Administrator Reflections on Youth Sport Programming: Moving Forward After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Youth sport has been a context where positive youth development (PYD) can be promoted (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). However, for youth sport to effectively foster PYD, all adult leaders need to understand and invest in the approach. The youth sport context is a large system that encompasses multiple stakeholders across the developmental lifespan of athletes (Dorsch et al., 2022). Much of PYD research reflects the contributions of parents and coaches (e.g., Harwood et al., 2019; Vella et al., 2011), yet often overlooked is the administrator role in PYD. Administrators are tasked with communicating and reinforcing organizational missions across stakeholders for the duration of the season (Schwab et al., 2010). Despite the essential responsibilities administrators hold within the organization, little research has examined how well missions are enacted in youth sport. Within PYD research, studies have found the importance of structuring programs to reach desired outcomes (e.g., life skills; Bean & Forneris, 2016). Thus, it would be beneficial to understand how administrators perceive the missions of, along with the implementation within, youth sport organizations.

Keywords: positive youth development, sport organization, grassroots sport, qualitative

Introduction

Personal Assets Framework (PAF)

The athlete development process is both complex and multitudinous (e.g., Kelly & Williams, 2020; Kelly et al., 2018). Youth sport researchers have developed various models in an attempt to synthesize the constructs of athlete development (e.g., Davids et al., 2013; Gagné, 2004; Gulbin et al., 2013). One particularly useful model that applies to athlete development is the Personal Assets Framework, or PAF (Côté, Turnnidge, & Evans, 2014; Côté et al., 2016; Kelly et al., 2022; Matthews et al., 2024). As an example, within a commentary article, Kelly, Erickson, and Turnnidge (2020) adopted the PAF as a conceptual framework to explore implications of youth sport during COVID-19. They illustrated that the PAF provides a suitable tool to examine the potential implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on athlete development. More specifically, the PAF suggests that there are three essential dynamic elements required for youth development to occur, including: (a) personal engagement in activities (i.e., the what), (b) quality social dynamics (i.e., the who), and (c) appropriate settings and organizational structures (i.e., the where). When these elements interact, an immediate sport experience is generated that can affect short- (e.g., competence, confidence, connection, and character; the 4Cs) and long-term outcomes (e.g., performance, participation, and personal development; the 3Ps). In an effort to better understand the key mechanisms and desired outcomes in youth sport, the PAF provides an appropriate framework to explore the perspectives of youth sport administrators whilst considering the future directions of youth sport afforded by lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Youth Sport Engagement in Activities

Youth sport administrators play a crucial role in providing appropriate activities for young athletes, which is a key element of the PAF. This responsibility was particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, where youth sport administrators worked tirelessly on return-to-play protocols to ensure young athletes could safely access sport once again (e.g., Department for Digital, Culture, Media, & Sport, 2020). However, there has been limited examination to consider the effectiveness of youth sport activities that lead to desired outcomes of youth sport (e.g., 3Ps). Kelly, Erickson, Pierce, et al. (2020) have stressed a need for the youth sport system to adapt post-COVID-19. More specifically, authors emphasized the use of evidence-based recommendations when organizing activities. For example, the use of deliberate play and youth-led activities may be used to emphasize fun and build the intrinsic motivation of participants (Côté & Hancock, 2016). It would thus be beneficial for this current study to document what activities are provided, how administrators view activities, and if the activities align with the missions of youth sport organizations.

Organizational Structures of Youth Sport Programs

Another vital role of a youth sport administrator is in providing appropriate settings and organizational structures to youth sport programs. Youth sport has been shown to have a wide range of positive outcomes (Neely & Holt, 2011). For instance, skill acquisition, psychosocial benefits, physiological development, and an increased level of exercise at adulthood are all positively correlated with youth sport participation. While there are many positive outcomes associated with youth sport participation, unless intentionally cultivated, short-term outcomes (i.e., 4Cs) may not be actualized. For example, a broad range of socioeconomic and cultural disparities were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Laster Pirtle, 2020; Power et al., 2020). In the context of youth sport, access to clubs, coaching, and facilities often coincides with a

substantial monetary outlay, leaving those from families with low socioeconomic status unable to afford fees to participate (Project Play, 2020). Thus, it is plausible to suggest that administrators hold an integral part in ensuring that youth sport is accessible to all young athletes, irrespective of socioeconomic status or race. By examining the perspectives of administrators, this study will be able to better understand what barriers may be present when reviewing organizational structures of youth sport.

