

Shaikh, Majidullah

School of Human Kinetics, University of Ottawa

Tanya Forneris, Diane Culver

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The Implementation of a Sport-based, Trauma-sensitive, Youth Development Program in a National Community Organization

Tags: Community sport, coaching, life skills, program design and evaluation, youth

Project Summary

Community organizations can adopt sport-based, trauma-sensitive, youth development programming to support underserved youth who face high risk of traumatic exposure. These programs involve leaders who create safe environments, recognize and respond to youth's trauma-related distress, and promote youth's healing and resilience-building.

In partnership with [BGC Canada](#), a national non-profit community organization that serves underserved youth, the Bounce Back League (BBL) was developed. The objective of this research was to explore how the BBL was implemented and the outcomes of this implementation.

Research questions:

- (a) What were the successes, challenges, and lessons learned in developing BBL?
- (b) How did leaders learn BBL programming?
- (c) How did leaders apply BBL programming?
- (d) What outcomes resulted from BBL programming (for leaders, Clubs, and youth)?

The results of this work helped to understand:

- (a) The value of youth development and trauma-sensitive approaches in this context
 - (b) Facilitators, constraints, and strategies for effective program planning, leaders' training, and program delivery
 - (c) Effectiveness and potential impacts of BBL on leaders and youth's development
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Sport program providers can use results to inform program decision-making in adopting these approaches, which can contribute to the difference between dark and bright futures for underserved youth.

Research Methods

A multi-disciplinary leadership team led the project, comprised of BGC Canada administrators, expert consultants from Edgework Consulting, and researchers from the University of Ottawa and The University of British Columbia. The team collaborated on project development, implementation, adaptation, and evaluation.

Over 4 years, 18 participating Clubs had leaders: (a) attend initial training workshops, (b) design and deliver BBL, and (c) receive ongoing support and learning opportunities (e.g., mentoring, monthly meetings, and interacting on Slack, an online workspace). Each BBL was ran weekly, afterschool, targeting youth ages 9-12 years old.

Multiple methods were used to collect data throughout, including individual and group interviews with leaders, leader-reported logbooks, surveys with leaders, leaders' assessments of members' participation, conversations on Slack, and researchers' observations of training opportunities and leaders' practices.

Research Results

1. What were the successes, challenges, and lessons learned in developing BBL?

Successes included:

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- (a) BBL was delivered to 3 Clubs in the Pilot years (2017-19), 10 more Clubs in the expansion (2019-20), and 5 more Clubs during the pandemic (2020-21). 700+ youth were reached
 - (b) 40+ leaders were trained and facilitated program components and integrated life skills successfully
 - (c) Leaders valued facilitating an intentional, structured program to facilitate youth development and trauma-sensitive approaches (as opposed to unstructured drop-in sporting activities)
 - (d) Adult-youth relationship building contributed to youth feeling more comfortable to approach staff with issues, and staff being more responsive
 - (e) Youth who spent more time in the program were seen adopting more skills and prosocial behaviours
 - (f) Youth reported feeling accepted, making friends, and learning sport and life skills
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Challenges included:

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- (a) Leader turnover, which impaired relationship-building and maintenance of program knowledge and skills over time
 - (b) Funding limitations, which made it difficult to hire and retain the staff necessary to run an efficient program
 - (c) Facilitating youth's life skill development and transfer
 - (d) Scheduling limitations, where BBL competed for youth's time in comparison to other sport and non-sport activities that youth already participated in outside of BGC – challenging attendance consistency and long-term engagement

(e) The pandemic resulted in several Club closures, loss of youth and staff members

Lessons learned included:

- (a) Rolling out the program slowly over time helped enabled learning from trial and error, understanding what features of programming are key, and adapting programming based on these insights
 - (b) Understanding Club's existing capacities (e.g., resources, staff), and working within these means, rather than simply adding-on, helped ease rollout and leaders' burden
 - (c) Maintaining ongoing communication with leadership team and community members was important to build strong relationships and re-negotiate project vision and priorities as the community's needs change
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2. How did leaders learn BBL programming?

