Fostering Empowerment: A Review of Youth Sports Programs

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Abstract

Sports are a popular vehicle worldwide for supporting healthy youth development, and many sports program descriptions include a reference to youth empowerment. However, the definition and construct of empowerment in relation to youth sports have not been extensively researched. This study considers how youth sports programs define, address and measure empowerment. Surveys were completed through a combination of website reviews and interviews with program representatives, and data was analyzed using an inductive approach. Results include a descriptive definition of the empowerment process, as well as examples of program curricula and evaluation methods used. These findings suggest a need for the clarification of "empowerment" within the context of youth sports programs, as use of the term with lack of a clear basis could serve to undermine its effectiveness.

> *"For, what are sport, exercise, play, and physical education about, and for, if not human freedom? The essence of sport, exercise, and physical education work lies in liberating and empowering people, enabling them to eliminate terror, find joy, maximize their freedom, and improve their health and wellbeing. This empowerment-oriented freedom has a dual character. It is freedom FROM terror, oppression, and the ills of poverty, and it is freedom to CHOOSE, starting with what to do, play, and create."*[1]

1. Background

Empowerment is in its essence a question of power, which implies personal strength. However, its meanings can be fluid and contextually dependent. Page and Czuba define empowerment as "a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they define as important".[2] Christens and Peterson outline empowerment as a core element of human development,[3] and Cattaneo and Chapman state that it is central to the work of improving human lives.[4] According to The World Bank, empowerment is "the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" and has intrinsic value in that it allows the individual to live with dignity and respect, and is therefore an end in and of itself .[5] Empowerment implies the harnessing of personal control and research indicates that a sense of personal control is linked to increased health and wellbeing for individuals.[6] This health benefit may be due to the fostering of a natural urge to work toward positive change,[7] and to the reduction of fear that arises from feelings of powerlessness. Empowerment also is believed to be a moderator of stress and threat, as it allows for personal perseverance in times of difficulty.[8] It is fundamental to the prevention of hopelessness and alienation, as it promotes personal agency in sociopolitical contexts.[9] Further, empowerment forms the underlying mechanism for righting societal power imbalances.[10]

2. Introduction

Supporting empowerment in youth appears to be particularly developmentally appropriate. Childhood and adolescence are periods of immense growth during which youth are challenged in many ways during and many initiate risky behaviors such as criminal activity, self-harm, and substance use.[11, 12] Additionally, many experience issues with body image and self-esteem.[13] However, risk behaviors established during childhood are largely preventable[11] and research indicates that although adolescents may experience a period of identity crisis and formation, participation in meaningful activity may mitigate some of its negative effects.[14] Additionally, a focus on the strengths of adolescents as opposed to their deficits has been reported to promote effective positive change across the teen years.[15] It is believed that youth who are effectively engaged and supported will be able to transfer critical skills into their adult lives.[16] Youth empowerment in particular has received a significant amount of attention in recent years. Empowerment is linked to youth wellbeing, as evidenced in Wallerstein's comprehensive study, which found that youth empowerment interventions were related to various empowerment outcomes, and that those were linked to improved health and educational outcomes.[17] New challenges of our global society, such as rapid technological advances and increases in cultural exchange, also inspire development of new competencies in youth that will allow them to contribute to the world in meaningful ways.[18] Additionally, funders and policy makers are increasingly interested in programs that foster youth empowerment, as they are believed to support greater civic engagement and opportunities for success.[18] Youth are viewed as resources of great potential, and programs that support youth empowerment support healthy development in many ways.[19]

Among the programs promoting youth empowerment, youth sports have long contributed to the wellbeing of young people. Physical activity has a direct relationship with improved health.[20] Additionally, research by Scales, Benson, Leffert, and Blyth showed that weekly participation in sports or other community organizations was more highly linked to thriving outcomes among adolescents than all other assets surveyed.[21] Youth who participate in organized sports have scored significantly higher in measures of self-concept than non-participants, with girls showing even more benefit than boys in this regard.[22]

Sports foster empowerment because they allow the individual to experience challenges across a range of domains that can support confidence and belief in one's own ability. Sports also may be considered moral activities, offering opportunities to engage personal values within the context of rules and relationships.[23, 24, 25] As an educational forum, sports can be considered as experiential, which John Dewey identified as fundamental in gaining an understanding of the world.[26] The experiences of winning, losing, persistence, teamwork, and resilience can be utilized throughout the lifetime in what WomenWin describes as the ripple effect of sports participation.[27] Additionally, DiCola states that abilities gained through youth sports can improve future employment opportunities and income levels.[28] Sports and empowerment are part of a larger framework that considers the global need for improved health, community development, and collaboration.

