

Participant Perceptions of Character Concepts in a Physical Activity–Based Positive Youth Development Program

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Physical activity–based positive youth development (PYD) programs often aim to foster character development. This study examined youth perspectives of character development curricula and the impact these activities have on their lives within and beyond the program. This case study examined youth from low-income families in a physical activity–based summer PYD program that integrated one character concept (respect, caring, responsibility, trust) in each of 4 weeks. Participants ($N = 24$) included a cross section of age, gender, ethnicity, and past program experience. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis and constant comparative methods. Thirteen themes were grouped in four categories: building high-quality reciprocal relationships; intrapersonal improvement; moral reasoning and understanding; and rejection, resistance, and compliance. The findings provide participant-centered guidance for understanding youth personal and social development through physical activity in ways that are meaningful to participants, which is particularly needed for youth in low-income communities with limited youth programming.

Keywords: low-income, adolescent, character development, case study

Positive youth development (PYD) holds that all people have strengths and potential for positive change (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). PYD attempts to foster growth by developing personal (e.g., self-worth) and social (e.g., interpersonal skills) assets by nurturing youths' strengths (Lerner et al., 2005). PYD is grounded in developmental systems theory (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, Johnson, & Buckingham, 2015), which assumes development is dynamic and occurs through reciprocal interactions between the person and his or her context, including family, peers, and the community (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). PYD programs are designed to enrich youths' lives by providing opportunities for growth and character development through social skill-building and engagement in prosocial behaviors (Holt, 2008).

Social relationships are a key mechanism facilitating growth in PYD programs (Benson et al., 2006), as they

can provide feedback, support, and a framework for youth to understand their experiences. Youth are increasingly sensitive to the opinions of others as guides for their self-perceptions and behavior as they approach adolescence, making constructive feedback from adults critical in this period (Harter, 2012). By late childhood, children internalize opinions and standards to which they have been exposed, which then function as self-guides (Harter, 2012). Positive early experiences with significant adults are critical to forming functional self-guides and problem-solving strategies and behaviors (Harter, 2012). Trusting relationships with adults can foster physical and psychological safety and perceptions of being valued and supported (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Such relationships can promote self-esteem and social responsibility (Hellison, 2000; McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, & Riley, 2013; Rhodes, 2004; Ullrich-French, McDonough, & Smith, 2012). In contrast, when youth are exposed to negative or unsafe relationships, they are likely to use suboptimal strategies (e.g., self-promotion through bullying) that, while allowing youth to navigate their daily life, are not socially acceptable. Over repeated exposure, youth may become reliant on suboptimal strategies (Harter, 2012). Exposing youth to nurturing social interactions and feedback in PYD programs that emphasize prosocial character traits can support development of adaptive behaviors and cognitions (Côté, Strachan, & Fraser-Thomas, 2008). Consistent with the developmental

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systems theory perspective that adaptive development is a processes of mutual influence between the person and the context (Lerner et al., 2015), as social awareness increases through late childhood and early adolescence, youth enter a critical period for the development of social skills and personal attributes that influence interactions with others (Harter, 2012). Physical activity-based programs are an important domain for PYD interventions because physical activity programs are valued and salient contexts for youth, rich with opportunities to foster prosocial values and behaviors if intentionally structured (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Weiss, 2008). However, few studies have examined youths' perceptions regarding their social interactions within PYD contexts structured to promote character development. Youths' perspectives on how they influence, and are influenced by, relationships in the PYD contexts would improve our understanding of how to structure these contexts to resonate with and promote positive outcomes for youth. Consideration of the unique elements of a physical activity context is a further need.

PYD programs may be particularly important for youth from low-income families who tend to face more stressors and negative outcomes, such as lower rates of school readiness and achievement, more externalizing behaviors like aggression, more maladaptive social functioning, and greater risk of adolescent childbearing (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). These disadvantages may stem from a variety of sources, as youth from low-income households often have more limited access to cognitively stimulating experiences and may receive less emphasis on regulation and verbal skills from parents if they have limitations in time resources due to work demands or in their own educational resources (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). They also tend to have less access to structured activities in their communities (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999), fewer opportunities to participate in activities that develop social skills such as teamwork and leadership skills (Holt, Kinglsey, Tink, & Scherer, 2011), and face more physical and safety barriers to participation (Holt et al., 2009). Free or low-cost physical activity-based PYD programs may help combat these disadvantages, as low-income youth have been shown to increase in social responsibility, self-esteem, and hope during physical activity-based PYD programs (McDonough et al., 2013; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013). Gains in traits such as social responsibility are larger for those youth who start with lower levels of social skills at baseline, highlighting the importance of programs for individuals who may start with greater needs (Anderson-Butcher, Riley, Amorose, Iachini, & Wade-Mdivanian, 2014). Parents of youth from low-income families identified that a sport-based PYD program benefited their children through resource provision, opportunities to use discretionary time constructively, and improvements in prosocial and emotional skills in their children (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012).

