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Girls Just Wanna Have Fun: Understanding Perceptions of Effective Strategies and Outcomes in a Female Youth-Driven Physical Activity-Based Life Skills Programme

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Abstract

The Girls Just Wanna Have Fun (GJWHF) programme was designed to help female youth increase their physical activity and develop life skills. Although in recent years there has been a rise in community-based physical activity programmes for youth, there remains a dearth of evaluation and research to understand the impact of such programmes. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore the contextual factors viewed by participants as important in the delivery of GJWHF and the perceived developmental outcomes resulting from participation in the programme. The study specifically sought to examine whether the programme was perceived as embodying Petitpas et al's framework for positive youth development. Results indicate that the programme supported the framework. It was found that the GJWHF programme provided a trusting and caring environment, afforded positive and supportive leaders, and helped foster positive developmental outcomes in youth participants (i.e. a positive future orientation, a sense of identity, and life skills including teamwork and leadership). Overall, the results provide initial evidence that the programme may be having a positive effect on the development of female youth participants.

Background

Research has shown that participation in community-based sport and physical activity programmes can lead to enhanced psychosocial development and health outcomes for the participants.[1,2] However, recent data reveal that only seven percent of Canadian youth are meeting the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines, which recommend 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day. [2] Therefore, the data suggest that youth should be provided with more community-based programmes that offer organized physical activity and sport.[2] Based on the current statistics, Active Healthy Kids Canada recommends that policymakers, funders and programmers target adolescent females, particularly those from low-income families, because this group has the lowest rates of physical activity.[2] In addition to physical activity levels, female youth also score consistently lower on indicators of psychosocial development compared to their male counterparts.[3] For example, beginning in grade six, levels of self-confidence markedly decline so that by grade 10 only approximately 14% of females report that they believe in themselves.[3] Furthermore, although it can be argued that all female youth need opportunities to enhance their development, female youth from low income families are particularly vulnerable. These youth have greater risks of dropping out of school, experiencing mental health problems, having difficulties with the law, and engaging in risk-taking behaviour.[3-5]

As a result, there has been a call for increased community physical activity and sport programming for female youth.[6] It appears, however, that simply providing opportunities may not be sufficient. Sport and physical activity programmes must be deliberately structured to encourage youth to develop positive outcomes.[7, 8] Incorporating a positive youth development (PYD) approach into youth programmes can enhance developmental outcomes. [9, 10] PYD is a strength-based approach with the perspective that all youth have the potential for positive and healthy

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development.[11, 12] As such, PYD programmes focus on promoting positive behaviours in youth while also working to decrease problem behaviours.[13] Providing youth with opportunities to facilitate these behaviours may allow them to acquire positive life skills (i.e. goal setting, time-management, self-regulation, communication, and problem-solving) that enable them to lead meaningful lives and positively contribute in society.[11, 12, 14]

An argument for integrating a PYD approach specifically into physical activity and sport programmes is based on research, which has found that PYD programmes emphasize mediating variables such as social support and enjoyment for physical activity and sport.[15, 16] Furthermore, reviews have shown that these psychosocial determinants of youth physical activity such as social support and enjoyment are the same psychological and social variables significantly associated with later adult participation in physical activity.[16, 17] Thus, youth physical activity interventions that focus on integrating a PYD framework may be effective in enhancing both the physical and psychosocial development of youth.

The PYD framework for sport programmes designed to enhance psychosocial development by Petitpas et al[18] was used to guide the development of *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* (GJWHF), the programme on which this research is based. This framework outlines three specific components that should be incorporated into PYD programmes in order to enhance development: (a) context, (b) external assets, and (c) internal assets. First, Petitpas and colleagues assert that youth need to be engaged in a challenging and motivating activity within a physically and psychologically safe environment (context). Second, these youth also need to be surrounded by responsible and caring adult mentors and a positive peer group (external assets). Finally, the teaching of life skills (internal assets) is critical in helping youth develop the capacity to successfully cope with various life situations. In addition, Petitpas et al[18] stress the importance of evaluation to ensure that a programme produces the desired outcomes (research and evaluation).