As the concept of empowerment gains popularity, many youth sports programs are utilizing this terminology in their program descriptions. However, although many studies have addressed the relationship between sports and youth development, [22, 24, 25, 29, 30, 31, 32] the concept of empowerment as addressed in youth sports programs has not been studied as widely. Similarly, although empowerment is believed to be a process that is developed over time, little has been written as to how programs are facilitating this process.[33] As Chamberlin points out, "The word has become common political rhetoric, with a flexibility of meaning so broad that it seems to be in danger of losing any inherent meaning at all".[34]

As such, the current study examines the how youth sports programs that report to foster empowerment in youth: 1) define empowerment; 2) address empowerment through their program design and content; and 3) measure/evaluate empowerment in their programs. Understanding how youth sports programs conceptualize and operationalize empowerment will provide insight into the meanings and use of the concept and possible recommendations for facilitation of programs in the future.

3. Method

This study utilized a cross-sectional design involving website reviews and structured interviews with representatives of youth sports program that explicitly referenced "empowerment" of their participants in their online program descriptions. The sample was drawn by first searching at google.com the terms "empower", "youth", and "sports", yielding a total of 49 potentially eligible programs (see Figure 1). The program websites were then reviewed for the term "empower" on their 'home' and 'about us' or similar pages. Twenty-eight programs met these criteria. One program, conducted by the U.S. State Department initiative, was excluded because the nature of the program was

potentially to be different from the others, which were private (for-profit and not-for-profit) entities. Box 1 lists the organizations ultimately included in the study.
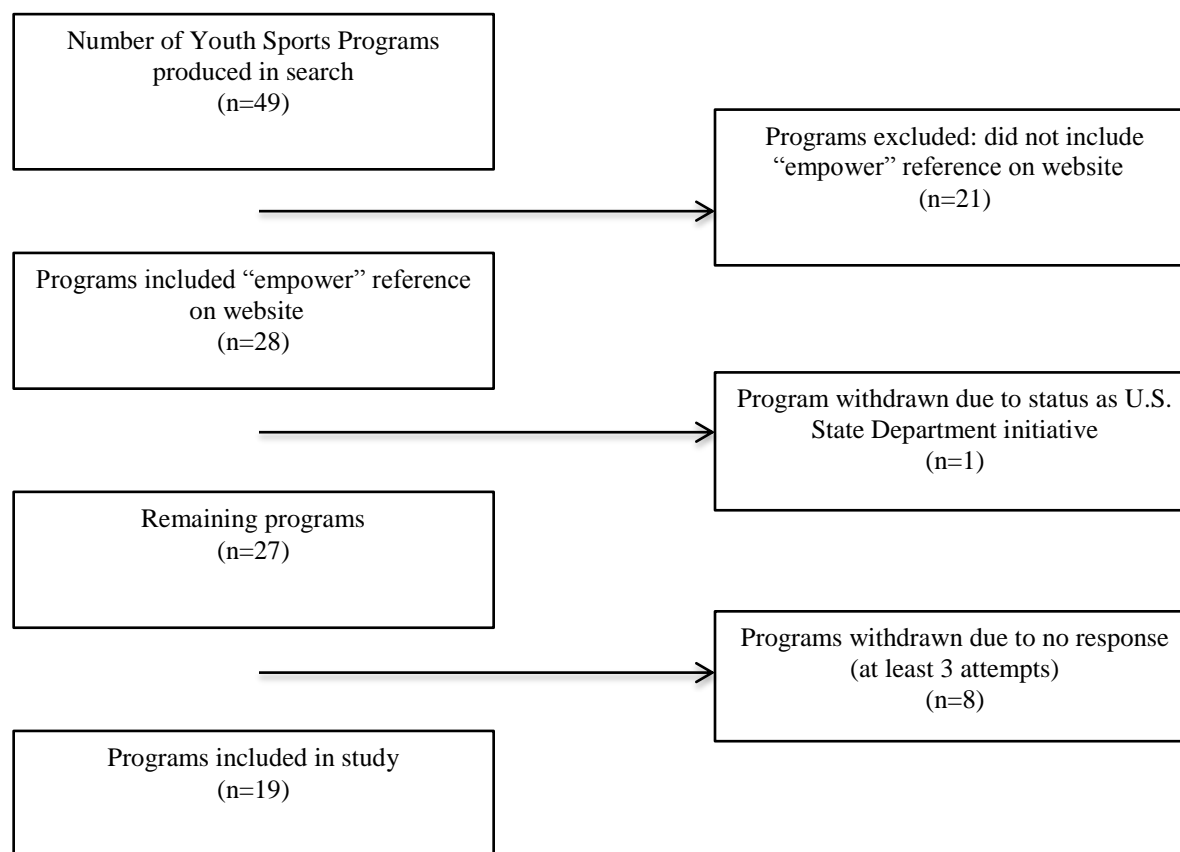
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┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Number of Youth Sports      │
│ Programs produced in search │
│         (n=49)              │
└─────────────────────────────┘
                              ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                              │ Programs excluded: did not    │
                     ───────▶ │ include "empower" reference   │
                              │ on website                    │
                              │         (n=21)                │
                              └──────────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Programs included "empower"  │
│ reference on website         │
│         (n=28)               │
└─────────────────────────────┘
                              ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                              │ Program withdrawn due to      │
                     ───────▶ │ status as U.S. State          │
                              │ Department initiative         │
                              │         (n=1)                 │
                              └──────────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Remaining programs           │
│         (n=27)               │
└─────────────────────────────┘
                              ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                              │ Programs withdrawn due to     │
                     ───────▶ │ no response                   │
                              │ (at least 3 attempts)         │
                              │         (n=8)                 │
                              └──────────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Programs included in study   │
│         (n=19)               │
└─────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 1. Program sample selection flow chart

