Positive Youth Development Among Grade School Students

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Abstract

This quantitative study aims to understand the role of organized sports in youth development from a parental perspective. Specifically, it addresses whether grammar school-aged children (Mean Age = 9) who participate in organized sports have higher levels of positive youth development (PYD) compared to those who do not participate or who minimally participate. This study also explores the barriers to participation for those who do not participate. The sample was drawn from the two public grammar schools in Secaucus, N.J. during the 2012-13 academic year.

The major findings of this study do not show a difference in PYD levels based on sports participation. However, the results indicated that youth had a strong interest and high levels of participation in extracurricular activities. The results of this study are consistent with previous research which has found sports participation to be the most common type of activity involvement for children in kindergarten through eighth grade (Theokas, et al., 2008). Barriers, limitations, and implications of the study findings are discussed.
ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZED SPORTS AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AMONG GRADE SCHOOL STUDENTS

A THESIS

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For the degree of Masters of Arts

by

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"We can reach far more people through sport than we can through political or educational programs. In that way, sport is more powerful than politics. We have only just started to use its potential to build up this country. We must continue to do so."
~Nelson Mandela

Introduction

Children may struggle with many aspects of life such as responsibility, self-esteem, social acceptance, and self-confidence. Adolescents deal with a variety of biological, social, emotional, and psychological changes in order to effectively enter the adult world (Holt, 2008). For example, research has found heightened depression levels are common in girls during early and middle adolescence (Zarrett, et al., 2008). The common opinion that adolescents today face more obstacles on the way to adulthood, from time-crunched parents, dangerous substances and behaviors, overburdened schools and a more demanding job market, has fed into the idea that adolescents should no longer be on their own during the out-of-school hours (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

However, instead of being seen as problems to manage, youth can be seen as resources to be developed (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). For example, organized activities may give youth a healthy way to spend their leisure time. The “organized” aspect of activities teaches participants the importance of characteristics such as teamwork, trust, and reliability (e.g., Mueller, Lewin-Bizan, & Urban, 2011; Theokas, 2009). In general, positive behavioral outcomes are measured as the absence of negative behaviors, but efforts are ongoing to develop and test measures of healthy adolescent development (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). “All young people have problems in need of fixing, as well as the capability to contribute and solve problems. Research suggests that the best way to help young people solve problems is to involve them as problem solvers;
high-risk youth are typically those most in need of opportunities to participate and take action" (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003, p. 25). Lack of problems is not the same as positive development. Removing a negative does not imply it is replaced with a positive. All children are in need of healthy positive development, not just the “problem child.”

Research has found that children who participate in organized activities show signs of positive youth development more often than children who do not participate (Lerner, 2005; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). Sports are an activity that provide all youth with opportunities for positive development. Sport and other organized activity participation provides an environment for adolescents to develop their identities and explore their emotions (Hoh & Sehn, 2008). Sport is not a monolithic entity, however. “It is its diversity that attracts a wide range of participants and sustains their involvement over time” (Theokas, 2009, p. 304). Athletes may learn to regulate emotions through sport because it is a setting in which they must learn to deal with stress in order to be successful performers (Holt & Jones, 2008). The foundation for a successful or healthy adulthood begins during childhood and adolescence (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).
Positive Youth Development

The positive youth development (PYD) perspective emerged in the 1990s (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004) and is consistent with developmental system theories that stress the relationship between the developing individual and the environment, as well as the capability for change, which is essential in human development (Lerner, 2005). The developmental systems theoretical model of PYD stresses that all young people have the potential for positive, successful, and healthy development and that this potential is actualized when the strengths of youth are aligned with interpersonal and institutional supports for healthy development in adolescents’ ecologies (Lerner, 2005; Vierimaa, Erickson, & Gilbert, 2012).

Studies suggest that extracurricular and structured out-of-school-time (OST) activities are powerful assets critical in the positive development of youth (Urban, Lewin-Bizan, & Lerner, 2010; Lerner, 2005). Youth development settings are generally focused on providing safe and structured environments, positive mentors, and positive overarching goals (Zarrett, et al., 2009). Programmatic experiences intended to foster positive development among youth are a potentially powerful basis for support of PYD (Mahoney, et al., 2009). Variations in social capital, peer group influences, social and personal identity formation, and skill mastery result from the different combinations of activities in which youth participate (Zarrett, et al., 2009). PYD does not happen overnight; time is needed to develop relationships and to engage in development-enhancing activities/experiences (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). In general, more
participation in organized activities is usually better than little or no participation (Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006).

**Positive youth development frameworks.** There are several different perspectives revolving around PYD, and all frameworks tackle youth development issues. For example, Roth (2000) suggested five areas that describe PYD, Eccles and Gootman (2002) hypothesized that PYD programs provide youth with eight important assets, The Search Institute (1990) released 40 Developmental Assets that promote PYD, and a majority of PYD researchers base their work around Lerner’s 5 C’s concept.

Roth (2000) explains that PYD encompasses five constructs: (1) competence in academic, social, and vocational areas; (2) confidence; (3) connection to family, community, and peers; (4) character; and (5) caring and compassion (Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005). Participation in youth programs is a crucial asset connected to positive development among contemporary American youth (Lerner, et al., 2005).

Eccles and Gootman (2002) stated that programs that promote PYD provide youth with (a) physical and psychological safety, (b) appropriate structure, (c) supportive relationships, (d) opportunities to belong, (e) positive social norms, (f) support for efficacy and mattering, (g) opportunities for skill building, and (h) integration of family, school, and community efforts. One type of asset that can potentially enhance development is participation in extracurricular activities.

The Search Institute proposes a related framework. In 1990, the Search Institute released a framework of 40 Developmental Assets that identifies a set of skills, experiences, relationships, and behaviors that enable young children to develop into successful and contributing adults, which has become the most frequently cited and...
widely utilized in the world over the past two decades (Search Institute, 2014a). The Developmental Assets identify building blocks of healthy development that help young children grow up healthy, caring, and responsible (Search Institute, 2014b).

The forty assets are broken down into internal and external assets. The twenty external assets wrap youth with familial and extra-familial networks that provide support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These external assets describe the necessary ingredients in youth's environment for positive development. The twenty internal assets serve to nurture, within individuals, positive commitments, values and identities, as well as social competencies (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The internal assets illustrate personal qualities that facilitate positive development. The Search Institute has collected data from over 4 million children and youth from all backgrounds and situations resulting in the claim that “the more developmental assets young people acquire, the better their chances of succeeding in school and becoming happy, healthy, and contributing members of their communities and society” (Search Institute, 2014a, p.1).

The majority of research that relates to PYD revolves around Lerner's conceptualization of the 5 C's of PYD. Lerner’s model of the 5 C’s built on Little’s original model of 4 C’s, which includes competence, confidence, connection, and character (Vierimaa, et al., 2012), Learner added caring/compassion as an additional fifth C. He provided the first empirical evidence for the existence of these five C’s and for their convergence on a latent variable that could be labeled PYD (Lerner, 2005). The existence of the 5 C’s and PYD were empirically studied in the longitudinal 4-H Study of PYD (Lerner, 2005).
The 4-H Study of PYD tests the 5 C’s using a longitudinal design. The study followed 5th through 12th graders and exemplified a developmental systems approach to PYD research. The purpose of this study was to understand the diverse ways in which individual strengths are associated with ecological developmental assets to promote PYD (Lerner, 2005). PYD is regarded as a linear combination of the C’s, wherein a higher score on each of the C’s contributes equally to a resultant higher score for PYD (Lerner, et al., 2005). Lerner, et al. (2005) found that youth who possess all 5 C’s typically demonstrate a sixth C, contribution. Contribution to self, family, community, and society is often regarded as an important outcome related to PYD (Lerner, 2005).