The GJWHF programme is a community-based youth-driven programme designed to help female youth increase their physical activity and develop life skills; Bean, Forneris, and Halsall[19] provides a complete program description. This programme was developed in collaboration with the local Boys and Girls Club (BGC). The BGC is a non-profit community-based organization that focuses on providing opportunities for youth (ages 5-18) from low-income families. Similar to the data reported above, a 2008-2009 annual report produced by the local BGC identified a gap within physical activity programmes indicating that approximately three times more male members participated in physical activity programming compared to female members.

Along with a call for increased programming, there is also a need for evaluation of physical activity and sport programmes that integrate a PYD approach.[20] The purpose of this study was to explore the contextual factors identified by participants as important in the delivery of GJWHF as well as the perceived developmental outcomes resulting from participation in the programme. More specifically, this study sought to examine whether the programme was perceived as embodying Petitpas et al's[18] framework.

Methods

This research used a mixed-methods approach. An embedded design was employed, such that quantitative data played a supportive role into a larger qualitative study.[21] The qualitative data was intended to provide depth of understanding of the participants' perceptions of processes and/or components that may help explain perceived psychosocial outcomes. The quantitative data was intended to gain an understanding of whether the youth perceived the programme as helping them develop specific life skills that were intentionally incorporated into the programme (e.g., goal setting, emotional regulation, relationship skills, future orientation and identity).

Context

The GJWHF programme targeted female youth ages 11 to 14 years from a local BGC located in a city in Eastern Ontario, Canada. The programme was implemented from September 2011 to May 2012 and involved one 75-minute session per week. A total of 31 sessions were planned and 30 of these sessions were carried out. One session was cancelled due to bad weather during the winter months. Within each programme session the youth participated in one life skills activity and one sport or physical activity that was designed to reinforce the life skill of the session. For example, the life skills relaxation and managing emotions session was reinforced by a yoga session: throughout the yoga activity discussions of how yoga can facilitate relaxation and managing emotions were integrated, such as breathing exercises. The GJWHF programme was developed using a youth-driven approach in which the youth were provided a voice in decision-making. Specifically, each week the youth selected the sport and/or physical activity that they wished to engage in and program

staff would select the life skill that was best associated with that sport or physical activity.

Participants and Procedures

Two categories of participants were recruited for this study: female participants of the GJWHF programme and programme leaders. While attendance rates fluctuated from five (during March break) to 14 youth, there was an average rate of 10.4 participants over the course of the programme. All youth were invited to participate in the study and parental consent forms were distributed by the BGC staff and completed by participants' parents before the programme's launch. Participating youth completed assent forms at the beginning of the first programme session. The programme leaders completed assent forms prior to their participation in the interview.

Twelve youth agreed to participate in the research and obtained parental consent (mean age = 11.75, SD = 1.19). The girls were from low-income families in a major city in Eastern Ontario. As this was the first year the programme was run, all of the participants were new yet their length of participation in the BGC ranged from two months to nine years. All five female leaders implementing the GJWHF programme were recruited and agreed to participate in the study. The leaders ranged in age from 21 to 46 years old (individual leaders' ages: 21, 21, 25, 29, 46). Three of the leaders were students from a local university (two senior undergraduate students and one graduate student) and two were regular staff at the BGC. The leaders outside of the BGC who had less experience working within the BGC environment completed a standardized volunteer training with the BGC. All five leaders were required to attend three training sessions that focused on the planning and implementation of the GJWHF prior to the commencement of the programme.

Youth (n=10) participated in a qualitative semi-structured interview at the end of the programme. To avoid interrupting participation in GJWHF, the youth were interviewed at their home clubhouse on a night in which the programme did not occur. All five leaders participated in a semi-structured interview that took place outside of programming hours at a place and time convenient for them. The youth interviews lasted between 25 and 45 minutes, while the leader interviews lasted from 35 to 90 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded using a digital audio-recorder. On the last day of the program, all youth (n=12) completed an additional two-page paper-based questionnaire, administered by the lead researcher.

Ethical Approval

The University of Ottawa's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity approved all study procedures in this research.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews. Separate interview guides were developed for the youth and programme leaders. The youth participants' interview guide focused on exploring their programme experience and their perceptions of how participation in GJWHF impacted their development. The interview guide included questions such as: 'What did you learn in the programme?'; 'What did you like/not like about the programme?'; 'Do you feel any differently from participating in the programme? Has the programme helped you develop different skills? How?'; 'What was your experience like working with the programme leaders?'; 'What do you believe has impacted you the most during this programme?'; 'Do you plan to use the skills you've learned in the programme in any areas of your life? In what ways? 'What do you think would make the programme better?'