Box 1. List of participating programs

America Scores	Kelly's Champions
www.americascores.org	www.kellyschampions.net
Beat The Streets Columbus	Legacy Youth Tennis
www.btscolumbus.com	www.legacyyte.org
Black Women In Sport Foundation	MGR Youth Empowerment
www.blackwomeninsport.org	www.mgrf.org
Cadence Youth Cycling	Philadelphia City Rowing
www.bicyclecoalition.org	www.philadelphiacityrowing.org
Empower Youth Football	Piers Park Sailing
www.empoweryfcl.org	www.piersparksailing.org
Future Stars Academy	Right To Play
www.futurestarsacademy.org	www.righttoplayusa.org
Girls Inc. Sporting Chance	Sportsmen's Tennis Center HEY Sister
www.girlsinc.org	www.sportsmenstennis.org
Girls On The Run	Team Up Philly
www.girlsontherun.org	www.teamupphilly.org
International Sports Alliance	Up 2 Us
www.isa-youth.org	www.up2us.org
	Women Win Goal Programme
	www.goalprogramme.org

Once the sample was identified, general information about the program was extracted from the program websites. This information included addresses, contacts, references to empowerment, mission statements, and program descriptions. Additional information about the conceptualization, implementation, and measurement of empowerment was gathered through structured interviews with representatives from the organizations. The University of North Carolina Asheville Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the interview study protocol and participants gave verbal consent for their organization/program name and relevant information to be included. An initial introductory email was sent to each program requesting a telephone interview. Eight programs were subsequently excluded. One program was excluded due to an invalid email address, two due to disconnected telephone numbers, and five were excluded due to a lack of response to requests for information. Ultimately, a total of 19 programs were included in this study (Box 1). Fifteen program representatives were interviewed by telephone, and four representatives preferred to complete the survey questions through email correspondence. Phone interviews averaged 25 minutes in length. The interviews included questions about program design and curricula, individual challenges, measurement of outcomes, and defining empowerment within the context of specific programs. Frequencies of quantitative information from the website review and interviews were tallied and themes that emerged through an inductive process from the qualitative information are summarized in the results section.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The programs in this study were from a broad geographic area, with 84% based in the U.S. and 16% in other countries, including one in Tanzania and two in the Netherlands. The programs focused on a wide variety of sports, including CrossFit, cycling, football, rowing, running, sailing, soccer, tennis, and wrestling. A majority of programs used volunteers and/or mentors, required and/or provided facilitator training and/or certifications, and were offered at no cost to participants. A majority of programs also provided equipment, supplies, transportation and snacks to participants (see Table 1). Seventy-nine percent of the programs offered after school programs, and 74% offered programming for middle school aged participants. Sixty-three percent did not involve only a particular gender, 32% were female-only programs, and 5% were male-only.