The 5 C’s represent concepts that culminate to produce the higher order aspect of PYD, and has been recognized as a functional framework for researching PYD in sport (Vierimaa, et al., 2012). Sport confidence is defined as “the belief or degree of certainty individuals possess about their ability to be successful in sport (Vealey, 1986, p. 222).” Character in sport is generally illustrated by the engagement in prosocial behaviors and avoiding antisocial behaviors: prosocial behaviors are voluntary actions intending to help or benefit others, where antisocial behaviors are voluntary actions intending to harm or disadvantage others (Vierimaa, et al., 2012).

In addition to behaviors, the environment also becomes an important factor when examining youth sport developmentally. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory provides a combined approach to studying the development of youth through sport participation (Cote, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2008). The ecological systems theory refers to the idea that human development and human behavior are the manifestation of person-context interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Four levels within an ecological
network were originally noted: 1) microsystem (comprised of parents, relatives, close friends, teachers, mentors, coworkers, spouses, or others who participate in the life of the developing person on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time), 2) mesosystem (based on interrelationships between two or more microsystems involving the developing person, such as the coach and player), 3) exosystem (represents situations that affect the setting containing the person in question, such as interaction between coach and administrator), and 4) macrosystem (includes cultural and social forces that impact human development); all four systems are in continuous interaction with each other to result in developmental processes and results (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Cote, et al., 2008).

In 1999, Bronfenbrenner merged ideas to form two specific propositions. The first hypothesizes that ‘human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving bio psychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 797). These ‘proximal processes’ must occur on a regular basis and over a long period of time, such as continuous sport participation. For younger children, participation in such interactive processes over time generates the ability, motivation, knowledge, and skill to participate in such activities both with others and on their own (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). However, the power of such processes to influence development is shown to vary significantly as a function of the characteristics of the developing person, of the immediate and remote environmental contexts, and the time periods, in which the proximal processes take place (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
The second proposition states that the form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of: 1) the characteristics of the developing person, 2) the environment in which the processes are happening, 3) the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration, and 4) the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). An operational research design that permits the simultaneous investigation of both propositions is referred to as the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The developmental outcomes typically revolve around the activities a child is involved with.

The PPCT model functions to emphasize the multiple features that should be combined to design and deliver youth sport programs that promote physical health, motor-skill development, and psychosocial development (Cote, et al., 2008). The ability to transfer skills learned in sports to other areas in life is possibly the most crucial step in achieving the maximum outcome from participation in sports (Theokas, Danish, Hodge, Heke, & Forneris, 2008).

Cote and colleagues (2008) describe three possible trajectories of sport involvement known as Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP), which evolved in part from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. DMSP provides a framework that supports continuous participation for all youth, health benefits, and psychosocial development through sport. The DMSP emerged from interviews with athletes in a variety of sports and proposes three possible sport participation trajectories: 1) recreational participation through sampling (“sampling” is referring to trying certain
sports for the first time), 2) elite performance through sampling, and 3) elite performance through early specialization. “Recreational participation and elite performance through sampling have the same foundation from ages 6 to 12. After age 12, participants may choose to either stay involved in sport at a recreational level (age 13+), or embark on a path that focuses primarily on performance (specializing ages 13-15; investment ages 16+; Cote, et al., 2008, p. 35).”

During ages 6-12 (sampling years), athletes participate to maximize natural enjoyment; the recreational years (age 13+) are typically an extension of the sampling years with the primary goals being enjoyment and health (Cote, et al., 2008). The sampling and recreational years have coaches that are primarily supportive and encouraging, and parents providing levels of emotional, informational, and tangible support (Cote, et al., 2008). The specializing years (ages 13-15) are a transitional stage to the investment years (age 16+) where youth engage in fewer activities (Cote, et al., 2008). Youth commit to only one activity during the investment years. During the specializing and investment years, coaching styles become more skill-oriented and technical, and parents become less involved, but provide more financial and emotional support (Cote, et al., 2008). Elite performers in the early specialization sports generally skip the sampling years, and could experience negative physical and psychosocial outcomes such as overuse injuries and reduced sport enjoyment (Cote, et al., 2008).

**Defining positive youth development programs.** Programs that promote PYD take on many diverse forms. Youth development programs can range from general activities to single-focus programs such as organized sports to national organizations such as 4-H (Urban, et al., 2010). Researchers typically classify programs as youth
PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZED SPORTS

development programs when it improves the adolescents’ lives. Improvements include reducing problem behaviors and/or promoting positive outcomes, promoting bonding, fostering social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral or moral competence, or fostering prosocial norms (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Whether at home, school, among friends, in an after-school program, or in the community, youth need access to safe places, challenging experiences, and caring people on a daily basis (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). PYD programs must be conveyed in an appropriate context. “Positive developmental settings provide: 1) physical and psychological safety, 2) appropriate structure, 3) supportive relationships, 4) opportunities to belong, 5) positive social norms, 6) support for efficacy and mattering, 7) opportunities for skill building, 8) integration of family, school, and community efforts (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p. 97).”

Youth development programs offer an opportunity to increase youth’s exposure to positive developmental settings when circumstances prevent families, schools, and communities from providing youth with these fundamental resources (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). A physically and psychologically safe place is created within programs that embrace a strong sense of membership, commitment, explicit rules and responsibilities, and expectations for adolescents’ success (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Youth development programs promote normal development and acknowledge youth’s need for both ongoing support and challenging opportunities (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Programs that have the potential to foster life skills related to creativity, initiative, problem-solving, critical thinking, social justice, equality and equity leadership also make, keep, and build peaceful nations (Mandigo, Corlett, & Anderson, 2008). Youth
development programs also help youth direct their adolescence in healthy ways and prepare them for their future by fostering their positive development and preventing problem behaviors (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Growing public support for more structured activities during the non-school hours supports the idea that these activities and programs do more than filling idle time and keeping youth off the streets (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The activities can provide youth with enriching experiences that expand their perspectives, improve their socialization, and enrich their skills (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Local, state, and federal investments support organized activities (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). “Approximately 500 national and 17,000 state and local organizations classify themselves as youth development programs (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p. 95).”

Some communities have many school-based extracurricular activities as well as community-based youth programs to provide young people with an abundance of choices for supervised growth-promoting activities outside of school (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Unfortunately, this is not always the norm. Availability, cost, and transportation limit many youth's choices during the non-school hours (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Knowledgeable and supportive adults have the opportunity to empower adolescents to develop their competencies in positive atmospheres (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). “Youth development programs are only as effective as the adults that deliver them; individuals who are unable to build trusting relationships with young people are less likely to create an environment where participants are willing to take risks and where they know that making mistakes is a normative part of the learning process (Petitpas, Cornelius, & Raalte, 2008, p. 62).” In general, programs with more hours of contact with
the youth offered more encouraging environments as well as a greater variety of involvement (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

The best chance of positively influencing adolescent development does rely on just one program; numerous options have to be offered to youth in all communities that are consistent with the youth development framework (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The size of a program can also influence program implementation in various ways. Larger programs may have a difficult time harboring supportive environments due to the large number of youth, but on the other hand, larger programs also may have the resources available to offer expensive activities and provide more opportunities for their participants (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Roth and colleagues (2003) found that programs where the prevention of problem behaviors was not an obvious goal of the program did a superior job of structuring a supportive and empowering environment. They also found programs aiding more disadvantaged youth offered their participants more developmental opportunities and supports. A more positive atmosphere was created and more opportunities for activities such as skill building and horizon-broadening were offered.

**Factors that lead to participation in PYD programs.** Strategies for promoting supportive contexts and ecologies vary as a function of the individual’s societal location and internal resources (such as intentional self-regulation; Urban, et al., 2010). Youth tend to participate in organized activities for intrinsic reasons such as excitement and enjoyment, to build competencies, and to affiliate with peers and activity leaders (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). Pressures from adults or educational and career goals are rarely given as key reasons for participation (Mahoney & Vest, 2012).
Youth activity participation choices have an impact on identity development in terms of expectations for success and self-beliefs about ability (Mueller, et al., 2011). If the child believes he or she is good enough in a particular activity, this may result in future continuation of participation in said activity and/or activities in the same domain (Mueller, et al., 2011).

