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Doctoral Stipend 2009

A Sport-based Critical Hours Program for Low-Income Youth

Project Summary

This program of research addressed three important issues faced by Canadian children; the problem of low physical activity, the need to increase sport participation, and the absence of programming during the 'critical hours' after-school period (see Active Health Kids Canada, 2012 Report Card for a review). It is particularly important to offer critical hours programming for children in low-income areas to provide safe places for them to develop skills, explore interests, and learn healthy living traits. Therefore, the overall purpose of this research was to develop, implement, and evaluate a sport-based critical hours program for children living in low-income areas of Edmonton, AB.

Research Methods

We conducted a 3 phase project. Based on a participatory action research (Park, 1993) approach, the first phase of the research involved developing an understanding of the context and building relationships with community partners. In the second phase a multi-sport program involving collaborations between the school board, schools, and provincial sport organizations was created and delivered to 37 children (from grades 2 and 3) at two schools in low-income areas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 program participants (i.e., children) and 19 stakeholders (i.e., adults) to evaluate program delivery and implementation.

In the third phase a revised program (now named TRY-Sport) was created and delivered to 35 children (from grades K-3) attending two schools in low-income areas (one school from phase 2 and one 'new' school). Following the program we interviewed 14 children to obtain their views about program content and skills they learned through participating in TRY-Sport.

Research Results

Qualitative analysis of data from phase 2 revealed five themes that depicted participants' views of the program: (1) "I Play Those Games Nowhere Else," (2) "Just General Life Skills," (3) "How We Fit in the Whole Picture," (4) "It's Not Always Financial," and (5) "Plan for it Long Term." Overall, findings showed that children had positive experiences, the program filled a void in their lives, and they learned some life skills. The adults' views supported some aspects of the delivery of the program and provided direction for future program development.

We revised the program based on our findings from phase 2. First, while collaborations with provincial sport organizations were valuable partnerships, we realized the need to create a more independent program that would still address a range of movement and sport skills without relying on provincial sport organizations to send staff to run program sessions. Second, we realized a need to more specifically target life skills in a consistent manner. Third, it was important the revised program required minimal equipment because schools did not have financial resources to buy/repair equipment. Finally, we built flexibility into the program so that it could fit with the requirements and constraints of different schools.

Hence, for the third and final phase of the project, we revised the program (and renamed it TRY-Sport). It was designed to teach fundamental movement skills and life skills through the sports of soccer, volleyball, and basketball in a manner consistent with the FUNDamentals stage of the Long Term Athlete Development/Canadian Sport 4 Life model. In addition, the program focused on teaching three life skills: Leadership, teamwork, and confidence.

Analysis of the children's interviews from phase 3 showed that in terms of program content the activities children reported they enjoyed the most were based on creating optimal challenges and 'adventures' which engaged their imaginations. Children also reported learning social and life skills (e.g., teamwork, sportspersonship, listening) along with a range of fundamental movement skills. These skills seemed to be specifically learned in the program and there was some evidence of transfer of these skills to other parts of the children's lives. Finally, the need to adapt program delivery within the context of the two different schools was confirmed as a strength of the approach. Thus, this study showed the importance of engaging children's imagination to deliver the TRY-Sport program and the need for a flexible approach.

Limitations of the research included the fact that the program was delivered to a relatively small number of schools/children and therefore the results likely generalize only to schools/children in similar circumstances to those we studied. We did not evaluate the effectiveness of the program in terms of its effects on sport participation or physical activity. Further research is needed to address these issues.

Policy Implications

The research showed that it was viable to provide high-quality critical hours programs to children who attend schools in low-income areas. These children face limited options during the critical hours period and have few opportunities to engage in organized sport activities. The critical hours period is an important opportunity to influence children's sport participation and levels of physical activity.

The main implications are as follows:

- 1) It was important to develop collaborations with organizations from multiple sectors. Such collaborations supported the creation and development of programs that address participants' needs. However, relying on these collaborations for program delivery was unsustainable. We showed that 'stand-alone' programs that are relevant to stakeholders' needs could be delivered with minimal staff/equipment and will therefore likely be more sustainable in the long-term.
- 2) TRY-Sport was shown to be viable approach that was positively received and appraised by children and adult stakeholders. It made a positive difference in the children's lives. Thus, the creation of such programs should be addressed by all levels of government.
- 3) Our research showed critical hours programs should be created and delivered in a flexible rather than standardized manner. A flexible approach that has certain core principles (i.e., fundamental movement skills and select life skills) and can be adapted to the circumstances and restraints faced in particular schools is required. There is no 'one size fits all' critical hours program, but a flexible approach based on core principles appears to represent a valuable and practical way forward.
- 4) Given that the federal government is exploring ways to promote sport and physical activity, and that the Children's Fitness Tax Credit program appears to benefit middle and higher income families (Spence, J. C., Holt, N. L., Dutove, J., & Carson, V. (2010). Uptake and effectiveness of the Children's Fitness Tax Credit in Canada: The rich get richer. *BMC Public Health*, 10, 356. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-10-356) the provision of direct funding to critical hours programs represents a policy option. This issue

also applies to provincial governments that have introduced tax credit programs for children's sport/physical activity.

Next Steps

There is a need to evaluate the effectiveness and longer-term outcomes of the TRY-Sport program. A 'program manual' that includes the core principles of the TRY-Sport program will be created and disseminated. This will be useful for various organizations who wish to deliver critical hours programs.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

- Provincial and National Sport Organizations
- Branches of provincial and federal governments responsible for sport/physical activity promotion.
- Physical and Health Education Canada
- Schools, school boards.
- Active Health Kids Canada