Aims

Considering the influence of administrators on the organizational structures and participation activities of youth sport programs, it is important to consider their reflections during the COVID-19 pandemic in reimagining a successful youth sport experience. Therefore, this study aimed to examine how the pause in youth sport operation due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have shifted administrators' perception of and intentions for youth sport programming.

Methods

Methodological Coherence

This study was exploratory in nature and employed a qualitative descriptive method to provide an initial survey of youth sport administrators' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative descriptive studies fall under a naturalistic inquiry approach, where research examines the current state of what is being studied or the central nature of experiences (Sandelowski, 2000). Thus, this study utilized an online survey with open-ended response questions that was disseminated to a diverse range of administrators, allowing for a description of administrators' reflections on youth sport. Questions were created reflecting the input-throughput-output model (Chelladurai, 2014). Mission of organization was used as a proxy for organizational input, activities as the throughput, and goals for athletes as the output. An abductive coding process was used, where codes were deductively organized based on each aspect of the model and inductively coded for meaning within each of the aspects. Results are presented with main themes across the chronological order of retrospective pre-lockdown, present during lockdown, and prospective post-lockdown reflections.

Procedure and Sample

Following institutional ethics review board approval, the research team recruited through various youth sport organizations. Additionally, researchers distributed the online survey via social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), list serve email contact lists, and informal personal networks. As this study was exploring a novel period for youth sport, there were no exclusion criteria for organizational offerings (e.g., type/amount of sport, competitive level) nor administrator roles. Participants provided informed consent prior to completing an online survey via Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) which took approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete.

Thirty-four youth sport administrators, holding various positions within their respective organizations (e.g., commissioner, consultant, coordinator, director, league president), completed an online survey regarding their existing organizational structures and reflections during the COVID-19 lockdown and pause in youth sport (March and June 2020). Participants were primarily male (64.3%) and between the ages of 21 to 66 years ($M = 45.25 \pm 10.57$), representing eight countries: Australia ($n = 1$), Canada ($n = 4$), Peru ($n = 1$), Republic of Korea ($n = 1$), Serbia ($n = 1$), UK ($n = 2$), USA ($n = 22$), and Zambia ($n =$

1) with one participant not reporting. The administrators served youth between the ages of 5 to 18 years and included recreation/community-based (46.2%), club/travel (32%), and scholastic-based programs (21.8%). The majority of sampled organizations were in the nonprofit sector (64.3%), followed by school-based (21.4%), public/municipal (12.5%), and for-profit (1.8%). Although the administrators represented different countries, programs, and competitive levels, the broader sociocultural context of the COVID-19 pandemic unites their perspectives as a collective voice for reflecting on youth sport.

Data Collection

Qualtrics Survey

The online Qualtrics survey was created with the purpose to examine multiple sport stakeholders' perspectives including administrators, parents, and coaches. The participants in this study selected "Administrator" as their primary youth sport role, directing them to 34 questions, both open- and close-ended, relevant to administrators. However, due to a small sample, only qualitative data is reported. In the survey, participants were instructed to keep three time periods in mind: (a) *Retrospective Pre-Lockdown*: during the previous, "normal" state prior to the COVID-19 lockdown, (b) *Present During Lockdown*: during the COVID-19 lockdown (when the study was administered) in which all organized youth sports were removed/canceled, and (c) *Prospective Post-Lockdown*: anticipating how the post COVID-19 lockdown youth sports could look when activities were reinstated.