The interview guide for the programme leaders focused on their experiences implementing the programme and their perceptions of the impact GJWHF had on the youth. The interview guide included questions such as: 'In your opinion, what successes did you experience related to implementing the GJWHF programme?'; 'In your opinion, what difficulties did you experience related to implementing the GJWHF programme?' 'Do you believe the GJWHF programme had an effect on the youth? In what ways?'; 'What strategies did you use to keep the youth engaged in GJWHF? Which strategies were the most effective?'; 'What suggestions do you have for improving the GJWHF programme?'. The interviewers also used probes to further explore areas of the participants' experiences further. For example, probes such as 'Can you tell me more about that?', and 'Can you give me an example of what you mean?' were often used to facilitate further discussion.

Youth Experiences Survey (YES) 2.0. Questionnaire items were derived from the YES 2.0 scale. The YES 2.0 was originally designed to assess the experiences of youth participating in different extracurricular activities and youth programmes focusing on examining various domains of socio-emotional development. [22] It should be noted that the YES 2.0 does not test whether learning actually occurs, only whether participants report experiences that are related to its occurrence, [22] which is why it is used as strictly a post-measure.

Psychometric testing from a previous study with 1822 grade 11 students across 19 high schools within the United States with diverse demographics has indicated that the YES 2.0 is a valid and reliable instrument.[23] Although the YES 2.0 has 17 subscales and a total of 70 items, only the subscales relevant to the objectives of GJWHF were used in this study. Specifically, participants responded to 31 items from 11 subscales: 'identity exploration', 'identity reflection', 'goal setting', 'effort', 'problem-solving', 'time management', 'emotional regulation', 'physical skills', 'diverse peer relationships', 'prosocial norms', and 'linkages to community'. The youth responded to the items on a 4-point Likert scale (1: Not at all; 4: Yes, definitely; see Appendix for full questionnaire).

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and then subjected to an inductive-deductive content analysis.[24] Content analysis allows researchers to identify themes that have been shown to be important in the existing literature while also allowing themes to emerge inductively that could provide new insight. For this paper, Petitpas and colleagues'[18] framework for planning youth sport programmes that promote psychosocial development was used to guide the deductive analysis. As stated earlier, this framework outlines three specific components that should be incorporated into PYD programmes in order to enhance development – (a) context, (b) external assets, and (c) internal assets.

An iterative process was used for the content analysis. First, the researcher read the transcripts to become familiar with the data. Second, the researcher read the transcripts again and made notes in the right hand column of responses related to the purpose of the study. Next, the researcher read the transcripts for a third time and began to group responses into broader themes. Finally, these broad themes were organized and pertinent quotations were identified that supported the emerging themes. Trustworthiness of the data was assured through a collaborative approach to analysis.[25] Two independent coders who were familiar with qualitative content analysis, but not involved in the programme reviewed the transcripts and identified themes after the first author did the original analysis. The three coders met to discuss the analyzed data and to resolve any coding discrepancies. Minor changes to the initial analyses resulted in moving a few quotations from one theme to another as it was deemed that the quotations provided stronger support for an alternative theme. For each quotation, identification codes were created to identify the participants' roles (P = youth participant; L = leader) and the order in which they were interviewed. For example, the identification code P-3 would indicate that the individual was a youth participant and was interviewed third.

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 20.0. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for each of the subscales on the YES 2.0. The data was examined to reinforce the qualitative data.

Results

Given that this research used an embedded mixed-methods approach where the qualitative data took on a primary role, the results section will first present the qualitative results followed by the quantitative results.

Qualitative Results

From the inductive-deductive content analysis, seven critical factors emerged as themes. Three of the themes related to contextual factors perceived as being effective: (1) Importance of a Girls' Only Environment; (2) Establishment of a Trusting and Caring Environment; and (3) Positive Leader Support. The remaining four themes that emerged were related to perceived outcomes of the programme and included: (4) Emergence and Strengthening of Friendships; (5) Positive Future Orientation; (6) Identity; and (7) Development of Leadership and Teamwork.