**Outcomes related to participation in PYD programs.** PYD programs provide formal and informal opportunities for youth to develop their interests and talents, learn new skills, and gain a sense of personal or group recognition. The activities also help youth develop by exposing them to new worlds with new people, ideas, cultures, and experiences, as well as indirect or direct links to education (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Out-of-school-time (OST) activities establish a key developmental asset linked to PYD (Mahoney, et al., 2009). Participation in activities that act as a resource for positive development by providing structured and challenging activities in safe environments should result in better developmental outcomes (Urban, et al., 2010).

Activity participation can be an influential contextual asset for promoting adaptive outcomes for youth (Mueller, et al., 2011). Positive development is best when there is a good fit between the ecological assets found in the environment in which an individual is rooted and the resources for which the individual searches (Urban, et al., 2010). Location and resources also can influence developmental outcomes for children.

Urban, Lewin-Bizan, and Lerner (2009) found that outcomes for children living in lower asset neighborhoods vary by gender when participating in extracurricular activities. Girls living in lower asset neighborhoods exhibited higher levels of PYD and lower levels of depressive symptoms and risk behavior; whereas, boys showed lower levels of
PYD and higher levels of risk behaviors. The same study found that for children living in higher asset neighborhoods: girls exhibited lower levels of PYD and higher levels of risk behavior and depressive symptoms; whereas, boys displayed higher levels of PYD and lower levels of risk behaviors. Unfortunately, youth living in lower asset neighborhoods may have difficulties accessing extracurricular activities (Urban, et al., 2010).

OST activities involving supportive and caring adults, skill-building activities, and the presence of positive peers also are effective assets for promoting PYD (Urban, et al., 2010). Positive developmental outcomes, such as college attendance, volunteering, voting, higher academic performance, decreased risk taking, psychological resilience, self-worth, and school belonging (e.g. Urban, et al., 2010; Zarrett, et al., 2009), have been linked with participation in positive activities.

Positive outcomes of a youth development program also have been linked to the consistency of participation over time and the intensity of involvement (Mueller, et al., 2011). The National Institute of Out-of-School Time reported in 2003 that two-thirds of American adolescents participate in at least two OST activities during the school year (Mueller, et al., 2011), but the majority of American adolescents do not spend all of their leisure time in organized activities (Mahoney & Vest, 2012).

After-school and community programs and extracurricular activities are important contexts of development for adolescent’s physical, psychosocial, cognitive, and educational functioning (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). Mahoney, Lord, and Carryl (2005) found that youth who participated in after-school programs reported higher academic performance and motivational attributes as compared to those who had parent, self, or sibling care during after-school hours. “Theoretically, positive youth development
fostered through organized activity participation should set the stage for positive adult
functioning marked by educational success, civic engagement, and contributions that give
back to the broader community or society” (Mahoney & Vest, 2012, p. 410).

Alternatively, negative developmental outcomes may appear for youth who
participate at very high levels, disproving the “more is better” rationale (Urban, et al.,
2010). A child that participates in OST activities for an extensive amount of time, or
numerous activities at once may not experience positive developmental results,
supporting the over-scheduling hypothesis (OSH). Some researchers believe the time
commitment and competitive elements, including pressure from adults, which coincide
with increasing amounts of organized activity participation, may destabilize aspects of
family functioning, take away from schoolwork, and foster psychological distress
resulting in risky coping behaviors such as substance abuse (Mahoney & Vest, 2012).
However, organized activities are not to blame for the youth who feel pressure from their
parents or other adults to participate (Mahoney & Vest, 2012).

The over-scheduling hypothesis (OSH) warns against the possible negative effects
of over-involvement in activities (Elkin, 2001). The OSH involves the concern that too
much organized activity participation leads to poor developmental outcomes (Mahoney&
Vest, 2012). This hypothesis also supports the idea that intense participation during the
adolescent ages can lead to internal stress, anxiety, and unhappiness throughout young
adulthood (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). In addition to potential negative effects on children,
OSH suggests that activity participation challenges parents’ ability to manage their
children’s activity schedule and related needs. Over time, some believe this could cause
stress for parents that could eventually negatively affect their psychological functioning, feelings toward the child, and strain the marital relationship (Mahoney & Vest, 2012).

OSH proposes that participation in any type of activity or any combination of activities at high rates can be linked with detrimental adjustment outcomes (Mahoney & Vest, 2012) and can lead to slight declines in psychosocial functioning (Zarrett, et al., 2009). Randall & Bohnert (2009), found that either very low (less than 5 hrs/week) or very high (greater than 25 hrs/week) levels of activity involvement predicted elevated levels of depressive symptoms (Randall & Bohnert, 2009). Despite this study’s findings, a meta-analysis using nationally representative data found the concern that young people may be over-scheduled during their leisure hours cannot be validated across the general population (Mahoney & Vest, 2012).

Side effects of participation in specific activities, such as sports, also have been linked to negative behaviors (alcohol use, substance use, and violence; e.g. Theokas, 2009; Mueller, et al., 2011). Unfortunately, these negative behaviors are rarely addressed, especially if there is a winning outcome (Theokas, 2009). Despite these findings, the overall picture shows sports and organized activities to be better than the alternatives such as unstructured activities.

For example, Mahoney and Vest found in their 2012 study that adolescent participation in organized activity is a significant predictor of several indicators of positive adjustment and is unrelated to several indicators of problematic adjustment at young adulthood. The association between adolescent activity participation and positive adult adjustment became stronger as the time youth spent in activities increased and the results held for those youth who participated in activities intensively (20+ hrs/week)
compared to those who were uninvolved (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). Youth who spent high amounts of time participating consistently showed more positive adjustment than adolescents who were uninvolved (Mahoney & Vest, 2012). Developmental activities and programs propose more positive results than negative.

The positive outcomes for youth with access to extracurricular activities are endless. Setting goals, managing time, taking leadership of their own development, and having personal responsibility are just a few positive results from participation in OST activities (e.g. Mueller, et al., 2011; Theokas, 2009).

**Sports as a unique instance of PYD programming.** Sports are defined as “structured activities with certain rules of engagement,” where directions are given for participants to follow to execute the skills taught in order to compete (Theokas, 2009, p. 303). Sports are the most universal type of OST activity among youth today (Zarrett, et al., 2009) and the most frequently occurring extracurricular activity, accounting for the largest amount of United States adolescents’ leisure time corresponding to four to six hours per week on average (Holt & Sehn, 2008). For example, up to 35 million children in the United States and almost 2.2 million Canadian children participate in community, school, or privately run sports programs (Holt & Sehn 2008).

Increases in physical activity levels are beneficial across all stages of life, not just during the childhood and adolescent years (Agans, Safvenbom, Davis, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013). Since participation is voluntary, there is a commitment involved in playing. Youth have the option to stay with the activity, which shows commitment. Research has shown this commitment contributes to higher levels of motivation, initiative, and
cognitive engagement (Theokas, 2009). Children who participate in sports may have increased physical fitness and reduced body fat (Holt & Sehn, 2008).

Continuity and intensity of sport participation are major factors of whether participation leads to PYD benefits because intense and continuous participation helps aid skill mastery and comprehensive knowledge (Zarrett, et al., 2008). Sport is generally considered a tool through which other life skills are taught, in addition to the development of sport-specific skills. These skills include persistence, teamwork, leadership, and character development (Theokas, 2009). “Sport competence can be broken down into three main skill dimensions: technical, tactical, and physical. Technical skills refer to an athlete’s ability to move and perform the tasks necessary to achieve success in their sport; tactical skills focus on the specific actions and decisions that athletes make during competition to gain an advantage over their opponents; and physical skills refer to the physical fitness and functional qualities that allow athletes to perform sports skills and meet the sport’s physical demands (Vierimaa, et al., 2012, p. 604).”

There is a potential for development across multiple domains of functioning throughout sport participation. It has been associated with psychological well-being, positive social development, and higher academic and occupational achievement through young adulthood (Theokas, 2009; Urban, et al., 2010). Youth who participate in sports learn values and skills associated with initiative, responsibility, social cohesion, persistence, self-control, and goal setting (e.g. Theokas, 2009).