The "Pre-Lockdown" section consisted of two questions addressing organizations' mission/philosophy and goals for athletes. Please describe your organization's: (a) mission/philosophy, and (b) goals for your athletes prior to the COVID-19 lockdown. The "Present During Lockdown" section contained three questions. Please explain how (if at all) the removal of organized youth sports has influenced your thinking about your organization's: (a) mission/philosophy, (b) typical participation activities for the young athletes (e.g., hours per week, length of season, etc.), and (c) goals for athletes. The "Prospective Post-Lockdown" section consisted of two questions. Participants reflected upon any changes they intended to make, as well as any changes they would like to see (even if not within their direct control), within their youth sport organization when activities did resume after the lockdown ended.

Participants also completed demographic questions to provide more information about their age, gender identity, race, country of residence, socially limiting restrictions (e.g., government-imposed lockdown), primary youth sport role, program type, and competitive level.

Data Analysis

For qualitative data, a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and abductive coding procedure (Patton, 2015) of participants' open-ended responses was implemented. Sandelowski (2000) suggests that content analysis is an appropriate method for encapsulating the content of data within a qualitative descriptive study. After immersing themselves in the data, the lead author deductively grouped raw data in the previously described time periods. Once all raw data were grouped within the periods, data was further grouped deductively based on the subthemes of mission, activities, and goals.

Inductive coding by the first author was used to categorize the raw data into similar groupings within the subthemes. For example, holistic athlete development (e.g., physical, social, intellectual, spiritual) was a category developed to group raw data within the goals subtheme. Throughout this process, constant comparison was implemented to ensure reliability of results (Patton, 2015) where some codes were moved to find an optimal fit with another theme. The second and third authors served as critical friends (i.e., research team members not directly involved in the data analysis process), which functioned as a rigor check (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The lead researcher brought emerging themes to the group to challenge

and discuss changes to the thematic structure. Finally, the research team discussed a general review of meaning and groupings of each subtheme, ensuring each effectively contributed to the major theme. If there was any contention between researchers, discussions persisted until unanimous agreement.

Results

Using the input-throughput-output model (Chelladurai, 2014), three themes (i.e., mission/philosophy, participation activities, and goals for athletes) were deductively created. Participants were prompted for information about their organization prior to the lockdown (Phase 1: retrospective pre-lockdown), during the lockdown (Phase 2: present during lockdown), and any changes they would like to see implemented when youth sports return (Phase 3: prospective post-lockdown). Through inductive coding, main findings are presented across each of the themes and time frames.

Mission/Philosophy

Phase 1: Retrospective Pre-Lockdown. When reflecting on their organization's mission prior to the lockdown, participants described how their organization was planning to focus on learning, growth, and development. For example, one participant from Australia shared, "We do our best to run an all-inclusive, competitive program without cuts in divisions." Participants also generally highlighted the mission of creating a positive and safe environment that was fun for youth. Specifically, in the United Kingdom, one participant stated, "our aim is to provide the children from our local community with a safe and fun environment."

Phase 2: Present During Lockdown. During the lockdown, participants were reflecting on how organization missions needed to be reviewed. One participant in Peru stated, "The focus needs to be on inclusion, relationship building, anything but the competition." Several administrators from different countries discussed the same themes of lowering the importance of winning, performance, skill development, and competition while increasing emphasis on fun, inclusion, and relationship building. Participants also noted the importance of youth sport in the community, believing it was more important to facilitate positive experiences and provide more opportunities to play. During the lockdown, regardless of country of origin, administrators were focused on the same issue, wanting to provide youth athletes with the possibility to participate in fun sport experiences rather than competition.

Phase 3: Prospective Post-Lockdown. When asked about what changes they would make when returning to play, participants continued to discuss resetting their missions: "Greater perspective on why we play, lose the focus on winning and the craziness of the fans and parents if a team doesn't win or the child doesn't play all the time" (USA). They reiterated the importance of focusing on fun, reasons children play, growth/character development, and limiting an emphasis on winning. Some participants stressed the need to get all stakeholders (i.e., parents, coaches) on the same page, and that playing in college or professionally is not the primary mission of their organizations.