Importance of a Girls' Only Environment. The notion of a safe and trusted environment was reinforced by the programme's inclusion of only female youth. The all-girls' environment seemed to be a strong reason why the youth attended as they shared that this environment was more comfortable. When asked what she liked best about the programme, one youth stated it was "just us girls…so we don't have to be around boys because boys can be annoying…this one [programme] is only girls so you can say whatever you like and do whatever you want" (P-7). Another youth shared a similar experience: "it was a programme for girls and it was pretty much for the girls to be comfortable about themselves…and you can share things and it's a way to have fun" (P-5). One of the GJWHF programme leaders, who was also a staff member at the BGC, stated:

> The girls just needed to feel comfortable, just be all girls…There are no boys so they can just be themselves …There is less female participation in other programmes at BGC that are co-ed and sometimes they (the girls) think 'the

…guys aren't going to pass to me'. I think they're just more comfortable. (L-2)

Establishment of a Trusting and Caring Environment. The development of a trusting and caring environment also appeared to be influenced by having a programme that was only for female youth, which emerged as a second theme related to programme assets. The youth in the GJWHF perceived an element of trust from the group and the programme in general. Two youth shared: "if there was an activity I didn't feel comfortable with, I would have still done it 'cause I felt a trust and everything" (P-6), while another youth stated:

It was really relaxed…we can tell you guys stuff and we know you won't go and gossip about it after we tell you, or like if we want it to be confidential, then it is—not another soul but you—and we trust that about the youth leaders. (P-3)

In addition to trust, the youth discussed how the programme environment was also caring. This was particularly evident during the relational activity that took place at the beginning of each session. Two youth discussed how they could share their feelings during this activity: "I really liked the Rose and Thorn thing and I liked how my friends were there too. I liked that I could say what was really bothering me out loud" (P-1) and "I liked doing the Rose and Thorn activity because we got to say whatever was on our mind and everybody was listening" (P-7).

Overall the youth felt that the leaders were individuals whom they could trust, since they created an environment that helped the youth share their experiences in a safe way and incorporated activities like Rose and Thorn that allowed the youth to listen and support one another.

Positive Leader Support. A predominant theme that emerged from both the participant and leader interviews was positive leader support. The youth discussed the experience of having supportive leaders whereas the leaders discussed the support they felt from their co-leaders. With regard to the youth experiencing support from the leaders, two subthemes emerged: leaders who were supportive and leaders who challenged appropriately. First, the youth highlighted: "the leaders were very supportive. They (the leaders) were listening to what we were saying and asking questions about what we were saying" (P-7). Two youth also expressed that they felt comfortable and encouraged by the leaders: "what I really liked about the programme is that when you come in they make you feel welcome" (P-5) and:

It was good to get to know [the leaders]…helped us all learn our life skills and helped us be active, taught us what girls are meant to do, meant to be here, and girls can have fun too and it helped me figure out who I am. (P-4)

Finally, one youth talked about her experience with the programme leaders:

It was like you've known them (the leaders) for a long time because they were so comfortable with you and you'd feel comfortable with them…I felt very supported by the leaders because when (name of leader), I was kinda not doing it (an activity), they'd help you to do it properly and they'd support you through it. (P-5)

Second, the youth appreciated that the leaders challenged them appropriately. While being pushed out of their comfort zone, they still felt supported by the leaders who did not push the youth too much, which is evident by this quote:

They (the leaders) didn't tell you to stop, but if you wanted to stop, they didn't make you feel bad about it. They wanted to push you to your limit, and if you could go over the limit, they'd congratulate you for it, but if we couldn't go over the limit, the leaders would be fine and they'd be like 'well you tried your best'. (P-6)

Another youth underlined this similar notion: "even though you may not want to try something, they still ask you to or try and convince you to do it, unless you actually really, really don't want to" (P-5). Third, the youth felt encouraged to try new activities, as explained by one youth:

There were times when I didn't want to do stuff, and people would just be like 'come on you gotta do it—you can try new things'. And I'd be like 'well you can't learn if you don't try new things' so I'd just be like 'alright'. (P-3)

Additionally, the youth felt they were treated age-appropriately by the leaders. It was discussed how in past programmes the youth had been treated as children instead of the maturing adolescents that they are growing into. As one youth stated:

Having youth leaders who don't act like way too mature. They don't act like we're a bunch of five year olds and they're instructing us to do something…Whenever we participate in basketball or something, we have the choice of whether we can participate or not, 'cause other groups they'd be like 'oh you have to do it and that's final' and it's sort of sets us back because we're like 'hold up, why are

…you treating me like this—I'm thirteen calm down, I'm not five'. But not in this group. (P-3)

Therefore, in addition to creating a trusting environment for the programme, an important asset based on the perceptions of the youth was to have supportive leaders that challenged them appropriately to try new activities in a psychologically safe environment.