Exercise and athletic participation are commonly accepted as important aspects of healthy lifestyles and human development (Agans, et al., 2012). The role of OST
activities and of sports participation in particular, is more complicated than current theory may suggest, as each individual and each circumstance differ (Zarrett, et al., 2009). As noted previously, there can be negative side effects as a result of youth sports including alcohol use and perpetration of negative acts. Sports can also be violent and excessively competitive, which leads to stress, injuries, and burnout (Theokas, 2009). Broader developmental goals are overshadowed by competition and winning at all costs (Theokas, 2009). Despite this, the overall consensus is that sport participation is better than unsupervised activities.

**Outcomes related to participation in sports.** Sports participation has been linked to lower use of cigarettes, marijuana, cocaine, as well as lower rates of depression, and lower occurrence of suicidal behavior (Zarrett, et al., 2008). However, when different uses of tobacco have been analyzed, findings show that adolescent athletes were more likely to report use of smokeless tobacco products (e.g. chewing tobacco); sport may protect against regular cigarette smoking, but adolescent athletes seem to participate in the use of smokeless tobacco more than non-athletes (Holt & Jones, 2008).

Mere participation in sports does not present benefits; it is the quality and execution of sport programs that are the likely underlying instruments of enjoyment and development (Theokas, 2009). Overall, PYD and youth contribution is related to participation in a combination of sports and youth development programs (Theokas, 2009). When controlling for the total time youth spent in activity participation and duration of participation, youth who participated in sports along with another youth development program showed the highest levels of PYD and the lowest levels of risk behaviors (Zarrett, et al., 2009).
Prior to Zarrett and colleague’s (2009) study, the majority of youth sport participation and general OST activity participation research focused on high school youth. The study indicated that sports participation is a positive applicable experience for elementary and middle school youth. Youth across all sports-prominent activity patterns reported higher PYD and contribution than nonsport youth. Sports participation was especially effective when clustered with participation in certain types of other OST activities (Zarrett, et al., 2009). Zarrett’s study examined the influence of sports participation during the late elementary and early middle school years (Zarrett, et al., 2009), but there is still a lack of research on younger children and their sport participation.

Sports participation is a supplementary, developmentally rich context that reinforces and is reinforced by developmental supports in other contexts (Zarrett, et al., 2009). The original 4 C’s of PYD (competence, confidence, connection, and character) have been desirable athlete outcomes of sport participation, and a useful proxy measure of coaching effectiveness. There is a fault is a lack of tangible ways to accurately measure these constructs in athletes (Vierimaa, et al., 2012). Prior to claiming positive personal development outside of sport programs, it must first be determined that these programs produce positive sport-related developmental outcomes (Vierimaa, et al., 2012).

In a 2006 self-study of athletes (questions were answered by the athletes), results proposed that competitive sport may be naturally suited for teaching initiative, teamwork, and social skills, but well less suited for teaching exploration and identity work, emotional self-regulation, peer relationships and knowledge, and developing connections
to an adult network and acquiring social capital (Holt, 2008). Participants also reported that parents provided general emotional support without applying excessive pressure and coaches taught them about persistence and effort, sportspersonship, and emphasized working as a team. Coaches also had a negative influence on participants with an overemphasis on winning, negative communication, and sport politics (Holt & Sehn, 2008).

There is evidence that if sport is structured in the correct way and trained caring adult mentors surround young people, PYD is more likely to occur (Petitpas, et al., 2008). Many factors play critical roles in discussing athlete outcomes from sports such as coaches (Vierimaa, et al., 2012). Research findings suggest that coaches’ autonomy support through process-focused praise has an effect on initiative and identity reflection through developing youth self-perceptions (Theokas, 2009). Variations in coaching approaches play an influential role in socialization and fostering positive developmental outcomes in athletes (Holt & Jones, 2008; Vierimaa, et al., 2012). Sports leaders can actively structure the sport context in a way that can help participants develop in both physical and psychological areas (Coatsworth & Conway, 2009; Gano-Overway, et al., 2009).

Theoretically, effective coaching should result in either positive sport performance (competence) or psychosocial outcomes (confidence, connection, and character) in athletes (Vierimaa, et al., 2012). Numerous strategies have been developed to aid coaches in facilitating PYD in their athletes, but limitation in research has been the struggle in evaluating coaching outcomes and effectiveness (Vierimaa, et al., 2012). A specific mix of professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge is required for
coaches to effectively develop the 5 C’s in athletes of a specific sport (Vierimaa, et al., 2012).

The amount of time youth spend participating in sports on a weekly basis (intensity), their participation duration across adolescence (continuity), and the time they spend in other types of activities in addition to their sports participation, all play a role in how sports participation in linked to youth development (Zarrett, et al., 2008). Sampling various sports during childhood allows youth to experience the various settings, and allows different relationships to form with coaches, teammates, and other adults that have the likelihood to positively structure the course of development of youth (Cote, et al., 2008).

Sport offers a common language and a platform for social democracy (Bailey, 2008). The non-verbal format of sports can benefit overcoming language and cultural barriers more easily than other areas of social life. The valued and socially prestigious character of sport could result in people who might not otherwise come together for the sake of a common passion (Bailey, 2008). Some players claim that sport can serve as a shared interest bringing families together and encouraging people to interact in the broader community and beyond, frequently with people of dissimilar social backgrounds (Bailey, 2008). The majority of sports research revolves around adolescent through adult years, but as stated earlier, there is not much known from the younger children’s perspective.
Gap in Literature

Large numbers of children in America choose to participate in organized sports (on a team roster), whether offered by the school or the community, but most research focuses on adolescents and older youth. Sports are becoming available to youth at a younger age, and parents are enrolling their children as young as Kindergarten in some areas. However, there is a lack of research on younger youth sport participation (grammar school age). The grammar school years begin the character foundation for children and their development, personally and socially. Research is needed to evaluate the resulting youth development outcomes.

Even though theoretical and experimental research on child and adolescent development is at the root of youth development philosophy, empirical research on how programs promote healthy development remains limited. A program can promote healthy development, but may do not know how it was achieved (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Research is also lacking a concrete number regarding the optimal amount of time youth should spend engaged in extracurricular activities (Mahoney, et al., 2009).

The majority of PYD research in sport has been theoretical and cross-sectional in nature (Vierimaa, et al., 2012). Although much research has been performed on youth development programs using Lerner’s 5 C’s model, there has been minimal empirical research on the 5 C’s in a sport setting (Vierimaa, et al., 2012). Research needs to clearly demonstrate what fosters PYD in sport programs in order to promote healthy development in athletes over time (Vierimaa, et al., 2012). By promoting an atmosphere that embraces youth and provides them with opportunities to grow, PYD can be promoted (Morrissey & Werner-Wilson, 2005).
Current Study

The current study aims to understand the parental perspective regarding the role of organized sports in youth development. Specifically, it will address whether grammar school-aged children who participate in organized sports have higher levels of PYD compared to those who do not participate or who minimally participate. This study will also explore the barriers to participation for those who do not participate. In addition to exploring these research questions, an additional goal of this project is to conduct a needs assessment for the recreation department in the town of Secaucus, NJ. The study questions are divided into eight needs assessment questions, which specifically address the needs of the Secaucus community, and four broader research questions.

Needs Assessment. Needs assessment research represents formal, systematic attempts to define and close the important gaps between “what is” and “what should be” (Kaufman & English, 1979, pg. 8). Conducting a needs assessment is crucial to selecting the problems for resolution and provides the essential information for determining appropriate interventions (Kaufman & English, 1979). A needs assessment was conducted to assist the community of Secaucus, NJ and will specifically address which organized activities the children in this community are engaged in (e.g. sports, performing arts, creative arts, boy/girl scouts, etc.). The Secaucus Recreation Department will receive a final report, which will assist them in developing a plan that can be implemented to increase participation in town sports.

