



Safe or Out: Using Community-Based Action Research to Transform the Environment for Youth Baseball at an Urban Recreation Center

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Background

If youth are not safe, they will be out. In many urban youth sport programs, a central condition of retaining youth participants is that of safety. Urban parks and recreation youth sports programs situated in low income settings are subject to higher instances of crime, violence, gang activity, and inadequately maintained recreational facilities (Harrison, 2000). The observance of various forms of violence in the surrounding area and sport fields can lead to lower physical activity levels (Gomez, Johnston, Selva, & Sallis, 2004; Molnar, Gortmaker, Bull, & Buka, 2004; Sallis, Bauman, & Pratt, 1998) and/or drop-out (Perkins et al., 2007). Studies have shown lower rates of participation in sports by youth living in urban low-income communities than youth living in middle and upper income communities in surrounding suburbs and urban settings (Bocarro, 2002; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005).

While urban parks and recreation programs recognize the importance of offering and delivering a variety of sports programs to urban youth within a positive developmental setting (see Table 1) and have developed partnerships with various professional sport organizations to provide opportunities to develop positive youth attributes (e.g., the Bears inner city flag football program, the PGA First Tee program, and MLB's Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities), these programs cannot succeed without addressing safety-related barriers (e.g., gang violence, crime, unsafe facilities, poorly maintained fields) (Reis et al., 2008) and opportunity and access-related barriers (e.g., dysfunctional families) to participation (Fukuzawa, 2000). Although much is known about factors contributing to the positive development of young people through community youth sports-based programs (Perkins, Jacobs, Barber, & Eccles, 2004; Perkins & Noam, 2007; Peitlpaas, Cornelius, & Van Raalte, 2008; Weiss, 2004), and barriers to participation (Bocarro, 2002; Perkins et al., 2007), how the first of the six features of positive developmental youth sport settings, physical and psychological safety, impacts the delivery of urban youth sports programs is an understudied phenomenon.



Table 1. Six features of positive developmental setting of youth sports program (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002).

1. physical and psychological safety
2. appropriate structure
3. supportive relations
4. opportunities to belong
5. positive social norms
6. support for efficacy

Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI)



- Major League Baseball's (MLB) Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) initiative offers opportunities for boys and girls to participate in baseball and softball in over 200 U.S. cities, including the "Twin Cities" of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota (MLB, 2008).
- The Minnesota Twins Community Fund, in cooperation with the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board and the St. Paul Parks and Recreation Department, currently offers the RBI and RBI Rookie League baseball programs that provide opportunities for youth ages 8-17.
- **RBI Goal:** To increase the opportunity for inner city and underserved boys and girls to participate in baseball and softball by assisting them in overcoming social and physical barriers that impede their participation.



Research Context

The Urban Recreation Center (URC) which served as the community context for this action research project is located in an east side section of St. Paul, MN. The community is considered a high crime area (City of St. Paul, 2006), comprising a predominantly diverse and lower economic status population where over 70% of school age children are of color, and 79% of children and youth qualified for free or reduced lunch (Wilder Research Center, 2000).

During the 2007 URC's RBI-Rookie League season, concerns were raised to the Minnesota Twin's RBI Coordinator about challenges the program had experienced, which had led to a decrease in participation (loss of 4 of 6 teams=45 participants) and affected the overall experience of program participants. Seeking help and frustrated with the decline of the program, the URC Program Director contacted the RBI Coordinator close to the end of the 2007 season. As a result, the URC Director and the RBI Coordinator met with the lead author, who agreed to assist the URC in enhancing the program and addressing retention issues.

Purpose

This poster reports on findings from the first phase of a three phase project that aimed to use a Community-based Action Research (CAR) approach to collaborate with URC stakeholders in creating a safe and positive environment for RBI-Rookie League baseball program participants.

Research Questions:

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the contextual features surrounding the delivery of the program influencing the conduct and delivery of the URC RBI-Rookie League baseball program?
2. What are URC RBI-Rookie League baseball program stakeholders' perceptions of the physical, social, and political issues creating barriers to participation?