Moreover, both the leaders and youth felt supported within the programme. The leaders expressed how working as a team and supporting one another made leading the programme more enjoyable. One leader shared: "there were a lot of really positive things; I definitely enjoyed working with all of the other leaders. I thought the other women were really committed to the girls and to the programme and that's always really good" (L-4).

Furthermore, one of the leaders expressed the benefit of having a strong staff network over the course of the programme:

We had great support within our group…The two staff that work at the BGC were great in chatting with the girls beforehand, reminding them, making sure they're prepared, trying to recruit people. It's been great in terms of the support from the other leaders; you know you're not going in there blindly or on your own. The support staff, the programme coordinators that work at the clubhouses, have complimented us on this…there have been really open lines of communication which has been helpful. (L-5)

Emergence and Strengthening of Friendships. From participation in the programme, many friendships emerged between the youth from both clubhouses. Two youth indicated: "it was a positive experience because you got to know people that you never knew or would probably never meet in your entire life" (P-3) and "I liked how none of the girls fought together; we all became friends when we got there even if we didn't know the other girls" (P-4). A leader observed, "what was really important is that the girls enjoy coming here and interacting with each other and having a really good time" (L-4). Furthermore, two leaders supported this statement by indicating: "we didn't expect the friendships that have emerged coming out of that. The social aspect has been really great" (L-5) and "Meeting other girls from the other clubhouse was neat...Even (name of a participant) and a couple of the girls, they are buddies already, you know, which I think is good. They weren't friends before the programme and now they are" (L-3).

In addition, the youth also discussed how the programme strengthened some of the friendships they had already established. Two youth shared: "one thing is that you get closer to your friends when you're doing activities" (P-2) and "being with my friends, as my friends are always there for me and I just wanted to have fun with my friends" (P-7).

Positive Future Orientation. Another theme that emerged from the interviews was that the programme helped the youth think more positively about their own future. Many youth outlined how the support from the leaders and participation in the programme helped facilitate this change. One youth stated: "in a positive way, like I know my future is important, but you guys kinda enforced that it was really important and that you can't wait and you only have one life. You only live once" (P-6). Another youth reinforced this notion by saying: "Before this programme, I didn't—I knew what my future was going to be, but I didn't believe it. And then after this programme, like I believe my future is going to be what I want it to be" (P-2). Moreover, the youth continued to emphasize how beneficial this programme was for its participants by saying:

I would [recommend this programme] because—I think it would be great because it would give you a chance to learn something in life that you wouldn't actually learn in school so it can change you and give you a reason to do something. (P-5)

Finally, a leader explained that the youth:

Got to know and test themselves…when we did goal setting – about goals they have for themselves in the future and so they know it's something they can accomplish for school or for sports or anything; that gives them an objective, something to look forward to. They were mostly long-term goals, but I think just seeing the girls want to have a goal was good. (L-2)

Identity. The youth and leaders perceived the programme as helping the youth to develop a sense of identity. Two youth highlighted that GJWHF "helped [me to] express myself so I can be me" (P-7) and "the programme is [a positive thing for girls] because they get to learn who they are and that they have a spot on this earth" (P-4). Another youth indicated that the life skills activities often helped her to shape who she was:

I liked how we had our books and we worked in them…ever since I've written those things, I'm like that. So if I wrote 'nice', I'm nice. And say I wrote 'sporty', now I'm more

…sporty…taking time in the programme to reflect on different characteristics about me has made me think about them a little bit more. (P-4)

Finally, a leader indicated that the life skill activities helped to facilitate the process of understanding themselves: "it would get a few of them to reflect more on their thinking, their behaviour, and who they are. And I think that's a big part of it" (L-3).

Development of Leadership and Teamwork. The youth and leaders also discussed individual life skills they believed developed as a result of participation in GJWHF. The life skills of leadership and teamwork seemed to be the predominant skills. One youth explained: "It helped me be a leader…and it helped me to accomplish things, like my goals and that you can be confident no matter what" (P-10).