Physical activity-based PYD programs can help youth develop adaptive, internal behavioral and cognitive

skills and values that may transfer to other domains. Most participants (90%) in a golf-based PYD program expressed evidence of transfer of knowledge and skills learned in the program to school, home, and other sport domains (Weiss, 2008; Weiss, Stuntz, Bhalla, Bolter, & Price, 2013). Parents of youth in a sport-based PYD program reported increased youth involvement in prosocial activities in the family (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). Hellison's personal and social responsibility model, which has been applied in PYD programs for underserved youth, suggests that fostering personal and social responsibility by integrating life skills and character lessons into physical activities can also result in a transfer of these lessons outside the physical activity setting (Hellison, 2000). Consistent with the contention from developmental systems theory that there are mutual influences between youth and their contexts (Lerner et al., 2015), youth may have the ability to apply knowledge acquired in PYD programs to other contexts. Learning about youths' perceptions of these experiences and how they believe they are affected by physical activity-based PYD contexts and in turn how such programs affect their relationships and outcomes in other domains would provide insight into this process of transfer of skills from PYD programs to other domains.

Physical activity programs are a useful setting for PYD because they are a rich and valued social context. Physical activity affords physical and mental health benefits (Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee, 2008) and can be structured to enhance developmental experiences by deemphasizing competition and promoting life skills (Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004; Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2008). Because physical activity often requires youth to interact with peers and nonparental adults, it can foster personal and interpersonal skills through intentionally designed lessons and naturally occurring opportunities for goal setting, conflict resolution, cooperation, team building, and leadership (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Hellison, 2000; Holt, 2008). Fostering a mastery climate, in which individuals are reinforced when they work hard, demonstrate improvement, and help each other learn can help achieve this goal (Cox, 2002). In a mastery climate, youth are more likely to develop higher levels of moral reasoning, sportsmanship, and positive attitudes about other players or adult leaders (Fry & Newton, 2003; Gano-Overway, Guivernau, Magyar, Waldron, & Ewing, 2005). Gains in personal and social responsibility, honesty, and integrity are also associated with programs that are intentionally designed to develop life and social skills (Weiss, 2008; Weiss et al., 2013).

Many PYD programs have structured curricula to nurture character traits (Côté et al., 2008). Given the utility of physical activity for teaching character lessons (e.g., Weiss et al., 2008) and the importance of interpersonal relationships for youth development (Harter, 2012), examining character curricula integrated into physical activity-based PYD settings is important for lending insight into the role these curricula play in youths' asset

development. Understanding how youth perceive these character development activities and lessons, and their impact upon and integration into their lives, would inform PYD program design and promote understanding of the processes through which youth develop adaptive, prosocial behaviors and attitudes. The purpose of this study was to examine how participants in a physical activity-based PYD program for low-income youth perceived the character lessons taught in the program and how they believed the lessons applied to their lives, both within and outside of the program.

Method

Design and Methodology

Qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 2005) using thematic data analysis with constant comparative procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) was employed to investigate youth perspectives of their experiences in a physical activity-based PYD program and to explore whether they perceived its character lessons and activities to be understandable and useful and how the character lessons applied to their lives within the program and other life domains. Case study methodology was chosen because it provided a holistic examination of multiple individual experiences within the social and contextual processes of the case of one PYD program (Yin, 2003). This approach allows for an idiographic examination of each participant's perspective on the person-context effects within the program (Molenaar, Lerner, & Newell, 2013). This study was approached from a pragmatic philosophical perspective. Pragmatism, which is concerned with the utility of discovered knowledge for practical use, proposes that an individual's actions cannot be separated from past experience and the beliefs that have arisen from those experiences (Morgan, 2014). As knowledge is developed and gains meaning through action and interaction (Dewey, 1922), pragmatism holds that knowledge is inherently social, results from multiple experiences, and is influenced by the socialization environment. Case study methodology was chosen because it is designed for in-depth investigation of a limited number of issues fundamental to a system (Feagin, Orum, & Sjöberg, 1991). Case study methodology is useful for questions about process (Stake, 2005), such as how youth understand, interpret, and implement the lessons from the PYD program. The case was examined through the perspective of several children to obtain perspectives across the population of youth in this PYD program and similar programs of this type (Morgan, 2014). This case may help illuminate the process through which youth learn prosocial behaviors and experience character development through physical activity.

Program

The case was a physical activity-based summer PYD program hosted at a university in the Midwestern United

States. The day program serves approximately 450 local youth ages 8–14 and is staffed primarily by young adult university students. Children must qualify for the U.S. Department of Agriculture free or reduced price lunch program to be eligible for the PYD program and are therefore from low-income families. Participants are provided breakfast, lunch, a snack, transportation, and equipment and clothing (e.g., swimsuits and a T-shirt) at no cost to reduce economic barriers. The program runs from 7:45 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. Monday through Friday for 4 weeks. Youth rotate between three physical activity and one classroom station each day, plus mealtimes, and walk to travel between stations. Sixty percent of program time is devoted to physical activity, 27% is mealtimes, and 13% is nonphysical activities such as art or computer instruction. Participants are organized into 24 age-stratified groups of approximately 18–19 youth with one young adult leader. The leader remains with the group at all times and is charged with building relationships and emphasizing positive interpersonal interaction. The authors were not affiliated with the program beyond their role conducting research.