Research Design

Community-based Action Research (CAR) is a pragmatic approach that aims to provide individuals affected by a community problem with the means to take systematic action (Stringer, 1999; 2007). Community members are empowered to mobilize their energies and expertise in Phase 1) delineating the nature of the problem, Phase 2) devising and implementing an action plan, and Phase 3) determining an evaluation process. These stages served as guide for the current project but did not occur in a linear fashion.

Sampling and Data Collection

Purposive sampling of individuals directly associated with the URC RBI-Rookie League baseball program (i.e., coaches, parents, staff, and community members) was carried out and three focus groups were held: (1) URC staff and St. Paul City Parks and Recreation administrators (N=7); 2) URC staff (N=4); and 3) parents (N=3). Individual interviews with two coaches from last year's program were also conducted. Participants were asked what they thought (a) was working well with the program, (b) were the challenges the program experienced, and, (c) was needed to address the challenges. Additionally, a meeting with the St. Paul police department was held to develop a partnership and gain support. Secondary sources of data were also collected in the form of field notes, participant observations, and pertinent documents (e.g., website information, brochures, and police reports).

Data Analysis

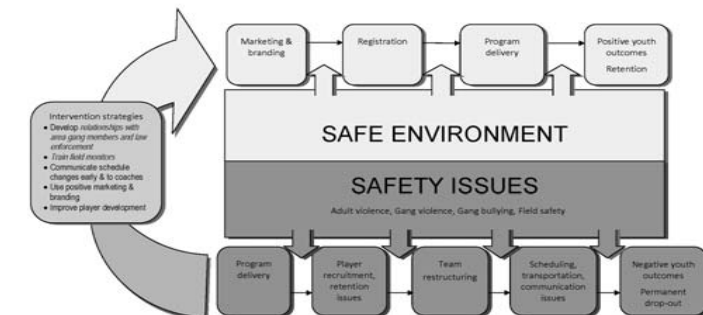
All interview data was transcribed verbatim, and all data was then prepared and downloaded into the qualitative analysis program atlas.ti. (Scientific Software Development, 1997). The data was openly coded and organized into major categories and themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Conceptual mapping was performed to outline identified antecedents of the problems and the consequences that derived from the respective problems. The data was then written-up and reported to project participants.

Findings & Discussion

As depicted in Figure 1, an unsafe environment (i.e., gang violence, adult violence, and unsafe fields) imposed a ripple effect on the delivery of the RBI-Rookie League baseball program. The various types of safety concerns created a ripple effect on the delivery of the program by negatively impacting retention, which then affected scheduling, communication, transportation, parent support, and ultimately recruitment in the subsequent season. The adult and gang violence and gang bullying caused players and their parents to feel unsafe, and as a result, many dropped out. Player drop-out led to modifying teams, which then created schedule changes, communication problems, and ultimately lowered participant enjoyment. These negative experiences made recruitment for the subsequent season extremely challenging for administrators and coaches. CAR participants identified various intervention strategies to improve the safety of the environment for the future, such as (a) developing relationships with area gang members and collaborating with law enforcement to create a safe environment, (b) improving player recruitment through marketing, branding, and player development; and (c) addressing scheduling issues by effectively communicating schedule changes directly to the coaches.

Eccles and Gootman (2002) recommend that "since these [positive development setting] features typically work together in synergistic ways, programs with more features are likely to provide better supports for young people's positive development" (p. 301). Based on our findings the physical and psychological safety of an urban youth sports program is a critical and even the foundational feature of a community youth sports setting. Safety underpins a program's ability to effectively deliver and provide additional positive youth development attributes. A program may have five or more positive developmental features; unless a youth sports program is housed in a safe environment, however, it will limit youth from acquiring and developing different personal and social assets.

Figure 1. Safety's ripple effect on barriers to participation and retention



Conclusion

Through CAR it was found that despite a URC's effective delivery of an urban youth baseball program in partnership with a professional sports team, various environmental safety issues created barriers to participation and negatively impacted program delivery. The next phases of this CAR will examine how the URC and parks and recreation programs can utilize community resources to create and maintain safe urban youth sport environments, such as for the RBI program. In creating positive environments, this research illustrated that community agencies—including government, law enforcement, parks and recreation, and sponsoring professional sports clubs—must work collaboratively in providing the necessary infrastructure and broad funding support to effectively deliver urban youth sports programs within physically and psychologically safe environments.



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