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Doctorate 2008

Relative Age, Recreation Sport Participation and Youth Development

Project Summary

In both youth sport and education, children and adolescents are grouped into cohorts by using annual age grouping policies, whereby a child must be a certain age by a specified selection date (e.g., December 31st). Relative age describes the fact that children born early in their cohort/selection year (e.g., January) will be *relatively older* - by up to 12 months - than their peers that are born late in the selection year (e.g., December). Research has shown that relatively older youth may be more likely to be selected to youth sport teams, including school sports teams, and also more likely to make it to elite/professional levels of play in some sports (i.e., soccer and hockey).

The purposes of the current project were:

- To gain a better understanding of the different factors that might affect whether or not relative age influences recreational youth sport participation among boys and girls. The current project considered the quality (low vs. high) of youths' school environment.
- To explore how sport participation and relative age interact to influence indicators of positive development (i.e., self-perceptions of academic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioural conduct and global self-worth).

Relative age was only an influence on sport participation among boys in a school with a low quality rating, with relatively older boys more likely to participate. Relatively older boys also reported higher levels of enjoyment of sport and physical education. Relative age was not related to participation or enjoyment among girls in a *lower-rated* school or a school with high quality rating. And relative age was not related to participation among boys in a *higher-rated* school. Interestingly, sport participation was only related to indicators of positive youth development among boys in the *higher-rated* school, where relative age had no influence on participation.

Research Methods

Participants were purposefully sampled from two different schools in the United Kingdom. The first sample was drawn from a school which had been given the lowest possible quality rating (i.e., Inadequate) by government inspection procedures. Youth were 11 to 14 years of age (mean±: 12.9, ± 0.86), and the sample size was 391 (46.3% female). The second sample was drawn from a school which had been given the highest possible quality rating (i.e., Outstanding). Youth were 11 to 12 years of age (mean±: 11.70, ±0.29), and the total sample size was 206 (48.1% female). Participants completed questionnaires that asked them to describe their participation in sport(s), how much they enjoyed sport, and indicators of positive youth development (i.e., self-perceptions of academic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioural conduct, and global self-worth). Demographic and school-related variables were also collected from the schools.

Research Results

Among those in the *Inadequate-rated* school relatively older boys were more likely to be participating in sport(s). Relatively older boys, regardless of whether they participated in sport, also reported higher levels of enjoyment for both sport and physical education (PE) classes. Relative age did not influence sport participation or enjoyment of sport and/or PE among girls. Overall, approximately 32% of youth from this school participated in sport(s). Relative age and/or sport participation did not have an influence on boys or girls self-perceptions.

Relative age had no influence on sport participation among either boys or girls in the *Outstanding-rated* school. Overall, 76% of youth in this school regularly participated in sport, making youth in this school approximately 7 times (OR: 6.98, 95% CI: 4.75-10.26) more likely to participate in sport compared to youth in the *Inadequate-rated school*. Boys, and to a lesser extent girls, who participated in sport(s) had higher self-perceptions (i.e., perceptions of academic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, and global self-worth) compared to those than didn't participate

Generalizations based on this project should be tempered by the fact that only two schools were sampled, and significant variation between schools may exist. Similarly, this project is only one of the few that has explored relative age among recreational participants and females; as such more research is needed in these areas. Furthermore, future research will need to consider the influence of specific sports on the trends reported in the current project.

Policy Implications

The results of the current project suggest that addressing the influence of relative on sport participation, at least at the recreational level, may not require making modifications to selections dates or annual age grouping policies. Solutions may need to consider wider social trends (such as inequalities in the distribution of resources), and broader non-sport characteristics (such as school environment). Furthermore, any policies aimed at addressing the influences of relative age may need to be gender-specific (since relative age had a more salient influence among boys). In summary, just looking at relative age alone does not provide a “whole picture” of the factors that influence sport participation.

Next Steps

The findings of the current study suggest several possible directions for future research. In particular, the current project suggests that by only looking at relative age alone important nuances and trends may be missed. Therefore, for a complete understanding of how relative age influences sport participation and outcomes related to sport participation, future research will need to consider relative age alongside the many other factors that have been shown to influence sport participation. This “whole picture” may involve including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, family size, overall age as well as characteristics of specific sports in future relative age research projects.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

The influence of relative age on sport participation would be of interest to policy makers, parents and coaches involved in both recreational and competitive youth sport. However, the results of the current project may

also be of interest to those within the education sector. Dialogues between those in the sport and education sectors may be necessary to address the complexities of relative age's influence on sport participation.