This PYD program is guided by a philosophy promoting positive relationships and personal improvement through a character development curriculum structured around weekly interpersonal relationship themes of caring, respect, responsibility, and trust. Caring was defined as showing genuine interest in, and concern and compassion for, other people; respect as acknowledging and valuing the worth of each person; responsibility as being reliable, dependable, and accountable for your actions; and trust as believing in others to be reliable, responsible, caring, and respectful people. Themes are integrated into most program activities, and staff were encouraged to emphasize character concepts during unstructured periods.

Team leaders and other staff, including support staff and station instructors, received 3 days of training before the start of the program including sessions to familiarize them with program goals, strategies for building and nurturing relationships, techniques for fostering a mastery environment, and the character curriculum. In particular, the staff are trained to deemphasize competition and emphasize improvement, teamwork, inclusion, and full participation by all (Cox, 2002), including principles of the TARGET model for creating a mastery climate (Epstein, 1989). Staff are exposed to cooperative activities and taught to emphasize positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, communication skills, and the opportunity for feedback (Johnson & Johnson, 1990). They also learn methods of meeting psychological and social needs of youth based on self-determination theory (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Through classroom instruction, discussion, lesson planning, games, and role-play, leaders were taught how to develop and maintain a positive and supportive atmosphere; teach the character concepts; integrate character concepts into lesson plans and activities; and emphasize a mastery climate, cooperative learning, and social

relationships. Leaders were provided with a handbook that explained these concepts, provided ideas and activities for teaching the character concepts, and provided guidance for developing weekly group goals, along with space to reflect on their progress and experiences.

Participants

Twenty-four participants were purposively sampled from the 446 youth who attended at least 2 days of the program to include a selection representative of age (33% 8–9 years, 42% 10–11 years, 25% 12–14 years), gender (50% male, 50% female), ethnicity (38% White, 46% Hispanic, 12% Black, 4% Asian), and prior program participation (75% 1st year, 17% 2nd year, 4% 3rd year, 4% 4th year). Youth had attended the program for 11–20 days ($M = 18.46$, $SD = 2.04$), with all but one youth's attendance ranging from 16 to 20 days.

Procedures

This project received exempt status from the university institutional review board, as it was part of a larger 2-year program evaluation (McDonough et al., 2013; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013) that included all participants, and data collection constituted part of the program activities. In accordance with the approved procedures, parents were verbally informed about the evaluation of the program at the time of registering their child for the program. A single semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant on the 16th day of the 20-day program. This allowed youth to have considerable experience with the program before the interviews and avoided encroaching on special end-of-program activities. Interviews were conducted by the second author ($n = 11$) and a research assistant ($n = 13$), who had received training through a workshop and role-play practice with the interview guide.

One child from each of the 24 groups was selected to participate. Because groups were gender-balanced and age-stratified, and two groups of the same age range traveled to stations together throughout the program, one male and one female were selected from odd- and even-numbered groups respectively. A list was created of two to four youth from each group who could be invited to participate that would result in a sample of youth who reflected the balance of age, gender, race/ethnicity, number of years of prior program attendance, and a balance of youth who were relatively engaged and having positive experiences, or relatively disengaged or having more negative program experiences based on staff observations. Consistent with case study methodology, we restricted the sample to 24 participants to allow for intensive analysis of each participant's experiences while selecting youth who had a variety of perspectives and experiences within the program (Stake, 2005). The researchers identified and approached the children in the arbitrary order that appeared on their list of potential participants. If the first youth on the list was not in

attendance, the researcher invited the next child. No youth declined to participate. Interviews were conducted in a private room adjacent to the activity area and lasted approximately 15–30 min. The semi-structured interview guide focused on youths' understanding of the character concepts taught in the program (e.g., "What does it mean to be caring?") and perceptions of the impact of the program (e.g., "How did learning about respect change you?"). Answers were probed to elicit examples and elaboration.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. QSR NVivo 10 software was used for data organization and storage. Names and identifying information were removed and replaced with participant codes indicating gender, age, and race/ethnicity of the participant. Thematic analysis using constant comparative procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) was employed to inductively identify patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Open coding, the inductive identification of raw themes, was conducted by the first author. Portions of text that described an idea relevant to the research questions were labeled as a theme. Similar concepts were coded as the same theme. The second author reviewed the codes, and when questions about terminology or classification arose, both researchers reexamined the transcripts and discussed the issue until consensus was reached. This process was repeated for axial coding, the organization of themes into categories. Throughout coding, constant comparison techniques including comparison of content across themes, within and between individuals, and peer debriefing with the second author were used to increase methodological rigor and ensure that each theme/category was unique, meaningful, and self-contained. The number of participants mentioning each theme is reported to provide a sense of the prevalence of themes within the sample.

Results

Results were classified into 15 themes in five categories (see Figure 1). One category, *elements of program context*, provides background information relevant to the learning setting for youth, while four represented youths' reflections on what they learned from and how they reacted to the program curriculum (*building high-quality reciprocal relationships; intrapersonal improvement; moral reasoning and understanding; rejection, resistance, and compliance*).

Elements of Program Context

Youth discussed how elements of the program, both the activities and the overall atmosphere and context, contributed to their experiences.

