

ARTICLE REVIEWED

Female Undergraduate Students' Experiences Facilitating an Out-of-School Physical Activity Program for Middle School Girls

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THE PROBLEM

Most adolescents do not meet the recommended guidelines of regular physical activity (PA); thus, many communities are adopting a Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP). Physical education, physical activity before, during, and after school, staff involvement, and family/community engagement are the main pillars of a CSPAP, as well as having physical activity leaders with the training needed to provide proper instruction, positive support, and skill-related feedback. Leaders lacking the necessary skills could become a barrier to adolescents engaging in meaningful PA. To further develop PA leadership skills, some physical education teacher education programs have started utilizing field-based PA experiences.



Research Summary

This study uses qualitative methodologies to examine the experiences of five undergraduate students facilitating the Girls Empowering Movement initiative with middle school girls in the southeastern part of the United States. All participants were in the final year of their studies in either physical education or public health and part of a larger service-learning cohort designed to train students on the Girls Empowering Movement initiative. Prior to the study, participants received a three-day long training on social-emotional wellness, goal setting, health behavior change, leadership, and mentorship. Participants were charged with leading one-hour long PA programs once a week for 15 weeks. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually by a member of the research team who was not involved in the initial training. Audio was later transcribed, and open and axial coding was used by two members of the research team. Participants were also asked to complete a “Glow and Grow” artifact on a weekly basis highlighting strengths and areas of improvement. These artifacts were also analyzed, and responses were extracted to support the developed themes.

Conclusion

One key finding was the difficulty for participants to find activities that were inclusive and engaging for all students. The intentionality behind selecting activities is evident, with leaders trying to introduce activities different from typical physical education routines. However, they acknowledged that not all activities translated well to the age group they were working with. Additionally, participants expressed difficulty managing students, which could be attributed to a lack of experience. Noting it was often difficult to “calm the chaos” despite having been given learning opportunities in management. The third theme was the development of relationships between the participants and the children they were working with. Finally, participants expressed feeling as though this experience was invaluable learning opportunity for them, regardless of their future career aspirations.

Key Takeaway

The findings underscore the importance of providing high-impact education practices, emphasizing the need for PA leader training in adolescent development, social-emotional learning, and cultivating supportive environments for meaningful engagement in out-of-school time programs.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

SHAPE America. (2015). Comprehensive school physical activity programs: Helping all students achieve 60 minutes of physical activity each day [Position statement]. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 84(9), 9–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2013.838105>.

Girls Empowering Movement (GEM) Initiative: (<https://gempower.org/>)