Participation Activities

Phase 1: Retrospective Pre-Lockdown. Administrators solely expressed competition (i.e., games) when reflecting on the typical activities their programs offered. For example, one American participant wanted to "provide teams and players an opportunity to play games in the best organized event." There was minimal description provided by participants regarding other activities (e.g., training camps, practices, games, tournaments) their programs offer to youth.

Phase 2: Present During Lockdown. Through the reflection offered by the lockdown, administrators described more concerns about the activities they could provide to youth. A participant from Australia shared their opinion that youth sport "should be less 'scheduled' time and more free play time." They stated concerns about time spent participating, such as the possibility of the season length being reevaluated, hours spent during the week may need to be lowered to allow for a better sport-life balance, and that excessive travel to games and practices was unnecessary. A Canadian participant shared their view: "I think we require a large time commitment from our players and we need to do a better job at offering a better sport-life balance." Administrators from different countries were coming to the same conclusion that sport participation requires a large commitment of youth and families. Subsequently, they discussed the importance of ensuring children had more time for free play and activities that did not put pressure on them.

Phase 3: Prospective Post-Lockdown. Through the reflection of the lockdown, participants described the changes they would have to make moving forward. These changes mirror the concerns highlighted in Phase 2 (i.e., season length, participation hours per week, travel). An American participant described their desires moving forward: "I wish the whole youth sports world would go back to focusing on local competition." Participants described the need for evaluating costs and expenses to make playing more affordable. Specifically, a participant in the United Kingdom shared: "We may need to support parents who may not be able to pay subs [fees] from the club funds." They expressed concern for families being unable to afford the cost of youth sport yet still wanted them to be able to participate, offering the potential of sliding scales or free programming.

Goals for Athletes

Phase 1: Retrospective Pre-Lockdown. Participants described goals for their athletes as continued participation in sport and holistic development. They stated participation should be fun and inclusive for all children. Further, participants hoped organizations would allow for more sport sampling (i.e., participating in multiple sports rather than specializing in one). Participants discussed holistic development by noting youth sport could provide opportunities for growth on multiple levels (i.e., intellectual, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, physical) and of various skills (i.e., life, motor, sport-specific). They also noted the importance of considering child development when creating "goals dependent on age groups and competitive levels" (USA).

Phase 2: Present During Lockdown. While reflecting during the lockdown period, participants expressed concerns that participation in youth sport may decrease post-lockdown. They highlighted that youth sport should be supporting children in their pursuit of maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle and provide an experience to be a part of a team. A Canadian participant stressed needing to "provide the opportunity to be part of a team, and provide social interaction." They noted that mental, social, and physical health was being overshadowed by winning. They also emphasized that supporting children's opportunities to play by providing equitable access to all should be prioritized.

Phase 3: Prospective Post-Lockdown. When asked about what they would change moving forward, participants stated the health of athletes and getting more kids opportunities to play. A participant in the United States expressed their opinion: "I would like our organization to prioritize playing a greater role in the overall health and well-being of our youth sports participants, not just a focus on sports." As participants described holistic development prior to lockdown, very little changed in the ideas of goals for athletes when considering the future. Regardless of country of origin, participants continued to believe holistic development and overall health and well-being goals should be at the center of youth sports.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to highlight administrators' reflections of youth sports organizations' operations and suggestions for moving forward after learning from the pause afforded by the COVID-19 lockdown. Overall, administrators believed youth sport is a place where organizations are set up for PYD, especially when integrating the elements of the PAF (i.e., engagement in activities, quality social dynamics, appropriate settings and organizational structures). However, an emphasis on competition and performance may be limiting the participation (a long-term outcome of the PAF) of children in youth sport. Therefore, we suggest three ways youth sport organizations and administrators can design positive youth sport experiences for their athletes: (a) administrators can present and promote missions of organizations to keep all youth sport stakeholders on the same page, (b) youth sport organizations can provide local free-play activities, and (c) organizations can provide equitable access for their programs to align with the goals of health and participation in youth sport.