Program as a safe space ($n = 8$). The program provided not only a structured learning atmosphere but a

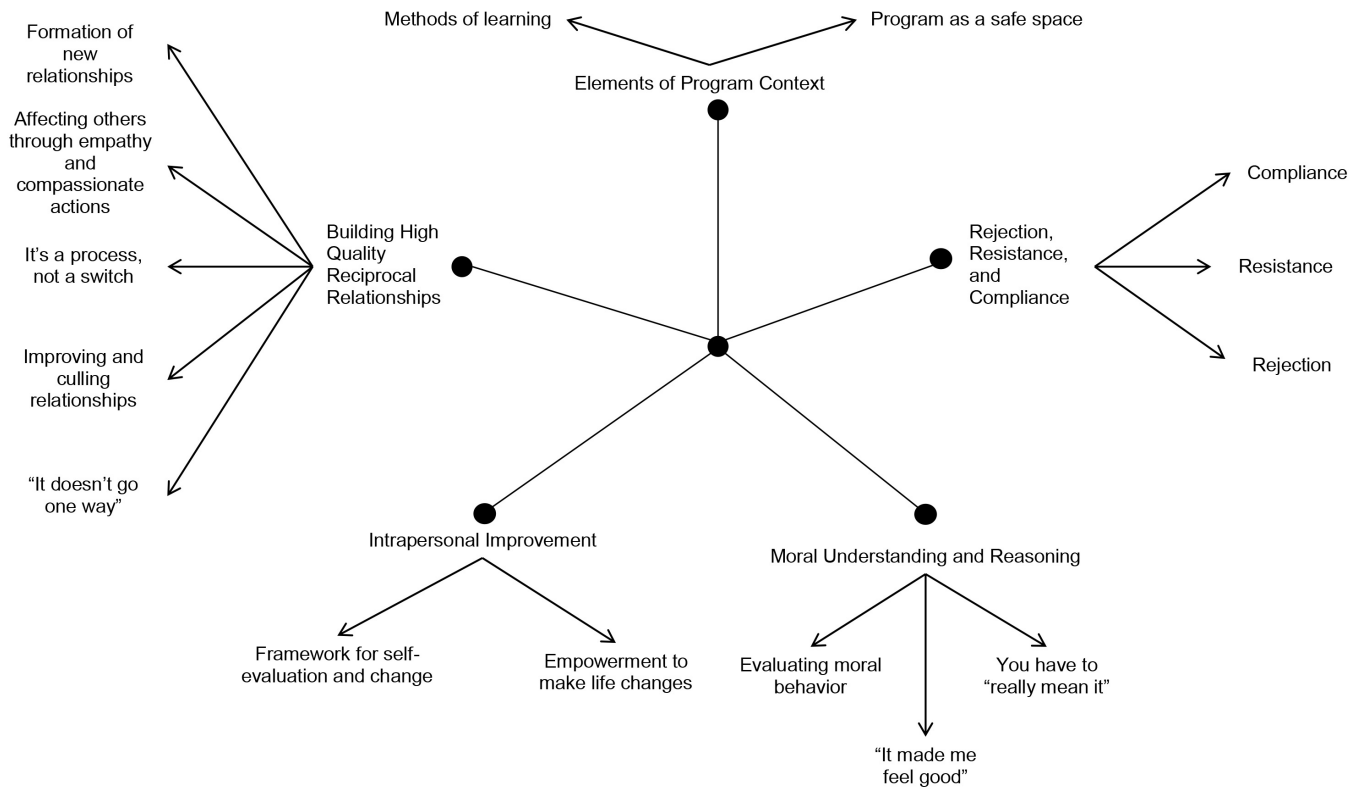


Figure 1 — Diagram of the five categories and the subcategories of themes describing youths' perspectives on their experiences with character concepts in a physical activity–based positive youth development program.

safe space to learn about the character concepts without concern of judgment because “everybody is treated nicely [there] and respected totally” (F, 11, White). One youth detailed how her group leader helped create a safe, inclusive space because

[he] just [saw everyone] as one big family. . . . He won't, like, talk to certain people in our group and then leave out the others and then, and won't talk to them unless he really like, has to or anything like this. He plays with us all together and just has fun with us. It makes us stay together a little more. (F, 13, Black)

Methods of learning (n = 24). Most youth described specific activities through which they learned the character concepts, and articulated at least a basic understanding of each concept and what the concept meant to them. Examples included how staff integrated character lessons into program activities, such as teaching trust through judo: “Like judo, when you choke them, like go for the choking hold, like when you tap them they should let go and you trust that person” (M, 13 years, Hispanic). The diversity of activities described by youth suggested that the specific activity was less important for learning the concepts than was the general manner of integrating the lessons into the various activities. Youth also noted learning character lessons through teachable moments that led to less structured discussions or improvisations

of activities initiated by staff members to illustrate the examples, as when one boy explained:

The last time we thought the lectures were kind of boring, so [the counselors] made a skit and it was kind of fun and . . . the counselors threw stuff on the ground and they left it behind so uh, we made main goals like to care for the environment and to care for other people. (M, 12, Asian)

Building High-Quality Reciprocal Relationships

Youth noted developments in their relationships with staff, peers, and family. They learned how to build new, and adjust existing, relationships through mutual social partnerships. They also developed a greater awareness of their ability to affect others through their actions, the need for reciprocity in social relationships, and that building relationships takes time.