Additionally, one leader explained that the youth who had more experience acted as leaders and helped those with less experience:

It was always nice to see when the girls would help each other out. We went skating and I think that was the time when they showed the most help towards each other because there was a lot of different levels of ability and some of them had never skated before, but the other girls who were better would always wait for them and try and teach them. (L-2)

Teamwork was identified as a skill that was developed. One youth stated she "learned how to be better teammates and work as a team in sports" (P-2), while another youth said she learned "teamwork, we used teamwork when we played the games that the girls made up in our groups" (P-7). Furthermore, one youth talked about a specific activity in which she recalled working together as a team with the other GJWHF participants:

When we did the game where you hold people's hands and the doctor has to untangle you…I liked that game 'cause it was kinda like a challenge because there's times where the people who are tangled are trying to get untangled and when the doctor has to get you untangled. I liked it because it was a challenge for the group. (P-5)

Quantitative Results

The descriptive statistics (M, SD) of the modified YES 2.0 are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for the YES modified 2.0 (n=12)

Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation
YES 2.0		
Identity Exploration	3.33	0.47
Identity Reflection	3.06	0.79
Goal Setting	3.15	0.69
Effort	3.14	0.62
Problem Solving	2.76	0.79
Time Management	2.78	0.60
Emotional Regulation	2.93	0.68
Diverse Peer Relationships	3.00	0.70
Prosocial Norms	3.32	0.88
Linkages to Community	3.14	0.56
Physical Skills	3.60	0.95

Note: 1=Not At All, 2=A Little, 3=Quite a Bit, 4=Yes, Definitely

From the descriptive results of the YES 2.0, it appears that the youth perceived the GJWHF programme as helping them develop a number of skills: eight of the subscales had a mean score above 3.0 (labelled Quite A Bit) on a 4-point scale (labelled Yes, Definitely). The largest mean score (M=3.60; SD=0.95) was for 'physical skills', meaning that the youth perceived the programme as providing opportunities to be physically active. The mean score on the 'prosocial norms' subscale (M=3.32; SD=0.88) also indicated that the youth perceived the GJWHF programme as helping them learn about assisting others along with the development of morals and values. The mean scores further indicated that the youth perceived the GJWHF programme as helping with 'identity exploration' (M=3.33; SD=0.47), which measures being able to try new activities, and 'identity reflection' (M=3.06; SD=0.79), which relates to thinking more about the future and ways in which participation in the programme might serve as a positive development opportunity in their lives. In addition, based on the mean scores from the 'effort' (M=3.14; SD=0.62) and 'goal setting' (M=3.15; SD=0.69) subscales it appears that youth perceived that participation in the programme helped them learn about goal setting and how to challenge themselves to put forth effort. Finally, the youth perceived the GJWHF programme as helping them meet new friends from different backgrounds ('diverse peer relationships', M=3.00; SD=0.70) and to make connections in their community ('linkages to the community', M=3.14; SD=0.56). The remaining subscales in which the average scores were below a '3' (scoring between the labels "A Little" and "Quite a Bit") included 'emotional regulation' (M=2.93, SD=0.68), 'time management' (M=2.78, SD=0.60), and 'problem solving' (M=2.76, SD=0.79).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the contextual factors that the participants identified as important in the delivery of GJWHF as well as the perceived developmental outcomes resulting from participation in the programme. Specifically, it sought to examine whether the programme was perceived as embodying Petitpas et al's [18] framework. Results from this study indicated that overall, the GJWHF programme met the guidelines set forth by Petitpas et al[18]. The participants perceived the programme as providing both a positive context including supportive external assets (leaders) and an opportunity to learn a number of life skills. Bean et al[19] suggest that an all-female environment can facilitate a higher level of comfort than in a mixed-gender environment thereby raising confidence levels and increasing levels of physical activity participation. The results from this study are consistent with these findings. It was evident from this study that the GJWHF programme provided a psychologically safe environment based on two of the qualitative themes: the establishment of an environment that a) was comprised of only girls, and b) fostered trust and support. The youth enjoyed the all-girls aspect, which they explained helped them feel more at ease while enabling them to be themselves. They also expressed feeling comfortable when discussing the programme's environment. These results concur with previous findings that suggest a female youth's social environment can impact self-perceptions and confidence levels. [26, 27]