Table 1. Characteristics of participating programs

	n	%
Location (n=19)		
USA	16	84
Outside USA	3	16
Scope (n=19)		
Local	9	47
Regional	2	11
National	3	16
International	5	26
Years of Operation (n=17)		
0-3 years	2	12
4-10 years	8	47
11-19 years	1	6
20+ years	6	35
Grades Served* (n=19)		
Elementary	9	47
Middle	14	74
High	8	42
Gender(s) Served (n=19)		
Girls only	6	32
Boys only	1	5

Inclusive	12	63
Times Offered (n=19)		
After school	10	53
Saturdays	1	5
Varies (includes after school)	8	42
Certification/Training Provided (n=18)	14	78
Uses Volunteers/Mentors (n=17)	14	82

* May be more than one

4.2 Defining Empowerment

Program representatives were asked to define *empowerment* in the context of their organizations. Most of the definitions of empowerment framed it as a process that included three sequential parts: 1) what the programs provided to participants, 2) what these provisions allow youth to know, believe, or do, and 3) the desired perceptions and behaviors that can be manifested through this process. Table 2 presents aspects of these dimensions, shared by the respondents.

Table 2. Aspects of empowerment drawn from organization representatives' definitions

Programs provided…	To allow youth to…	So they can…
Tools	Build skills	Be independent
Opportunities	Increase knowledge	Be successful
Resources	Increase competence	Have control in their lives
Space to have a voice	See what they're capable of	Realize their dreams
	See their strengths	Create community change
	Believe that they have a choice	Be able to resolve conflicts and
	Believe in themselves	problems
	Develop: leadership, self-efficacy,	
	self-esteem, courage, confidence,	
	responsibility	

The words of organization representatives provide the best illustration of this. For instance, the representative of Girls Inc. stated that empowerment is "helping girls to see their strengths. The program is grounded in a strengths based perspective; we are not here to rescue girls. Adults can help to unleash strengths, and help participants see that they can do whatever they want to do and be successful." Similarly, the representative of Girls on the Run describes what they do as "preparing participants to address any situation with confidence and competence, being given the skills to negotiate the world." The representative from the Black Women in Sport Foundation described empowerment as "the feeling that you can do what you want to do, especially for females." She went on to say, "You can say the words, but you have to go through the experiential process in order to build confidence. Girls can be pioneers but it's a difficult task. If we collaborate around the mission there's so much we can do for the greater good." Finally, the definition of empowerment shared by the representative of the Future Stars Academy in Tanzania was, "to free the mind and think of possibilities. Giving belief where once there was despair!"

4.3 Addressing empowerment through program design and content

Programming varied across the organizations in this study, with 90% utilizing some type of curriculum. The curricula were developed by outside providers as well as by program facilitators. They also included separate modules, themes, or tiers for specific populations or sports. Some programs used curricula based on experiential learning theory and others used curricula based on social and emotional learning principles. The representative of one organization, Right to Play, commented that they used a curriculum that was developed by participants to be used for subsequent programs. "What you create needs to resonate with the community you serve. Building relationships is where the work begins."

Some curricula involved a step-wise involvement for participants. For example, Piers Park Sailing Center had a future leaders program for students ages 13-15 years who want to develop leadership skills. They complete the program over the course of two summers and some of the participants have used the experience on college applications, as it makes them unique. They also develop job skills, as in the program they must create a resume and cover letter to apply to the program. Similarly, the Cadence Youth Cycling representative shared, "We want the participants to have a larger voice in the program, therefore have developed a "leadership ladder" the participants can progress through."

Many program representatives discussed the correlation between developing physical abilities and mental or emotional empowerment. The Kelly's Champions representative described using CrossFit to help build confidence and self-efficacy in this way as, "Once participants become physically strong, they gain the courage to try things that they never would have tried before." In many programs, participants are encouraged to express the personal growth they experience as it relates to their increased physical prowess. Keeping them engaged and allowing them to experience feelings of competency are key to this process. As the Girls Inc. representative explained, many girls drop out of sports at ages 12-14. This program has developed specific curricula for different age groups, and for this age in particular they introduce participants to non-traditional sports. Finding an activity that supports feelings of accomplishment and builds on individual strengths can lead to development of a personal sense of power, and this translates to other life experiences.