Formation of new relationships (n = 18). The inclusive climate provided a context that helped participants make new friends. Especially for younger or first-time participants, the program emphasis on “being nice” allowed them to make connections with other youth: “I already had friends before. I didn't know the [character concepts] and I made more friends. . . . 'Cause I was being

nice to them, we would talk to each other when we're sad" (F, 10, Black). Youth learned what it means to be a friend and used this information to help them develop friendships. Several youth discussed how they anticipated, or hoped, that their new friendships would be maintained after the end of the program. As all program participants were from the same general locale, one youth noted that he "probably will be able to see [his program friends]" (M, 14, Hispanic) in his neighborhood or school after the conclusion of the program. One 4th-year participant expressed the comfort of remaining friends with other participants year after year while still making new friends:

[The program] was great this year because usually I am with my old friends. Like these past three years I have been with my friends, and they moved this year and I was kind of sad and mad but . . . I mean it was okay because I got to meet a lot of new people and make new friends. (F, 13, Hispanic)

Affecting others through empathy and compassionate actions (n = 16). Participants felt more empathetic in terms of having an increased awareness of others' perspectives, choosing to care about others' feelings, and adopting a compassionate perspective on how they could behave in ways that affect others' lives. Youth often discussed a new ability to consider others' desires when deciding upon a course of action, even when they were in conflict with one's own wishes:

Well you have to care about what other people would say or how would they feel. Or even just playing a game and you don't feel like playing it, and you're in the team, maybe if you don't play it, it might affect the other person. (F, 13, Black)

Many participants identified specific actions they could take to positively impact others, such as one participant who had learned about the power he had as a role model: "Don't hit people [because] they might look up to you" (M, 10, Hispanic). Awareness of the power to affect others was more common among older youth and was expressed as empathy that occurred by taking another person's perspective.

Improving and culling relationships (n = 7). Learning the character concepts led to changes within participants' preexisting relationships with friends, program staff, and siblings. Youth thought these changes were primarily due to changes in their own behaviors or thought processes, as one noted how his relationship with the program leaders had changed: "When I showed them that I respect them, and that I care and take responsibility for my own actions, they knew that they could trust me" (M, 12, Asian). For some participants, learning about the character concepts led to a social reevaluation great enough to break off old friendships that they understood to be risky or harmful, such as with kids who were trying to initiate them into gangs:

Like I used to think like, I don't know, like bad things. . . . Like my friends, like some are not really, they think

they are gangs and all that. And I really don't hang out with them no more because I don't like when they talk about that and stuff. (M, 11, Hispanic)

This youth also noted how the program had allowed him to meet the "nice" people with whom he now spent time outside the program instead.

"It doesn't go one way" (n = 8). Participants understood enacting the character concepts involves reciprocation—it "doesn't go one way" (F, 13, Black). For some, using the character concepts was a way to earn others' good graces: "If you respect them, they'll respect you back" (M, 14, Hispanic). Many youth viewed their peers' demonstration of the character concepts as a foundation for forming friendships: "A lot of other people have been very nice to me at camp and they are caring for me and they, if they, they don't blame things on me that they did and I can always trust them" (M, 12, Asian). They also learned that authentic relationships are mutual, with reciprocal expectations for respect, care, responsibility, and trust:

Somebody who is not respectful will think like, "Oh well, they're the ones that came here, I should have the right to do that." Other respectful people would say like, "Well, it's okay. It's okay because I helped them and as long as they're okay, I'm okay." (F, 11, White)

It's a process, not a switch (n = 8). Learning about and using the character concepts was described as a process that takes time, effort, patience, and practice. Youth admitted that, though they believed they had made progress toward using the concepts, they were not as far along as they would have liked, or they ran into difficulties when trying to use them with other people who do not reciprocate respect, caring, responsibility, and trust:

Usually my sister and I get into a lot of fights because my sister would take stuff from me without permission and I would do stuff to make her angry, so. But now, uh, I kind, I'm kind of nice to her, and now if she wants something I would give it to her. And I don't know if I can trust my sister yet, but yeah. (M, 12, Asian)

Applying the character concepts may be slow and frustrating in situations where other people may take advantage of them. Youth also had to learn to communicate and interpret social signals to know if they were being used. As another youth explained, "To get trust from people you have to know them for some time before you can actually, like learn how to trust them. And they have to like be nice to you before" (M, 13, Hispanic).

Intrapersonal Improvement

Participants engaged in intrapersonal reflection, evaluating their own thoughts and behaviors against the character curriculum framework, and grew to feel empowered as a result.

Framework for self-evaluation and change (n = 16). While the fundamental lessons of respect, responsibility, caring, and trust were not new to these children, the character concepts built on previous skills by providing an explicit framework of definitions and examples to help them to better understand their own good intentions and support prosocial behavior. One youth explained, “. . . Like saying ‘thank you.’ I didn’t know that was about caring, I just knew it was polite” (F, 9, White). Explicitly discussing polite behaviors within the character framework defined polite actions as a way to show caring and build relationships, which was meaningful and valued, rather than encouraging merely repeating polite phrases because one is told to do so.