Needs Assessment Questions for Secaucus, NJ (parents’ perspectives):

1. What percentage of participants participate in sports?
   a. What percentage of participants participate in performing arts?
b. What percentage of participants participate in creative arts?
c. What percentage of participants participate in Boy/Girl Scouts?
d. What percentage of participants participate in academic clubs?
e. What percentage of participants participate in religious clubs?
f. What percentage of participants participate in martial arts?

2. What is the most common reason parents give for why youth who are interested in sports do not participate?

3. What percentage of participants who were born outside of the U.S. participate in sports?

4. What percentage of participants who were born in the U.S. participate in sports?

5. What percentage of youth who speak English as the primary language participate in sports?

6. What percentage of youth who do not speak English as the primary language participate in sports?

7. Is there a difference in income between those who participate in sports and those who do not?

8. Is there a difference with number of siblings in households between those who participate in sports and those who do not?

In addition to addressing these needs assessment questions, the following broader research questions will also be addressed.
Research Questions:

9. Are children with parents that participated in sports as a child more likely to participate in sports themselves?

10. Do grammar school aged children who participate in organized sports show higher rates of positive youth development than children who do not participate in organized sports?

   a. Do youth who participate in sports outside of the town show higher rates of positive youth development than those who participate in town sports?

   b. Do youth who participate in sports within the town show higher rates of positive youth development than those who participate in out of town sports?

11. Do females show higher rates of positive youth development than males (regardless of participation)?

12. Is there a linear relationship between the number of hours spent in organized sports and positive youth development?

   a. Is there a curvilinear relationship between the number of hours spent in organized sports and positive youth development (supporting the over-scheduling hypothesis)?
Methods

Sample/Participants

Secaucus is a suburban community in northeast New Jersey, less than 10 miles from New York City. According to the U.S. Census, the estimated population in 2012 was 18,351, compared to 8,867,749 in the state of New Jersey (U.S. Census, 2010). The actual population as of April 1, 2010 was 16,264 (8,791,909 total in NJ) with 19.3% persons under 18 years of age (U.S. Census, 2010).

Participants for this study were drawn from the only two public grammar schools in Secaucus, NJ. During the 2012-13 academic year, there were 1,016 students enrolled in grades one through six. The parents of all enrolled students were invited to participate in this study. In total, 195 surveys were completed with a response rate of 19.19%. Parents were asked to provide information about their children. The sample of children was 50.3% male (n=98) and 49.7% female (n= 97). The mean age of students was 9 (with a range from 6-12 years-old). Most of the participants were White/European American 41% (n= 80), with 21.5% (n= 42) Asian American, 19.5% (n= 38) Hispanic/Latino/a, 2.1% (n= 4) African American/Black, 0.5% (n= 1) Native Hawaiian/Pac Island, 15.4% (n= 30) Other, and 3% did not answer. The 2010 U.S. Census reported the town of Secaucus population to be mostly White/European American (55.9%), with 20.4% Asian, 18.6% Hispanic/Latino/a, 4.1% African American/Black, and 0.2% American Indian and Alaskan Native (U.S. Census, 2010).

Approximately 76% (n= 150) of the participants’ families speak English as their first language, which is an over representation of native English speakers when compared to the 55.7% of Secaucus residents who noted English as the primary language in the
2010 U.S. Census (U.S. Census, 2010). The town of Secaucus listed 30.9% of the residents as foreign born for 2008-2012, but 92.8% (n= 183) of the surveys were completed for children born in the United States (an under representation of the foreign-born residents; U.S. Census, 2010). The mean annual household income of participants was $60,001-80,000. The town’s median household income 2009-2012 was $85,944 with 7.6% of the residents living below the poverty level (U.S. Census, 2010).

Design

This study uses a cross-sectional non-equivalent group design. Primary data was collected using surveys that were sent to all students in grades one through six in the only two public grammar schools in Secaucus, NJ in the 2012-13 academic year. Participants were self-identified as sport participants or non-sport participants. A convenience sampling approach was used to choose the schools.

Procedure

Quantitative surveys were sent home in each student’s backpack in Spring 2013. One parent/guardian was asked to complete a series of questions about their family background, child’s sport participation, and a measure of PYD characteristics that was adapted so that parents could report on their perception of their child’s positive development. Each completed survey and a signed consent form was returned to the student’s teacher. With approval from the Institutional Review Board and the Secaucus Superintendent, a letter was sent to each teacher informing them of the process as well as two copies of the consent form (one to return with the completed survey and one for the parent/guardian to retain) and a survey for each student.
Measures

**Family background.** General demographic questions were asked pertaining to the student's family. Parents/guardians were asked to list the child's gender, age, grade (1-6), ethnic/racial background, and country of birth. Parents also were asked to report the annual household income and whether English was the primary language spoken in the home.

**Sports Participation.** The survey listed each sport offered by the town Recreation Department (basketball, cheerleading, football, gymnastics, hockey, soccer, wrestling, softball, and little league baseball) and asked the parent to indicate in which sport(s) their child participated. A subsequent question asked if the child participated in organized sports offered outside of the town. If the child did not participate in an organized sport, participants were asked for a general reason (costly, time consuming, safety concerns, etc.) and also were asked what activities were preferred over sports (performing arts, Boy/Girl Scouts, religious clubs, etc.). The survey also asked whether the parent or guardian completing the survey participated in organized sports as a child (see Appendix for sample survey).

**Positive youth development.** The original Positive Youth Development Inventory (PYDI) survey was a self-assessment measure for children; however, with permission from the original authors (Arnold, Nott, & Meinhold, 2012) the measure has been adapted so that parents could assess their child's positive development. The Positive Youth Development Inventory short version (PYDI-S) is a collection of 34 likert scale items designed to measure changes in levels of PYD (PYD) as an outcome of participating in youth programs. Items are distributed into six constructs: Pro-Social
Values (e.g., Other people’s feelings matter to me), Future Orientation (e.g., I know what I want to do for a career), Emotional Regulation (e.g., I can handle being disappointed), Personal Standards (e.g., It is important for me to do my best), Adult Support (e.g., I feel connected to my teachers), Friendships (e.g., I make friends easily), and Contribution (e.g., I take an active role in my community) (See Appendix for original PYDI-S).

The items were altered for the parent to answer about the child. Examples include: other people’s feelings matter to my child, my child knows what he/she wants to do for a career, my child can handle being disappointed, it is important for my child to do his/her best, my child feels connected to his/her teachers, my child makes friends easily, my child takes an active role in his/her community.

Each item is scored from 1 to 4 (1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Agree, and 4= Strongly agree). Higher scores reflect higher levels of PYD as a result of being involved in the program. The original PYDI overall measure has been previously validated (α= .97: Arnold, et al., 2012). The adapted measure also is valid (α= .92). Each subscale from the current study was acceptable: pro-social (α= .74), future orientation (α= .81), emotional regulation (α= .79), personal standards (α= .70), adult support (α= .60), friendship (α= .88), and contribution (α= .85).
Results

This chapter will first present the results of the needs assessment followed by the results of the research questions. The quantitative data was entered and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. Descriptive statistics were used for many of the needs assessment questions. T-tests, chi-square, and simple regression analyses were for the research questions and a few of the needs assessment questions. All of the responses from the surveys were based on the parent’s report of their children’s behavior.

Needs Assessment Results for Secaucus, NJ

1. What is the percentage of participants who participate in sports, performing arts, creative arts, Boy/Girl Scouts, academic clubs, religious clubs, and martial arts?

   Approximately two-thirds of participants (66%, n= 128) participate in sports. Percentage of participation in other activities is described in Table 1.
Table 1

*Percentage of participation in activities other than sports*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing Arts</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Arts</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy/Girl Scouts</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Clubs</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Clubs</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martial Arts</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even though 66% of the participants participate in sports, the overall response rate is low when compared to the registration numbers in the town Recreation Department. In total, only 14% of students that registered for town sports completed a survey.
Table 2

*Percentage of sport registered students that also completed the survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Number of students registered for sport</th>
<th>Number of students that completed a survey</th>
<th>Percentage of sport registered students that also completed the survey (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>425</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheering</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gymnastics</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Softball</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrestling</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,658</strong></td>
<td><strong>233</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. What is the most common reason parents give for why youth who are interested in sports do not participate?