Eccles and Barber[28] and Petitpas et al[18] have asserted that an important component of creating a safe context involves ensuring that youth find a valued role within the group. This appeared to be the case in the GJWHF programme as the youth often discussed how they were able to develop new relationships and strengthen existing friendships within the programme. The leaders discussed how they observed participants helping others who were less experienced with some activities. Results from the YES 2.0 further supported the qualitative findings as the mean scores on the subscales of 'diverse peer relationships' and 'linkages to their community' were above 3.0. These results have valuable implications, given that past research has shown that peer support is an important factor with regard to participation in youth programmes and physical activity.[26, 27, 29]

Similar to Petitpas et al[18], other PYD researchers have recognized that it is the quality of relationships youth can form with caring adults that is most likely to lead to positive developmental outcomes of youth.[8, 30] According to Petitpas and colleagues,[18] strong external assets (programme leaders) are critical in influencing the opportunities of youth to experience success and gain confidence. The results of this study indicated that the GJWHF leaders were strong external assets for the youth. The youth perceived the leaders as supportive because the leaders listened to them and challenged them appropriately. Past research has shown the involvement of positive leaders to be important for fostering PYD outcomes.[31, 32] Therefore, based on findings from this research, we advocate for youth girls-only programmes to incorporate supportive female leaders as role models as one way to way to increase programme effectiveness for fostering PYD outcomes.

Within Petitpas et al's[18] framework, the notion of external assets typically refers to relationships between youth and adults. In this study, however, it appeared that the leaders themselves also perceived their co-leaders as external assets. The leaders talked about having developed greater expertise, and gained more confidence as a programme leader through their relationships with the other leaders. Therefore, it appears that fostering a positive team environment can benefit the leaders, which ultimately and indirectly impacts the youth participating in the programme.[19]

Finally, according to Petitpas and colleagues,[18] programmes should incorporate intentional teaching of life skills, helping youth develop a sense of identity and apply skills gained to environments outside of the programme. Both the qualitative and quantitative results illustrated that the youth perceived the programme as helping them gain a positive future orientation, a sense of identity, and life skills, pertaining to goal setting, prosocial norms, leadership, and teamwork. More specifically, in the interviews the youth discussed that they developed friendships, a positive future orientation, and a sense of identity. These themes were supported by the questionnaire results, which demonstrated mean scores of above 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale) on the 'diverse peer relationships', 'identity exploration', and 'identity reflection' subscales. Recent research has found that hope or a positive future orientation is a strong predictor of positive PYD trajectories[33] and that acquiring a sense of identity is a key developmental milestone for a successful transition into adulthood.[34] For example, Schmid et al[35] suggest that youth's hopeful future expectations may be an essential ingredient to thriving across adolescence and into adulthood. In addition, the youth perceived the programme as helping them be physically active, which research has identified as an important element for enhancing their overall health and well-being.[36-39] Moreover, it is important to note that while mean scores for 'problem solving' and 'time management' were scored slightly below a three, any

perceived development of these skills were inherent in program participation and such skills were not intentionally taught within the program structure. In contrast, 'emotional regulation' (mean score fell just below a three) was a skill that was purposefully integrated into the GJWHF program structure. A reason for this lower mean score could be based on the age of the youth, as adolescence is a time for many youth to experience emotional challenges and dysregulations;[40] however, a qualitative study conducted with the GJWHF program that explored life skill development and transfer found that program participation helped youth learn how to manage their emotions within the program and believed they were able to transfer this to other life domains, such as school.[41]

In summary, findings from this study suggest that if researchers and practitioners work to implement programs that incorporate the strategies identified above, strong relationships can result particularly in programmes targeting female youth. Previous PYD literature has supported this finding, indicating the importance of positive social relationships and their influence and overall impact on development.[11, 30, 42, 43] Building positive and supportive relationships with adults outside of one's family that foster a sense of belonging are critical aspects that impact developmental outcomes. More specifically, Ullrich-French and McDonough[30] assert that interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in person–context interactions and as a result these interpersonal relationships are critical to fostering developmental outcomes in youth.