4.4 Measuring Empowerment

Of the 19 programs, 14 (74%) representatives reported that they had conducted program evaluations. Seven of these were local or regional, three were national, and four were international in scope. Evaluation information, such as reports or other documents, was available for review from 10 of these 14 organizations. There was substantial variation in methods of evaluation within the survey group. These included the use of proprietary evaluation instruments, participation in university studies, measurement of social and emotional learning competencies, and self-esteem scale measurement.[35, 36] Some programs engaged in creative monitoring and evaluation, using methods such as the Most Significant Change technique to gauge program efficacy.[37] Some programs used a combination of evaluation methods. The program evaluations emphasized the measurement of outcomes for the participants in the form of competencies, such as those presented in Box 2.

Box 2. Competencies mentioned as part of program evaluation

Caring	Character attributes	Communication skills
Critical thinking skills	Decision-making skills	Discipline
Empathy	Goal-setting/ planning/implementation	Leadership skills
Positive identity	Problem solving	Respect for others
Responsibility	Self-awareness	Self-compassion
Self-concept	Self-confidence	Self-efficacy
Self-esteem	Self-management	Social awareness
Social confidence	Social connections/relationships	Teamwork

5. Discussion

Responses to the question, "How do youth sports programs define empowerment?" suggest that empowerment was defined as a process involving various descriptive elements. Programs used differing terminology, but the overall definition reflected the provision of resources and opportunities for youth to develop a belief in their own power in applicable contexts, similar to a journey, as opposed to a destination.[33] The programs in this study sought to support youth along this journey by providing experiences that enabled the development of personal power. Power lies at the heart of this process, and becomes empowerment when realized within the context of social relationships.[2] It is not a quality that can be taught or transferred directly, but must be manifested through a personal process in the individual.[38] Sports programs provide a unique opportunity for individuals to develop their power and to become more empowered by offering scenarios that are representative of larger life experiences through the lens of sports participation. This experiential component gives the opportunity to practice skills that can lead to individual competence, efficacy, and mastery, which have been identified as components of psychological empowerment.[39]

Although empowerment is linked to self-efficacy, it varies in its manifestation. Whereas self-efficacy has been defined as belief in personal ability to succeed or accomplish a task,[40] empowerment implies the possession of knowledge or tools that can allow the individual to achieve that success. As reported by the participants in this study, in the context of youth programs, this empowerment will not be effective without associated competencies such as decision-making, critical thinking, assertiveness, etc. As stated by Huebner, empowerment itself is not effective as a strategy for developing competencies in youth, but is a potent attribute in those who possess the competencies needed to achieve a desired outcome.[32] In other words, it is the culminating factor that allows an individual possessing appropriate competencies to perform meaningful actions. This combination of competencies, tools and knowledge with perceived power provides a theoretical basis for empowerment, which was illustrated in the definitions of the empowerment offered by the study participants; however, it also suggests a challenge in identifying one common definition of empowerment.

Rappaport stated that it is possible to define empowerment by its absence yet difficult to define it in action, as it varies between different individuals and contexts.[41] This is reflected in the variation of definition as presented by the surveyed programs. Analysis of the surveys showed a conceptual process that can be described as having three critical aspects including provisions, capacity building, and desired actions. Programs defined provisions as the tools, opportunities and resources given to participants. These were provided in order to allow participants to develop capacities, defined as skills, knowledge, competence, and the perception of personal strengths and capabilities. These personal capacities translate as empowerment when manifested in participants' actions, such as taking control in their lives and contributing to change in their communities. This definition supports previous empowerment theories such as Cattaneo and Chapman's which describes a "personally meaningful increase in power that a person obtains through his or her own efforts".[4] As the surveyed programs stated, providing opportunity does not imply empowerment, but serves to support the empowerment process within the individual. The resulting competencies must be personally meaningful,[33] and may therefore vary substantially among individuals. This concept is evidenced by the broadly inclusive terms used in surveys such as "skills" and "knowledge." Additionally, as Bailey has pointed out, there is an implied connection between the individual and community,[42] and empowerment will be realized only when a person acts in a way that illustrates their embodiment of empowerment, for instance by taking on a leadership role, or by acting as an agent of change. These manifestations of empowerment support the recognition of sociopolitical control as a key indicator of the process of its development.[3] The programs in this study displayed a consistent conceptual understanding of empowerment, despite the lack of a succinct, cohesive definition. A more accessible definition will serve to make the concept and process more meaningful, thus supporting the efforts of program facilitators.