The most common reason parents gave for why youth who are interested in sports do not participate is that it is too time consuming (n = 25, 38.5% of participants). The percentage distribution for other reasons why interested youth do not participate in sports is given in Table 3.

Table 3

*Percentage distributions for reasons why interested youth do not participate in sports*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Consuming</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costly</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Offered for Age</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Concerns</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Parent’s Interest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. What is the percentage of youth who were born outside of the U.S. and participate in sports?

Of the 14 children that were not born in the United States, 10 (71.4%) participate in sports.

4. What is the percentage of youth who were born in the U.S. and participate in sports?

Of the 178 children that were born in the United States, 116 (65.2%) participate in sports.

5. What is the percentage of youth who speak English as the primary language and participate in sports?

One hundred and forty-seven children (70.1%) who speak English as the primary language participate in sports.

6. What is the percentage of youth who do not speak English as the primary language but participate in sports?

Forty-five children (51.1%) who do not speak English as the primary language participate in sports.

7. Is there a difference in annual household income between those who participate in sports and those who do not?
Those who participate in sports tend to have higher annual household income 
(M= 4.73 (approximately $74,600), SD= 1.55) than those who do not participate in sports 
(M= 4.03 (approximately $60,600), SD= 1.76), t(187) = 2.79, p< .05. The 95% 
confidence interval of the difference between means on levels of income ranges from .21 
to 1.19.

8. Is there a difference in the number of siblings in households between those 
who participate in sports and those who do not?

There is no difference in the number of siblings in households between those who 
participate in sports and those who do not, t(192) = -.85, p> .05.

Research Question Results

9. Are children with parents that participated in sports as a child more likely 
to participate in sports themselves?

There was no statistical association between parents that participated in sports as a 
child and whether or not their child would participate in sports, \( \chi^2 (1) = 2.10, p > .05. \)

10. Do grammar school aged children who participate in organized sports 
show higher rates of positive youth development than children who do not participate in 
organized sports?

There is no statistical difference in overall positive youth development between 
youth who participate in sports and those who do not, t(188) = -1.52, p> .05.
a. Do youth who participate in sports outside of the town show higher rates of positive youth development than those who participate in town sports?

Town sports generally entail a low cost fee and do not have try-outs or "cuts," whereas out of town teams hold try-outs (some participants may not make the roster), require more travel time and cost of travel, and are generally more expensive to join. These results were based only on participants who participate in sports. Of those sport participants, those who replied "yes" to participating in town sports were analyzed (n=115). On average, youth who participate in sports offered by the town show higher rates of positive youth development (M=1.59, SD=.32) when compared to those who participate in sports outside of town (M=1.38, SD=.28). This difference was significant $t(123) = 2.05, p< .05$. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the two groups was .01 to .42.

11. Do females show higher rates of positive youth development than males (regardless of sport participation)?

Regardless of sport participation, there is no statistical difference in positive youth development between genders, $t(190) = 1.48, p > .05$.

a. Do grammar school aged female children who participate in organized sports show higher rates of positive youth development than grammar school aged boys who participate in organized sports?

There was no difference by gender, $t(120) = 1.89, p > .05$. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between the two groups was -.01 to .22.
PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZED SPORTS

12. Is there a linear relationship between the number of hours spent in organized sports and positive youth development?

A linear regression analysis was conducted to evaluate the relationship between the number of hours spent in organized sports and positive youth development. The result shows that the number of hours spent in organized sports predicted the level of positive youth development, $F(1, 129) = 3.95, p < .05$, $r(130) = -1.99, p < .05$. The coefficient for number of hours a week in sports is -.01. For every one-hour increase in participation in sports during one week, we would expect a .01-unit decrease in positive youth development levels. Approximately 3% of the variance of positive youth development can be explained by its linear relationship with the number of hours spent in organized sports. Therefore, there must be other variables that also have an influence on positive youth development.

a. Is there a curvilinear relationship between the number of hours spent in organized sports and positive youth development (supporting the over-scheduling hypothesis)?

The number of hours spent in organized sports was negatively related to positive youth development, $\beta = -.17, p < .05$. This suggests that the more hours spent in organized sports, the lower the level of positive youth development.
Discussion

The primary hypothesis of this study was that grammar school aged children who participate in organized sports would show higher rates of PYD than children who do not participate in organized sports. Unexpectedly, participation in sports did not result in higher levels of PYD. Prior studies have found that participation in multiple activities generates higher levels of PYD (Holt & Sehn, 2008; Zarrett, et al., 2009). The PYD results of this current study suggest that only one activity alone may not increase the PYD levels. Also referred to as the pile-up hypothesis, this suggests that the strength of activities lies in the collective pile-up of effects across multiple contexts (Schilling & Diehl, 2014).

This study sought to understand parental views on their children’s participation in organized sports, extracurricular activities, and their PYD. The major findings of this study do not show a difference in PYD levels based on sports participation. However, a strong interest and high levels of participation in extracurricular activities was shown. The results might have shown a PYD difference if it had been the children answering the survey questions, rather than the parents. Adolescents are active individuals and their life experiences imply they learn best by doing rather than by talking (Theokas, et al., 2008). As many researchers have declared, participation in organized activities promotes PYD in multiple aspects. Both internal and external assets are heightened with participation.

Sport participants may be a self-selected sample: those who participate and stay involved over time may do so since their values are coherent with the type of experiences sport provides (Holt & Jones, 2008). Youth’s participation in sport can test and alter social norms about their roles and capabilities (Bailey, 2008). Sporting activities can
support young women to develop a sense of ownership of their bodies and access the types of activity experiences traditionally relished by boys (Bailey, 2008). For example, some female athletes have reported having a clearer sense of identity and self-direction as a result of their engagement in sport (Bailey, 2008).

Zarrett and colleagues' study (2008) supports the idea of organized sports increasing PYD levels. Their results showed participation in sports during 5th grade predicted higher PYD in grade 6, especially for female participants, and also predicted higher levels of Contribution for all youth. They also found that youth who participated in sports for one year showed higher rates of PYD and Contribution than youth who did not participate; youth who participated in sports for two or more years showed significantly higher rates of PYD and Contribution, and lower rates of depression, than youth who did not participate and youth who participated for only one year (Zarrett, et al., 2008).

The results of this study are consistent with previous research, which has found sports participation to be the most common type of activity involvement for children in kindergarten through eighth grade (Theokas, et al., 2008). This current study inquired about involvement in sports, creative arts, boy/girl scouts, martial arts, academic clubs, and religious clubs. Theokas and colleagues (2008) report the U.S. Department of Education grouping activities into sport participation, religious activities, and art activities. It is possible for one participant to fall in numerous categories of involvement; overall, most children are participating in extracurricular activities. As stated in most research, participation in multiple activities shows higher levels of PYD when compared to participating in only one activity.
Contrary to other studies, results of this study show male children who participate in sports showing higher rates of PYD than female children that participate. Gyomber and colleagues (2013) found male athletes to rate higher levels of their well-being, but females reported significantly higher levels of sociability and openness. Their study also showed females showing more personality factors, which might control to better their sport performance (Gyomber, Lenart, & Kovacs, 2013). Another study showed female athletes having higher moral reasoning scores than male athletes (Miller, Roberts, & Ommudsen, 2004). Although this current study did not ask questions pertaining to well-being, openness, or moral, the results do not support the previous findings that female athletes would score higher PYD rates than male athletes would. Regardless of sport participation, the current study showed no PYD difference among genders.

Results of this current study appear to show a higher rate of sport participants in those children being born outside of the United States than those born in the United States. Of the 14 children that were foreign born in this study, majority of them participate in sports. Of the 178 children that reported being native born, just over half of them participate in sports. Lower rates from those who were not born here were expected due to language barriers, cultural differences, etc. Unfortunately, there was no question asking what age the child came to the United States, which might explain the high number. It is possible that the child may have come to the United States at a very young age and adapted to our society.