Administrators can present and promote missions of organizations to keep all youth sport stakeholders on the same page.

There was a shift in participants' thinking about their organizations' mission and philosophy from competition and winning to fun and inclusion. Holding a coherent mission and effectively communicating with stakeholders is essential for youth sport programs to support those who participate (Martindale et al., 2005). However, limited research has been done in the area of enacting missions across the youth sport system, especially in reaching the short- and long-term outcomes of the PAF. With how difficult setting clear goals that do not conflict with another or the goals of stakeholders (Chelladurai, 2014), administrators can focus their efforts on setting clear and realistic missions for their programming and ensuring stakeholders are on the same page with promoting the 4Cs and 3Ps within the youth sport experience.

Administrators also stressed the importance of all stakeholders understanding the mission of the organization. Youth sport is a unique and dynamic system, where three subsystems come together to support the athlete across their developmental lifespan (Dorsch et al., 2022). Key adult leaders within these three subsystems of youth sport include administrators, coaches, and parents. Administrators are tasked with setting the mission and creating buy-in from coaches and parents. Therefore, having a mission can help administrators motivate other stakeholders to hold themselves accountable to the standards outlined within the mission (Moynihan & Pandey, 2004). Conversely, youth sport stakeholders can come together to develop a shared mission statement for their organizations (e.g., mad libs; Dorsch et al., 2021). Moreover, although youth athletes are often separated into different activity settings based on sport type, gender, or age, the COVID-19 pandemic may have led to a resurgence of engaging with one's siblings (Kelly et al., 2020). This is particularly important for both researchers and youth sport administrators to consider since the current literature concerning sibling relationships remains relatively limited (Blazo & Smith, 2018; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2013). After stating the need to get all stakeholders on the same page, participants elaborated on their role to enact the desired change by ensuring the organizations' activities and goals reflect the mission of the organization.

Youth sport organizations can provide local free-play activities to support development.

Engagement in activities saw the most changes that needed to be made by organizations. Initial thoughts for participants were solely based on competitive activities. Upon reflection, administrators suggested competition was causing too much travel and limited free play. Evans et al. (2020) proposed a series of questions pertaining to sport during the COVID-19 pandemic, where one queried whether the organizational structure would change. Noting the globalization of competitive sport, they debated on

whether continuing to promote global sport competitions was realistic. Indeed, the removal of organized competition due to COVID-19 may have helped administrators reflect on the most important aspects of youth sport. Results of this study substantiated that administrators of youth sport are emphasizing adapting the activity schedule to minimize the amount of travel their organizations require. Thus, the developmental model of sport participation (DMSP; Côté & Vierimaa, 2014; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009) is a useful framework that encapsulates the processes, pathways, and outcomes associated with activities across youth sport. Two postulates of the DMSP suggest deliberate play is associated with both performance and participation (i.e., 2 of the PAF 3Ps). Moreover, organizations are encouraged to consider Côté and Hancock's (2016) recommendations for programs when providing local activities (e.g., limit lengthy travel to organized competitions, promote deliberate play within and beyond organized sport).

Administrators also stated that participation activities should be developmentally appropriate. Engagement in sport activities can be characterized by: (a) the primary focus (i.e., practice activities focused on skill development vs. play activities focused on enjoyment), and (b) who directs the activity (i.e., adult vs. youth-led; Côté & Erickon, 2015). Based on the results of this study, organizations should aim to adapt their activities to ensure a healthy balance of competition and play for youth athletes). Moreover, administrators spoke primarily about adult-led activities, which highlights a need to facilitate more youth-led activities. Youth sport in the time of COVID-19 has resulted in young athletes engaging in increasing amounts of youth-led practice and play to fill the void of organized activities. Deliberate play offers an opportunity for youth to control their experience and self-regulate their behaviors (Baker & Côté, 2006) and can be helpful in developing intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of the sport experience (Soberlak & Côté, 2003). Administrators shared that organizations should be providing more opportunities for free play, which can be addressed by incorporating youth-led play activities.