Leaders valued training and support opportunities that were:

- (a) Delivery was engaging, incorporated problem-based learning and practical learning opportunities
 - (b) Content was relevant to their practice and specific contexts
 - (c) Training was facilitated by strong, credible experts who shared real-life cases of programming in action
 - (d) Environments facilitated hearing and learning from peers from other Clubs
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Leaders also learned through:

- (a) Their own practice (trial and error) and adapting practices to meet youth's needs
 - (b) Conversations/reflections with fellow leaders
 - (c) Completing logbooks to reflect on the successes/challenges in their practice
 - (d) Consulting resources on Slack
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Outcomes of learning included:

- (a) Greater *awareness* of the prevalence and impact of trauma on the brain, body, and behaviour, and their roles in supporting youth's trauma healing through sport.
 - (b) Shifted *attitudes* towards valuing training knowledge in offering a new lens and *skillset* to their existing youth work practice.
 - (c) Training knowledge was *transferrable* to youth interactions across the sport and non-sport activities they led.
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The results showed the importance of providing leaders with relevant and context-specific training, to facilitate improved knowledge, skills, attitudes, and confidence to integrate training into practice. Also, facilitating a variety of personal and social learning opportunities on an ongoing basis for leaders can encourage them to learn and share knowledge with others while they practice.

3. How did leaders apply BBL programming?

All BBL programs showed evidence of supportive relationships with adults and peers. There were differences between programs ran with trained leaders on-the-ground, and programs ran by untrained leaders. Trained leaders were stronger in maintaining the program structure, maximizing youth's engagement in movement-based activities, and facilitating life skills discussions. Trained leaders were less successful in facilitating sport-related skill development than untrained leaders who adopted more traditional, physical skill development foci.

The results showed the importance of training in facilitating high-quality programming, and then need for improving BBL training to help leaders learn sport coaching and athlete development skills alongside life skills teaching.

4. What outcomes resulted from BBL programming (for leaders, and youth)?

Long-standing leaders:

- (a) shifted perspectives on youth work and were equipped to support youth in their everyday lives
 - (b) became advocates for BBL and continued to volunteer their efforts in BBL sustainability initiatives (e.g., creating online training content, mentoring/training other Club leaders).
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The youth developed BBL-related language, adopted prosocial behaviours, and built life skills. The leaders were challenged in getting youth to transfer life skills beyond BBL, which may have been due to limited external support for transfer activities. BGC should consider having all leaders within their Clubs trained in youth development and trauma-sensitive approaches, to offer consistent support for youth and expand the environments and domains in which they learn and apply life skills.

Policy and Program Implications

Positive youth development and trauma-sensitive approaches integrated within sport programming can be useful in responding to youth's needs and offer them a means to build life skills through sport. Sport program providers should consider training leaders in these approaches so that they can adopt holistic understandings of their youth (beyond just as athletes), equip them with skills to respond to youth in times of dysregulation, and explicitly support their life skill building.

Staff turnover is an inevitable reality in this sector. Continual professional development and training opportunities are necessary to offer foundational knowledge (e.g., through online self-guided training modules), knowledge sharing (e.g., through communities of practice), and reflection (e.g., through individual/group mentoring).

Sport program providers should consider incorporating evaluation within programming on an ongoing basis. In BBL, having leaders' complete logbooks at the end of each BBL session doubled as both a reflection tool and an evaluation tool to understand the successes,

challenges, and strategies for program delivery. Such activities were used to improve supports for leaders in their practices as well as in adaptations to program and training materials.

Next Steps

Given the transferability of leaders' practices beyond BBL, and the difficulties of facilitating transfer through BBL alone, it warrants exploring how to move from program-based interventions to systems-based approaches to create expanded environments for life skills building. The next steps will be to explore how to incorporate trauma-sensitive and youth development approaches across a Club's activities, including non-sport programming, administration and leadership, human resources, family engagement, and community outreach activities. Such work will help to build shared knowledge across the Club, and systems that are more responsive to youth's needs.

Knowledge Translation

Infographics, videos, reports, and presentations were designed and delivered to BGC Canada and stakeholders across Canada (see attached).

Please disseminate this report to BGC Canada.