Some youth explained how the character concepts added to their preexisting schema for understanding their own values and social interactions: “You can still be a good child and not have known [the concepts]. But if you know it, it can really help as well” (F, 11, White). For others, learning about the pillars changed how they understood their own behavior. One youth admitted, “I used to be kinda mean” (M, 11, Hispanic) while another explained that since learning about caring, “I have become a better person. . . . I’ve been nice” (M, 9, Black). Some youth emphatically believed they had become a better person, even if the change was difficult to articulate:

Well I don’t really know, like [this program], like it’s my first year and like I don’t know it just changed me a lot. . . . Just like, back like a year ago, like, yeah I used to do a lot of bad things, like my parents said not to do. Like that just changed me, I don’t know. I don’t do them anymore. (M, 11, Hispanic)

Empowerment to make life changes (n = 16). Youth made conscious choices to change their behavior and way of thinking in both small and more profound ways. For example, one girl noted an immediate behavior change that occurred after learning the character concepts: “I started showing caring around my house by picking up. Because I didn’t pick up normally, and I have, and I have been helping pick up and doing chores” (F, 10, White). Youth also reported that the character lessons had an impact on how they thought about others on a larger scale:

It changed the way I learn how to think about, about how other people feel and how I should think about other people that aren’t so fortunate. . . . It [also] helps me learn how to understand other people’s religions, and religious religions, and understand their ways if they’re from a different country with different laws. (M, 8, White)

Youth felt empowered to make these changes because learning about the character concepts fostered skills and confidence, which provided motivation and hope for future growth and success. The character concepts were seen as something “you should always do . . . because you can make a big change in the world” (M, 12, Asian), allowing youth to try to positively impact

the environments around them. Goal setting in particular seemed to contribute to this intentional focus on changing behaviors, because goal setting “gives you something to reach for, to like try to make the goal real, and yeah, accomplish it” (M, 12, Asian).

Moral Reasoning and Understanding

Youth perceived the character concepts as ways to become better versions of themselves, using the concepts as a guide by which to pass moralistic judgments. They articulated that behaviors inconsistent with the concepts were wrong or rendered someone a bad person, while using the concepts was the right thing to do and made someone a good person.

Evaluating moral behavior (n = 18). Most youth discussed using the character concepts as a standard for evaluating moral behavior. Participants used the definitions of caring, respect, responsibility, and trust to evaluate behaviors as right/wrong and good/bad, invoking more moral language to describe these behaviors:

Being responsible is when, like when somebody else needs like to do something and then you are the one who has to come to that choice and there is the wrong choice. And that is wrong, so you do the right. (F, 12, White)

Youth also evaluated others’ behaviors within this moral framework: “Other people in my group get made fun of, and I don’t think that is right just because of being from a different country or something” (F, 11, White). Character concept use was identified as a marker of maturity by older youth: “[Respectful kids] are almost more mature I would say because they know. And when and if they do something that is not respectful, they would feel bad about it, I think” (F, 13, Black).

“It made me feel good” (n = 8). Thinking and behaving in line with the character concepts helped youth “feel good” (M, 12, Asian). For younger participants, the concepts guided choices that made them feel good or avoid feeling bad:

If someone could be caring is because they probably feel like they, that they probably thought they probably felt like they needed to be caring because, because it makes them feel bad, makes them feel weird when they are not very caring. (M, 8, White)

The good feeling that accompanied the use of the concepts was frequently explained as one that made youth feel happy: “It helped me sharing, like if one cup was mine and my sister wanted my cup, I say, ‘OK, you can borrow it,’ and I felt, like, happy ‘cause she got to use it” (M, 10, Hispanic). The participants seemed to understand that the use of the concepts contributed to a more positive climate that helped everyone feel good about themselves: “If I am nicer to them, they’ll be nicer to me and that just makes me feel better about myself” (F, 9, White).

You have to “really mean it” (n = 4). Participants observed that genuine intention and verbal endorsement of the character concepts were not mutually inclusive—instead, it was important to “really mean it” (M, 10, Hispanic), explaining that you knew if they really meant it by whether “they were serious.” The authenticity of one’s intentions was important: “You can and can’t [think differently if you’re caring] at the same time ’cause if you can by um just saying like ‘oh are you okay’ and like some people can be caring but not actually care” (M, 11, White). This relatively fine distinction between intentions and actions was noted by children as young as 10 years of age, supporting the idea of a deeper understanding of the concepts.

Rejection, Resistance, and Compliance

Several youth did not believe that they benefited from the character curriculum or did not willingly adopt the lessons into their daily routines. Several youth refused to engage with the character concepts, intentionally acted in opposition to the concepts, or acted in accordance with the concepts, but only because of social pressure.