The approaches utilized by surveyed programs in fostering the process of empowerment varied in design and content. Although there was variation, all were contributing to the process of developing empowerment in program participants through a combination of sports experiences and specific curricula. Although curricula were not extensively analyzed in this study, and not all curricula were available for review, those that were available generally reflected a highly individualized design approach, which is consistent with the notion that empowerment is contextually dependent and linked to the greater social environment. Available curricula were impressive in scope and design, and many utilized an interactive approach that included discussion and individual reflection. This is consistent with previous research that identified a mutual partnering of adults and youth that allows for engagement and reflection as a key element in the program environment.[43, 44]

Although the surveyed curricula encouraged and supported the development of competencies, what was not clear was the extent to which empowerment was specifically being addressed within the programs. Coalter suggests that there is no predictable effect of sports programs on personal development;[29] however, if empowerment is a critical program objective, it could be important to articulate the process for participants. This articulation can allow them to

understand what it means to be empowered, how to be aware of the process, and how to utilize competencies in manifesting empowerment in their lives. Empowerment implies personal power and therefore it makes sense to allow program participants to have a sense of ownership within the process. Placing youth in positions of decision-making has been identified as critical to the empowerment process, as assigning value to their decisions supports individual self-concept and self-efficacy.[18, 30]

Use of empowerment process models such as that developed by Cattaneo & Chapman in program design could be beneficial and allow for articulation of theories as well as mechanisms for implementation.[4, 29] Goal setting and implementation are believed to be key indicators of empowerment, and the opportunity to practice these skills is an important consideration in program design.[4, 30] Helping participants to identify personally meaningful goals is essential in encouraging feelings of empowerment upon goal achievement. Additionally, Cattaneo and Chapman have stated that goals not including a personal dimension do not constitute empowerment, as meaningful intent is key to the separation of empowerment from the pure pursuit of power.[4] Girls Inc. and the Black Women in Sports Foundation are two survey participants that include goal setting in their program curricula. As stated on the Girls Inc website, setting personal goals allows participants to create their own definitions of success, and through taking calculated risks, they are able to build self-reliance and a sense of personal power.

Equitable power sharing has likewise been identified as key to empowerment in youth.[43] Cadence Youth Cycling, Right To Play, and Piers Park Sailing are among study participants that include youth leadership as components of their programs. Piers Park's representative stated that participants in their leadership program have been able to utilize this unique experience in crafting successful college applications. Cadence includes program participants in the development of program evaluations, among other leadership roles. Curricula that utilize practices such as these within an intentional empowerment framework may provide the basis for the best outcomes. As stated by Morton and Montgomery, assets built within youth programs may be seen as pathways to the distal indicators of success and wellbeing.[18]

It is worth noting that regardless of curricula, individual facilitators will substantially influence any program, and therefore careful attention should be paid to who is working with youth in any program. The majority of programs in this study required or provided training and/or certifications for staff, which indicates their professional level of commitment to participants. Research regarding youth programs shows that relationships with supportive adults in a safe environment are key to this process,[18, 42, 43] as adults act as the guides for participants' personal growth. Program facilitators are charged with supporting each participant's own process of empowerment, which likely will span a time period much larger than that of program participation.[4] Training that is consistent with program goals and desired outcomes may best allow facilitators to support the empowerment process as well as other developmental goals for participants.

As stated by Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, there is a need for rigorous evaluation to ensure that resources are invested in interventions and practices that produce intended outcomes for identified populations.[45] Of the 19 surveyed programs, 14 reported that they have engaged in some type of evaluation, and 10 of those were available (to some degree) for review. Programs utilized a wide range of evaluation methods and measurement criteria, likely due to the variation in the programs' scope, locations, and durations. Measurement of empowerment specifically was not evidenced in the available examples, which is indicative of the aforementioned challenges in regard to definition of the term. If empowerment is difficult to define, it will be difficult to measure.

As the process of empowerment may not fit clearly into measurable criteria, evaluations typically focus on indicators that produce more definable results. In this study, some evaluations were focused on measurement of physical indicators in participants. Some programs focused specifically on evaluation of financial literacy, reproductive rights, or other identified population needs. Additionally, most program evaluations in this study measured competencies and attributes that are believed to be indicators of empowerment, such as goal setting and leadership skills.