Organizations can provide equitable access for their programs to align with the goals of health and participation in youth sport.

Participants suggested their goals for athletes (i.e., participation, holistic development) did not change. However, a key concern for participation in youth sport was the cost or accessibility of the programming. The sample of this study were primarily recreation/community-based and nonprofit programs where administrators suggested that youth sport organizations may need to lower costs or consider implementing an equitable payment scale. This is a timely suggestion since the COVID-19 pandemic may also have disproportionately affected lower socioeconomic status communities and their ability to participate in youth sports (Kelly, Erickson, Pierce, et al., 2020b; Project Play, 2020). Administrators felt the health of athletes was being overshadowed by this "pay to play" model. Therefore, organizations should consider the cost of their programs and offer a more inclusive price to increase participation rates and support the short- and long-term outcomes for athletes in youth sport.

Aligning missions, access, and activities with long-term outcomes can be a challenge for organizations to structure and subsequently achieve (Côté & Hancock, 2016). A few participants stated their concerns about being unsure of how to enact change or that they have previously attempted to implement changes and communicated the need for changes with leaders at the organization without witnessing subsequent change. It is critical for researchers and practitioners to learn from this unprecedented time and to collaborate in their attempts to enhance the quality of youth sport (Kelly, Erickson & Turnnidge, 2020). However, it seems the majority of athlete development pathways have continued in ways that they did before the pandemic, and in some cases, increased the professionalization of youth sport settings since returning (Belling et al., 2023; Mulyana & Suherman, 2023). The authors hope this study will highlight the lessons practitioners learned during the pandemic and remind scholars to inform youth sport research efforts with the intended outcomes of participation.

One specific way researchers can engage with youth sport organizations is through program evaluation. Program evaluations are employed to determine whether the activities of a program are effectively being carried out, goals have been achieved, and outcomes have been reached (Chelladurai, 2014). For example, this method has been utilized in youth sport when assessing programs' attempts at supporting character development (Flett et al., 2012) and sportspersonship (Wells et al., 2005) with youth sport participants. Program evaluations can be conducted to examine where the system is breaking down. Considering the short- and long-term outcomes (i.e., the 4Cs and 3Ps) for athletes, researchers and organizations can assess how they are attempting and whether or not they are achieving these outcomes within their programs. Therefore, youth sport organizations should evaluate their programs based on the capacity of their mission, activities, and organizational structure to foster short- and long-term outcomes (i.e., the 4Cs and 3Ps) of youth participants.

Limitations

This study was limited through a relatively small sample size of administrators that participated in this study. However, the study was constrained through contextual factors that may have influenced participant recruitment (e.g., sport administrators not attending to emails during the lockdown, having time off, added time pressures during lockdown). Further research would benefit from using stratified sampling and recruiting specific positions within organizations to analyze potential variation in administrators' perspectives across specific administrative roles. Moreover, all organizations may differ depending on location, level, and sport. Thus, it is important to work with specific organizations to support the effectiveness of their programming.

Conclusion

Using a qualitative content analysis, this study explored administrators' perspectives of youth sport programming. Findings presented three ways youth sport administrators and organizations can structure their programs to foster positive youth sport experiences: (a) administrators can present and promote missions of organizations to keep all youth sport stakeholders on the same page, (b) youth sport organizations can provide local free-play activities to contain the cost of participation, and (c) organizations can provide equitable access for their programs to align with the goals of health and participation in youth sport. Therefore, youth sport researchers and practitioners should work together to ensure the activities and programs consider the activities and organizational structures that align with intended short- (4Cs) and long-term (3Ps) outcomes for youth sport.

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