**Barriers to Sport Participation**

Language barriers may exist for youth sport participants in Secaucus, NJ. Only half of the children who do not speak English as the primary language participate in
sports. Language can be an issue for the youth participant, as well as being incredibly difficult for the parent. Since the children are very young in this study (ages 6-12), assumptions are that the parent is responsible for the main communication and transportation aspects. There is room for error in miscommunication and some families may choose to avoid any issues by not allowing the child to register for the sport.

When asked for a reason why participants who are interested in sports do not participate, the main reasons given were that they are time consuming, and costly. Consistent with findings from Roth and colleagues (2003), cost was cited as a common barrier to participation. Every activity comes with a cost of some sort. Cost of transportation, equipment, uniform, supplies, etc. add up quickly and many families do not hold sports as an essential expense. The results showed those who participate in sports tend to have higher annual household income than those who do not participate in sports. Children from a lower economic status are limited with options. The town of Secaucus offers recreation sports registration for $35 per child. Many of the sports require the family to spend more on items not provided with the registration cost (equipment, uniform, etc.). Even though the average annual household income of all participants was $60,001-80,000 and the town’s median household income was $85,944, 7.6% of the residents are living below the poverty level (2009-2012; U.S. Census, 2010). In response to this, communities are beginning to offer activity options at lower costs for families, but, unfortunately, many of the options are restricted due to decreasing budgets.

The parents of sport participants were asked if the child participates in sports offered by the town and/or out of town sports. On average, youth who participate in sports offered by the town showed higher rates of PYD then those who participate in out
of town sports. Most sport programs offered outside of the town cost more, demand more time for participation and travel, and usually have tryouts. There are no cuts for town sports; everyone who registers is automatically on a team. There is a lack of empirical research examining PYD experiences in competitive versus recreational sport contexts, as well as team sports versus individual sports (Holt & Jones, 2008).

Over-Scheduling Hypothesis

There could be lower rates of PYD for those who play in out of town sports due to the over-scheduling hypothesis. Children are expected to meet many requirements during after school hours: homework, studying, practice, games/competitions, chores, family obligations, etc. Although not all researchers agree, the over-scheduling hypothesis supports the idea that intense participation during the adolescent ages can lead to internal stress, anxiety, and unhappiness throughout young adulthood (Mahoney & Vest, 2012).

Supporting the over-scheduling hypothesis, this study suggests that the more hours spent in organized sports, the lower the level of PYD. However, the fact that only 3% of the variance of PYD can be explained by the number of hours spent in organized sports implies that there are other variables that also have impacts on PYD. There is no set number of hours that researchers recommend to spend in organized sports, but there is literature stating the possibility of too many hours spent in sports being detrimental to youth (Fredricks, 2012). Time commitment and external pressures from adults are believed to contribute to poor psychosocial adjustment for youth (Mahoney, et al., 2006).

Limitations

Time constraints, individual development rates, and the different factors of each sport are a few issues that make measuring PYD in sport challenging (Vierimaa, et al.,
There are several limitations in this study. The current study only focused on one suburban town and the responses were not self-reflective because it was the parent/guardian, not the child, who was asked to answer the questions pertaining to their child. If the children were to take the survey themselves, responses may have been different. Response rates were also fairly low. The surveys were given to the students to bring home. Response rates may have been better if parents/guardians had the option to respond electronically online.

There is an issue with the construct of the PYDI-S survey used. The original survey was designed for ages 12 and older whereas this study focused on younger ages. Some questions could have been difficult to answer pertaining to this age group (such as future career). With a combination of methodological constraints, such as the young children may not have a choice in which sports or activities to participate in, results can represent lower levels of PYD. In the grammar school years, most parents choose the activity participation for the child instead of the child receiving an opinion. The current study did not ask about cluster activities. Questions were not addressed to seek children that participate in sports alone, sports and another activity, or a priority level of sports and/or other extracurricular activities, which may alter the level of PYD.

Another limitation is that the study was cross-sectional as opposed to longitudinal. Human development can only be understood if examined over a prolonged period of time. Thus, in youth sport programs, the time element should focus on how playing and training activities change throughout development (Cote, et al., 2008). Long-term evaluation is imperative for understanding how participation in sport-based PYD
programs influences transitions from childhood into adolescence, and adolescence into adulthood (Holt & Jones, 2008).

There also was limited variability in terms of ethnicity, language, and income. Despite these limitations, the current study makes a critical contribution to our knowledge of how parents/guardians perceive their child's youth development and participation in out of school activities.

**Call for Future Research**

This current study only looked at the parent's perspective of their child. Future research should use multiple informants, such as reports from the children, which would allow us to see if the parental views differ from the child's view when pertaining to participation in activities and PYD. That is, would the children rate themselves differently? Researchers also need to carefully examine why some youth are more involved than others, and which individual characteristics may be associated with how youth engage in and benefit from activities (Mueller, et al., 2011). Since youth are typically involved in a variety of diverse activities, it is difficult to narrow down the exact types of activities and the amount of time spent in these activities (Urban, Lewin-Bizan, & Lerner, 2009). Steps are needed to fully understand why and under what conditions youth sports are a good investment of time and money (Theokas, 2009). Future research may be able to identify how youth activity participation can best be implemented to optimize PYD (Mueller, et al., 2011).

The methods and outcomes used to evaluate youth programs had often been insufficient for understanding if and why a program positively impacted youth (Holt & Jones, 2008). Many researchers have examined the outcomes associated with sport
participation instead of looking within to examine what types of processes and interpersonal interactions influence development in these sport settings (Holt & Sehn, 2008). Carefully designed studies will allow researchers to determine what types of sport-based interventions work, with which populations, and under what conditions (Holt & Jones, 2008). To advance sport-based PYD research it will be essential to combine implementation questions with questions about the positive and negative outcomes associated with program involvement (Holt & Jones, 2008). Programs can be further developed and well established if research addresses these issues.

**Practical Applications/Policy Implications**

Youth need access to safe places, stimulating experience, and concerned adults on a daily basis (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). There is a need to combine activities to maximize opportunities to enhance the positive development of youth (Zarrett, et al., 2009). Increases in funding for physical education and recreation programs are the bare minimum changes needed in public policy to enhance access to programs (Agans, et al., 2013). Secaucus Recreation Department offers many extracurricular activity options at affordable rates, but there should be a program implemented for the children from lower income families. The Secaucus Board of Education offers an assistance program for the families who cannot afford the school uniforms, and the Recreation Department can follow that model for assisting families with athletes that need to purchase uniforms or equipment. Unfortunately, in depth questions were not asked in the current study for the children that participate in out of town sports. Future research should be conducted to find out what out of town programs offer that Secaucus does not. The town’s recreation
department should implement a model based off of the results to increase their participation.

Research on youth athletic participation, exercise, and leisure activity has not yet implemented a theoretical framework useful for learning the development of individual participation with these movement contexts (Agans, et al., 2013). Clearly defined elements of youth development programs would allow researchers to design measures to seize the presence of these elements within programs, and then use that information to better understand why a program succeeded or failed in promoting positive outcomes for its participants (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Without knowing which components, elements, or characteristics are necessary for a program to be considered a youth development program, researchers cannot prove the effectiveness of this approach to programming for youth. A specific definition of what exactly establishes a youth development program does not yet exist (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). As research unlocks the building blocks of a youth development program, the town of Secaucus can implement new programs that are not sport based. For the children that are not interested and/or cannot participate in sports, developmental opportunities should be readily available. Extracurricular programs for the younger ages should be developed and offered throughout the community.