Rejection (n = 1). One youth explicitly discussed how he did not feel any need to talk about the character concepts or use them in his life. This youth still reported change resulting from participation in the program. He admitted that he “used to be kind of mean [and] make fun of people [so] . . . they wouldn’t trust [him] not to do anything bad” (M, 11, Hispanic), whereas they may have now trusted him more. However, he could not explain what about the program had changed that behavior for him, repeating that he did not learn anything about most of the concepts because he “wasn’t paying attention” and did not care about the lessons being taught. When probed about why he did not want to talk about the concepts, he explained, “I don’t really care. . . . It just doesn’t matter.”

Resistance (n = 2). Two participants illustrated how they still behaved in ways that were inconsistent with the character concepts despite knowing that it did not match what they had learned. Despite seeing value in incorporating some of the concepts into their lives, there were still occasions where the youth deliberately chose not to adhere to these lessons or see them as beneficial or attractive. One girl said that she still had a friend who was “really not nice to people” but the program had “not really” changed how she behaved around or got along with her friend (F, 10, White). Another girl explained: “[I like whining] and talking back to people ’cause when people don’t listen to me, I talk back to them” (F, 10, Black).

One girl’s resistance to some of the character lessons also appeared to be a reaction to program staff’s not complying with the lessons that they were purporting to teach:

Sometimes when, like, my team leader, when we don’t want to do something, he pushes us to do it. . . . [That’s not being caring] because he’s mean. That’s

mean to do to somebody, to push them to do it when you don’t want to. (F, 10, Black)

Compliance (n = 5). Several youth described incidences where they demonstrated the character concepts, but only because of coercion or reinforcements and punishments from program staff, parents, or other people who had some authority over them: “To have good respect, like if your mom or dad tell you, like, or sister, like, tell you, you probably do something, then you should probably go do it unless you wanna get in trouble” (F, 9, White). For some youth, applying the character concepts was primarily used to minimize punishment by avoiding behaviors that would lead to trouble. One participant noted that peers could also influence compliance by delivering social punishments, explaining that a kid might feel like “they had to [be responsible for and take care of a game they brought] because the other kids would not play or something” (M, 10, Hispanic). However, youth also acknowledged the potential negative influence of peers on compliance, as one child explained that a person might be less caring and say “oh I don’t care” because their friends would “think they’d be girly. . . . They don’t want [to be] embarrassed around their friends or made fun of” (M, 11, White) because they acted caring.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how participants in a physical activity–based PYD program for youth from low-income families understood the character lessons they were taught and how they perceived that these concepts affected their lives within and outside of the program. This study was designed to gain insight into the process through which youth interact with others and the program context to develop adaptive, prosocial behaviors that have been associated with PYD program participation (e.g., Newton et al., 2007; McDonough et al., 2013; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013). Youth reported that incorporating the character concepts helped them build positive reciprocal relationships, promoted personal improvement, and allowed for moral growth, both within and beyond the program. However, some youth demonstrated resistance to or outright rejection of the character concepts or only complied because of external enforcement.

One objective of PYD programs is to build a climate fostering close interpersonal relationships and prosocial behavior, as youth from low-income communities may have fewer opportunities to develop these social skills within a structured environment (Holt et al., 2011; Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). Development is a social process, and youth use cues from their environment to inform their behaviors throughout childhood and adolescence (Harter, 2012). By providing opportunities for numerous social exchanges within the context of the program, youth appeared to be learning about the character concepts through both structured activities and observations of how people treated others in the program. With the

program's focus on fostering a safe space, and creating multiple positive social cues, it is perhaps unsurprising that nearly all participants described improvements in their relationships. Congruent with past research demonstrating that perceptions of a caring climate in physical activity settings can increase empathy and emotional regulation (Gano-Overway et al., 2009), it appeared that many of these improvements stemmed from youth gaining understanding of the perspectives of others in social relationships (Harter, 2012). Further, youths' discussions of how they formed new friendships and reevaluated old ones based on the character concept framework support the perspective that youth are both influencers of and influenced by their social context (Lerner et al., 2015) and echo parent perspectives of shifts in youths' social circles following participation in a physical activity-based PYD program (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012).

Learning to evaluate social relationships and ending maladaptive relationships is an example of how programs may help youth in this population cope with the risks that they may face during adolescence (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Recruitment for gang involvement is a particular risk, as there are over 20 national and regional gangs active in this sample's local community (Project Safe Neighborhoods, 2015). As youth mature, they are increasingly able to integrate multiple perspectives into their self-concepts and to consider others when determining a path of action and developing their internal behavioral guidelines (Harter, 2012). The findings from this study suggest that providing youth with a safe space, lessons on positive social interactions, and positive relationships with peers and adults may help them develop social skills to cope with negative social influences. These changes appear to occur through increasing youths' self-evaluation skills and self-confidence to make changes in relationships. Previous research has shown that youths' ability to manage and evaluate their emotions inversely predicts antisocial behavior (Gano-Overway et al., 2009). The current study provides further insight into this process through youths' explanation of their increased self-reflection and personal understanding of prosocial and moral behavior.