Measuring competencies as proxies for empowerment may present challenges as well. Some of this difficulty may be related to developmental stages of the participants who are undergoing periods of significant change and growth. During this time, multiple life experiences may be contributing to changes in measured personal attributes, which are difficult to separate from program participation.[28] Additionally, competencies may be subjective, and as evaluation methods most typically involve self-reported measures, they may not be accurate reflections of participants' skill levels. Finally, competencies may not equate to desired outcomes, which in the case of empowerment may manifest well after a participant is no longer involved in a program. Therefore, what is being measured in relation to empowerment should be linked to a specified framework with clearly defined contributing competencies.[5]

Coakley suggested that the efficacy of youth development programs could be evaluated specifically by looking at how they provide guidance to youth to enhance their ability to make informed decisions about factors that influence their lives.[28] Recognition of the difficulty in evaluating 'soft outcomes' such as the competencies listed here has led to the development of various methods for program monitoring and evaluation, such as *The Most Significant Change*

technique.[36] This method uses narration of stories to illustrate changes in skills that are considered to be crucial as well as intangible in terms of measurement.[46] Techniques such as *The Most Significant Change* are considered to be supplemental to more traditional types of measurement, as they are in essence fleshing out the stories of programs and their effects on the lives of those they serve. This and other methods are particularly useful in areas of low literacy, but in all cases can be a creative addition to the evaluation process. Mixed-methods designs in general are believed to provide a more comprehensive view of both processes and outcomes in program evaluation.[47]

Although program evaluation in this context presents unique challenges, it may be critical for program funding and longevity. Evaluation can serve to assign validity that may support program advocacy efforts. Many programs have met this challenge by engaging in thoughtful, systematic program design that lends itself to effective evaluation. One such program is Right To Play.[48] Right To Play facilitates programs involving sport and play around the world, in a wide variety of communities. Information from a telephone interview described their general program design, which begins with an individual needs assessments for each community they serve. Curricula are developed in response to identified needs, and interventions are designed to address these needs specifically. Right To Play employs experiential learning theory to guide programming, which includes reflective group dialogue after every activity. Their evaluations measure outcomes that are specifically identified for each program. Using needs assessment and evaluation information to guide interventions sets the stage for the most positive outcomes, and allows for understandable and useful evaluation information.

As youth sports and development programs become more prevalent, evaluation will be an increasingly important component of program design. As program administrators face the challenges that this presents along with funding, staffing, and logistics issues, they may find collaborative efforts to be highly beneficial. One example of a community effort supporting youth is the Philadelphia Youth Sports Collaborative.[49] PYSC has been implemented by the city of Philadelphia along with multiple initiatives in an effort to address larger social issues affecting youth. According to their literature, this collaborative effort has allowed partner programs to attract more resources, promoted community engagement, and augmented the impact of programming. This collaborative effort can be used as a model for communities wishing to combine resources and work together to support youth development across varying platforms.

To the knowledge of the authors, this study was the first to utilize interviews to gather information about youth sports programs promoting empowerment. The method allowed researchers to collect both quantitative program information and more qualitative responses concerning how the representatives talk about empowerment in the context of their programs. Since the study used organization/program websites to determine inclusion in the study, some programs may have been misclassified because they did or did not include the word empowerment on their web pages. Six selected participants did not respond to follow-up emails to participate. Since the organizations and programs were so different, it also was difficult to identify themes across programs.

Future research should articulate not only definitions of empowerment within program frameworks, but should also specify methods by which it will be enhanced. In this way, outcome measurement may be evaluated across the wide variety of existing programs in a comparative way.

Since this study revealed a lack of a common definition of empowerment and, related, no measures of empowerment, there are implications for funders and other supporters of such programs. If a program is expected by funders to develop empowerment in youth, it must be clear that there are intermediate competencies that are measured in program evaluation in order to determine whether the program itself is effective at achieving its objectives. Program funders, as well as program developers, must recognize this step-wise process in its calls and requirements of grantees.

6. Conclusion

The programs included in this study offer opportunities for developing empowerment among youth through participation in sport. Their focus on youth empowerment highlights a meaningful concept that has great value in the context of youth development. However, empowerment may not necessarily be an easily identifiable outcome for program participants. The question remains of whether the use of the word empowerment, with no clear definition, undermines its effectiveness. In the future, it may be beneficial for programs to address empowerment more directly, by defining the term in context and describing it in terms of program outcomes. Programs that foster youth empowerment deserve recognition and support, and clarity around the concept will only serve to promote the important work that they are doing.

7. Acknowledgments

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