Conclusion

This quantitative study explored the views of 195 parents/guardians pertaining to their children’s youth development and participation in out of school activities. Spanning over grades 1-6 (ages 6-12), youth athletes’ and non-athletes’ positive development was assessed. Higher rates of PYD were anticipated in athletes, but instead, participation in
sports did not generate any difference when compared to non-athletes. Sports provide an evolving setting that has been linked with PYD, but sport alone does not lead to PYD. The way the sport is designed and delivered to children is what influences their development. The relation between participation in sport and youth functioning is very complex (Zarrett, et al., 2008). This study adds to the research of PYD programs, including sports, for younger children with hopes of improving their future.
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ecological assets and activity involvement in youth developmental outcomes:


PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZED SPORTS

Appendix

A. Sample Survey
B. Consent Form
C. Original PYDI-S
POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SURVEY

Parents/Guardians: When you answer questions that are specifically about your child, please think about the child who is a student in the classroom where you received this survey. If you have more than one child attending this school, and you received this survey in more than one class, please complete separate surveys about each child.

Please circle the letter which best corresponds to your beliefs about your child.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you agree that the following statements describe your child?</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. My child makes good decisions</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. My child knows what he/she wants to do for a career</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. It is important for my child to do the right thing</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. My child tries to do the right thing, even when he/she knows that no one will know if he/she did or not</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. It is important for my child to do his/her best</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. If my child promises to do something he/she can be counted on to do it</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. My child is able to stand up to peer pressure when he/she feels something is not right to do</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. My child has a wide circle of friends</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. My child thinks it is important to be involved with other people</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. My child’s friends care about him/her</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. My child feels connected to his/her teachers</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Having friends is important to my child</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. My child feels connected to others in our community</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. My child has adults in life who are interested in him/her</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. My child feels connected to his/her parents</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. It is easy for my child to consider the feelings of others</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Other people’s feelings matter to my child</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(please continue on the back of this page)
To what extent do you agree that the following statements describe your child?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26. My child feels accepted by his/her friends</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. My child has close friendships</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. My child takes an active role in our community</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. My child is someone who gives to benefit others</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. My child likes to work with others to solve problems</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. My child has things he/she can offer to others</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. My child believes he/she can make a difference in the world</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. My child cares about contributing to make the world a better place for everyone</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. It is important for my child to try and make a difference in the world</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please indicate your answer to the following questions by either circling your answer or filling in the blank where appropriate.

A. Does your child currently participate in organized sports (on a team)?  YES  NO
   
   If yes, please proceed to Question B
   If no, please skip to Question H

B. How old was your child when he/she first joined a team sport? ______ years old

C. How many teams does your child belong to throughout one calendar year (Jan-Dec)?
   _______ teams

D. On average, how many hours a week does your child practice or compete in a sport?
   _______ hours

E. How many months out of the calendar year (Jan-Dec) does your child participate in a sport?
   _______ months

F. Does your child participate in sports offered by the town of Secaucus?  YES  NO
   If YES, please circle all that apply:
   Basketball  Cheerleading  Football  Gymnastics  Hockey  Soccer
   Wrestling  Softball  Baseball  (Little League/Babe Ruth)

G. Does your child participate in sports offered outside the town of Secaucus?  YES  NO
   If YES, please circle all that apply:
   Basketball  Cheerleading  Football  Gymnastics  Hockey  Soccer
   Wrestling  Softball  Baseball  Other (please specify ___________________________)

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H. If your child does not participate in sports, does he/she have an interest in joining an organized sport (on a team)?  YES  NO

H1. If your child is interested in organized sports, what are the reasons he/she does not participate? (Please circle all that apply)
Costly  Time Consuming  Safety Concerns  Lack of Parent's Interest in the Sport
Not Offered for Child's Age  Not Offered for Child's Gender
Other (please specify) ________________________________

H2. If your child is not interested in organized sports, what activities does he/she prefer to participate in? (Please circle all that apply)
Performing Arts (dance, drama, choir, band, etc.)  Creative Arts (crafts, drawing, etc.)
Boy/Girl Scouts  Academic Clubs  Religious Clubs  Martial Arts
Other (please specify) ________________________________

I. Did YOU participate in organized sports (on a team) as a child?  YES  NO

J. Please circle your child's gender:  MALE  FEMALE

K. Please indicate your child's age: _______ years

L. Please indicate the grade your child is in (K-6): _______

M. Please circle your child's ethnic/racial background:
African American/Black  White/European American  Hispanic/Latino/a  Asian American
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  Other (please specify ______________________)

N. What is your relationship to this child?
Mother  Father  Grandmother  Grandfather  Aunt  Uncle  Foster Parent
Other (please specify ______________________)

O. Does your child have any siblings?  YES  NO
• If yes, please list the gender and age of each of your child's siblings

P. How many other children live in the household with you and your child? ________
Please list their ages: _______________________________________________________

Q. Is English the primary language spoken at home?  YES  NO
• If no, please specify the primary language: __________________________________

R. Was your child born in the United States?  YES  NO
• If no, please specify the country: ____________________________________________

(please continue on the back of this page)
S. Please circle YOUR highest level of education:
   Fewer than 12 years  High School Graduate  Some College  Bachelor's Degree
   Master's Degree  Doctoral / Professional Degree

T. Please circle the approximate annual household income:
   Less than $20,000  $20,001-$40,000  $40,001-$60,000  $60,001-$80,000
   $80,001-$100,000  Greater than $100,000

Thank you for your time! You have completed the survey 😊
Please place this completed survey with your signed consent form in the
colored envelope provided and send back to school with your child at your
earliest convenience.
CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

Study's Title: Association between participation in organized sports and positive youth development among grade school students in Secaucus, NJ

Why is this study being done? I am interested in whether children who participate in organized sports have higher levels of positive youth development compared to those who do not participate or who minimally participate, from the parent point of view.

What will happen while you are in the study? Survey packets will be given to each student to bring home for a parent/guardian to complete. If the parent/guardian chooses to participate, complete the attached consent form and survey, seal them in the colored envelope provided, and return it to your child's teacher or the main office as soon as possible. The teacher will bring the confidential colored envelopes to the main office and I will pick them up. I have no affiliation with the school and will immediately separate consent forms from surveys after they are collected, so that they cannot be identified.

Time: This study will take about 10-15 minutes.

Risks: The risks are no greater than those in ordinary life. Although we will keep your identity confidential as it relates to this research project, if we learn of any suspected child abuse we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

Benefits: A summary of the results will be made available to the community.

Who will know that you are in this study? You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential. You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Department of Children Protection and Permanency (formerly DYFS).

Do you have to be in the study? You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

Do you have any questions about this study? Phone or email the Principal Investigator, Jen Wilenta, (973) 655-4077 or wilentaj@mail.montclair.edu. You can also phone or email the Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Robert Reid, (973) 655-7862 or reidi@mail.montclair.edu.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu.
Future Studies
It is okay to use my data in other studies: Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Statement of Consent
I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

Print your name here                                     Sign your name here                                      Date

Jen Wilenta                                               Signature                                               5/2/13
Name of Principal Investigator

Dr. Robert Reid                                           Signature                                               5/2/13
Name of Faculty Sponsor
The Positive Youth Development Inventory  
Short Version (PYDI-S, 2012)

We would like to gather some information about the things you learned while participating in this program. Your responses are completely anonymous (meaning no one will know it is you who completed this form) and voluntary (meaning you don't have to complete this form if you do not want to). You can leave any question blank, and you can also choose not to complete the questions once you begin. Nor will any answers you provide be singled out; we will look at everyone's answers together.

Please rate your agreement using: 1) Strongly Disagree; 2) Disagree; 3) Agree; 4) Strongly Agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As a result of participating in this program:</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I make good decisions</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I have a wide circle of friends</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I think it is important to be involved with other people</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. My friends care about me</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. I feel connected to my teachers</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Having friends is important to me</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I feel connected to others in my community</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. I have adults in my life who are interested in me</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I feel connected to my parents</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As a result of participating in this program:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24. It is easy for me to consider the feelings of others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Other people's feelings matter to me</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. I feel accepted by my friends</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I have close friendships</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. I take an active role in my community</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. I am someone who gives to benefit others</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. I like to work with others to solve problems</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. I have things I can offer to others</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. I believe I can make a difference in the world</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. I care about contributing to make the world a better place for everyone</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. It is important for me to try and make a difference in the world</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>