Limitations

Study limitations must be recognised. First, selection bias may have resulted given that 10 of 12 participating youth were interviewed due to scheduling challenges. Although the data collected were from youth who consistently participated in the programme, the data is based on one particular programme; therefore, the generalizability of the results are limited. Second, as is often the case in programme evaluation, the data were based on self-report through interviews and questionnaires and therefore results were based on perceptions as opposed to observational data. There is always the potential of social desirability with self-report measures. However, the researchers tried to limit this potential by reminding the youth before completing the questionnaire that there were no right or wrong answers and that it was important to be honest. It was observed by the researchers that some of the youth did not enjoy completing the quantitative measure and at times these youth had difficulty staying focused, which could explain the variability in responses. Third, limitations surround the YES 2.0 questionnaire. Given its usage as a post-only measure, the questionnaire hindered the researchers' ability to gauge changes in outcomes immediately from before to after the programme. In addition, the small sample size and lack of a control group limited the researchers' ability to isolate the effects of the programme and generalize results beyond the study population.

Conclusion

Findings from the first year evaluation of GJWHF suggest that youth participants and leaders alike perceived the programme to incorporate several effective implementation strategies and to succeed in facilitating positive outcomes for youth. The results of this study support Petitpas et al's framework[18] and indicate that programme components—such as creating a positive context and ensuring the programme is led by strong external leaders who support and challenge the youth appropriately while teaching life skills—provide a foundation for achieving PYD outcomes. In future programme development and evaluation, PYD researchers and practitioners should focus on creating a safe and supportive context and training strong leaders on how to effectively teach life skills. Incorporating such factors can help to ensure that youth have access to effective programming that will enhance their development.

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Appendix 1. The modified Youth Experiences Survey (YES) 2.0 issued to GJWHF youth participants

Based on your recent involvement please rate whether you have had the following experiences in the Girls Just Wanna Have Fun program.

Age:____.
Gender:_____.
Race/Ethnicity (Check all that apply)
__White/Caucasian
__Black/African American
__Asian
__Aboriginal
__Hispanic/Latino
__Other_____.

Your Experiences In……			
[Activity]			
Not At All	A Little	Quite a Bit	Yes, Definitely
1	2	3	4

IDENTITY EXPERIENCES

Identity Exploration					
1. Tried doing new things		1	2	3	4
2. Tried a new way of acting around people		1	2	3	4
3. I do things here I don't get to do anywhere else		1	2	3	4

Identity Reflection					
4. Started thinking more about my future because of this activity		1	2	3	4
5. This activity got me thinking about who I am		1	2	3	4
6. This activity has been a positive turning point in my life		1	2	3	4

INITIATIVE EXPERIENCES

Goal Setting					
7. I set goals for myself in this activity		1	2	3	4
8. Learned to find ways to achieve my goals		1	2	3	4
9. Learned to consider possible obstacles when making plans		1	2	3	4

Effort					
10. I put all my energy into this activity		1	2	3	4
11. Learned to push myself		1	2	3	4
12. Learned to focus my attention		1	2	3	4

Problem Solving					
13. Observed how others solved problems and learned from them		1	2	3	4
14. Learned about developing plans for solving a problem		1	2	3	4
15. Used my imagination to solve a problem		1	2	3	4

Time Management					
16. Learned about organizing time and not procrastinating (not putting things off)		1	2	3	4
17. Learned about setting priorities		1	2	3	4
18. Practiced self-discipline		1	2	3	4

Appendix 1. continued

BASIC SKILL

Emotional Regulation					
19. Learned about controlling my temper		1	2	3	4
20. Became better at dealing with fear and anxiety		1	2	3	4
21. Became better at handling stress		1	2	3	4
22. Learned that my emotions affect how I perform		1	2	3	4

Physical Skills					
23. Athletic or physical skills		1	2	3	4

Interpersonal Relationships

Diverse Peer Relationships					
24. Made friends with someone of the opposite gender		1	2	3	4
25. Learned I had a lot in common with people from different backgrounds		1	2	3	4
26. Got to know someone from a different ethnic group		1	2	3	4
27. Made friends with someone from a different social class (someone richer or poorer)		1	2	3	4

Prosocial Norms					
28. Learned about helping others		1	2	3	4
29. We discussed morals and values		1	2	3	4

Linkages to Community					
30. Got to know people in the community		1	2	3	4
31. Came to feel more supported by the community		1	2	3	4

How honest were you in filling out this survey?

Very honest	**Pretty honest**	**Honest some of the time**	**Honest once in a while**	**Honest not at all**
4	**3**	**2**	**1**	**0**