Morality is often incorporated into programs' or researchers' definitions of exemplary good character, such as Lerner et al.'s (2005) definition of character as including a sense of right and wrong. However, few studies have examined youths' perspectives on how physical activity-based PYD programs contribute to moral development. This PYD program may have helped participants conceptualize morality within the context of their lives by grounding it in tangible examples of behaviors or thoughts that they could use as standards in other situations. Given the abstract nature of morality and its developmental evolution as a guide for youth in comparison with external guides (Harter, 2012), it is encouraging to see youth understanding character lessons as young as age 10, even in relatively simplistic manners. This process may be important for youth in late childhood and early adolescence who face complex social situations

and moral dilemmas just as their ability to reason through them is developing.

The transfer of new social skills and character lessons from the PYD program into other life domains may be important for the youth targeted by this program. Weiss and colleagues (2013) found that many of the life skills youth learned in a golf-based program were transferred to the school domain, and that youth reported a sense of automaticity in their use after several years in the program. Youth in the current study discussed taking their new skills and social relationships into their school lives, into their interactions within their neighborhoods, and with their families. By facilitating the internalization of external standards (Harter, 2012) by explicitly providing guidelines for acceptable behaviors, modeling the behaviors, and providing opportunities to practice them, this program appeared to help many youth make active efforts to make changes in their lives. Given that youth may have few opportunities to participate in similar programs during the school year (Holt et al., 2009), it is encouraging to see that participants anticipated continuing to use and develop these skills.

The experience of the program as a safe space supported youths' learning and integration of the concepts into their lives. Youth in this program over-represent ethnic minorities and low-income communities when compared with the demographics of the surrounding county (Indiana Youth Institute, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) and thus represent some of the most vulnerable people in this geographic area (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Parents in low-income families have cited the benefits of sport involvement in PYD programs, including the opportunity for positive use of discretionary time and an outlet from everyday life outside of youths' neighborhoods (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). The emphasis on a warm and welcoming culture allows youth to learn character concepts in a safe environment where they feel secure enough to show vulnerabilities without judgment or backlash from peers. Youth in physical activity programming that is intentionally designed to promote caring report higher likelihood of returning to such programs in the future (Newton et al., 2007), suggesting that such an emphasis may encourage youth to continue to participate in the future. Youth also reported friendships from this program carrying over into school and neighborhoods. The presence of these friends may help ease the transfer of skills learned in the program to other domains, as youth's supportive friendships may help them sustain behavior changes over time.

One challenge in PYD programs is that the character curriculum may not resonate with all youth. Some youth in the current study reported a lack of engagement with the program's character concepts, while others noted instances in which they only participated in the program lessons to appease their adult leaders. The problem for these youth may not be in their comprehension of the character concepts, as the youth who rejected the concepts in this study could still identify and explain them. Rather, some youth may not feel a personal connection to

the character lessons. The source of this disconnect may be internal to the program, such as youth disliking peers or staff, or external to it, such as being forced to attend the program by parents. Given the importance of social reinforcements in shaping behaviors (Harter, 2012), these youth may need different support from their leaders or peers to integrate the concepts into their lives, such as the provision of diverse role models and encouragement of self-standards over normative comparisons. This program appeared to be a positive influence for most participants, but it is important to identify those for whom the experience is less beneficial to consider how programs may be adjusted to better suit their needs. Future research should explore methods to identify and help youth who are struggling to connect with programs.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study include that social desirability may have influenced youth responses to interview questions, even though the researchers emphasized that they were confidential interviews that would not be shared with program staff. Although participants discussed perceptions of change in their lives, they were interviewed once near the end of the PYD program. The findings presented here provide insights into how efforts by PYD programs to develop character and interpersonal skills are received by youth, and preliminary evidence for how these skills may transfer to other contexts in youths' lives. Future research is necessary to examine how youths' interpretation and application of the character concepts develop over time, particularly once they leave PYD programs. Given the utility of PYD program participation for youth from low-income families, further exploration of the benefits of participation for this group of youth is warranted, perhaps comparing their outcomes to those from other structured or unstructured opportunities for peer involvement.

Conclusions

The current study illustrates how participants in physical activity-based PYD programs for youth from low-income families understand and use program character lessons in their lives both within and outside of the program. The character curriculum was relevant and accessible to youth targeted by the program, demonstrated by youths' broad but coherent understanding of the character concepts. Findings from this study have implications for future PYD program development, as well-intentioned curricula may be ineffective if youth cannot connect to the lessons within them. Furthermore, the study provides youths' perspectives on the processes through which PYD programs may help youth develop the social skills and personal assets that are critical to positive development through physical activity. The youth were receptive to many of the sports and games that incorporated cooperation, interpersonal interaction, and character development lessons,

and largely found them to be entertaining and meaningful ways to learn these life skills. Youth suggest that a positive, safe culture that supports youth growth and development by fostering prosocial behaviors is paramount for growth in the program beyond specific program activities. Youth in this study were able to reflectively appreciate their own development, supported by the infusion of the character concepts into a variety of physical activities within this PYD program and support for their efforts to demonstrate them. As youth embraced the character concepts through these physical activities, the potential importance of this process throughout their lives began to become clear. We hope that these findings will help guide future physical activity-based PYD program development by highlighting ways youth, particularly those from underserved populations, connect to program materials and character constructs in personally meaningful ways to develop positive personal and social assets because, as one participant explained, "They are all important life skills, and I should use them in everyday life."

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