

## ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

# Youth Experiences of a Sport Development Programme in a Rural South African Context

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## Abstract

Sport is a powerful development tool and social connector. Sport development programmes are often perceived as an effective means of encouraging youth development and teaching positive values, as well as providing opportunities for developmental experiences. This study was set out to understand youth experiences of a rural South African sport development programme and to identify the factors which contributed to the youth experiences. Thus, the study aimed to construct authentic knowledge and respond to tensions and debates about youth development and rurality in an African context. This study followed a qualitative, descriptive research design. Purposive sampling was applied and arts-informed methods such as drawings and photovoice, combined with semi-structured interviews, were used for data construction. Qualitative data analysis computer software ATLAS.ti (v.8.4.15) was used, and semiotic visual data analysis, photovoice data analysis strategies, thematic data analysis and member reflection were used as methods for data analysis. The results of this study highlighted multiple perspectives of the participants' experiences and complexities of relationships within the social context of the youth participants in the study. Therefore, youth experiences and perspectives cannot be viewed in isolation. The sports development programmes need to consider working with schools, parents, teachers and coaches. It emerged from the results that social interaction, a sense of family, the desire for positive relationships and a conducive sports environment were considered critical aspects that promoted positive experiences in the sport development programme.

**Keywords:** *arts-informed methods, community, developmental experiences, rurality, sport development programme, youth development*

## Introduction

There are numerous benefits derived from regular participation in physical activity and sport. Sport and physical activity have the potential to contribute to physical and psychosocial development (Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). Sport is viewed as a mechanism that leads to personal development and social development experiences. According to Coakley (2011), sport is perceived as a tool that leads to multiple forms of development and improves the quality of life, however, depend on multiple factors, such as social relationships, the contexts in which participation occurs, and personal sport experiences (Coakley, 2011). Coalter (2010) warns that the popularity of sport as a tool for development and the proliferation of sport development programmes is often poorly articulated

and raises concern about the narrow concept of the contribution of sport to development. It is important to acknowledge that a social system is complex and that sport should not be viewed in isolation and asserted as a magic box, but rather understood within a specific context in society.

Sport development programmes are perceived as effective means of encouraging youth development and providing opportunities to enhance youth experiences (Bruner, Hall and Cote, 2011). A major argument is that despite the benefits of sport development programmes and money invested by these organisations in youth development, experiences are diverse and cannot be assumed unitary. Therefore, sport development programmes cannot be assumed to provide the same benefits and outcomes for all youth participants.

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The top-down approach (pre-designed programmes) to youth development and the absence of youth voices in the context of designing sport development programmes that are based on the youth's needs and experiences, are some of the challenges in articulating the contribution of sport development programmes to the experiences of youth.

A wide spectrum of Non-Governmental's (NGOs) and non-profit organisations are using sport as a tool to address social challenges and to promote positive development of the youth (Coalter, 2010; Darnell, 2010). This belief is underpinned by a view of sport as a social connector and progressive instrument for social change and as a mean to deliver a wide range of personal development and positive outcomes (Coakley, 2011). NGOs and other civil society organisations play a critical role in partnership with government to ensure that expected initiatives and outcomes are achieved. These organisations are needed to address areas where the government partially fails to deliver sport development programmes (Sanders, Phillips, & Vanreusel, 2014). The notion that sport contributes to the social agenda has a wider social function, and has been embraced by a number of international organisations, including the United Nations, the International Working Group on Women and Sport, the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, and the International Council of Physical Education and Sport Science.

The current study was undertaken in conjunction with the Dreamfields sport development programme in South Africa. Dreamfields Project is a South African non-profit organisation which aims to enrich the educational environment in rural schools, empower youth, and develop individuals and community through sport. The organisation provides a range of youth sport programmes, including school sport and community sport programmes across South Africa. The Dreamfields Project is currently engaged in 24 major projects at 284 schools and 63 community sports clubs in six provinces in South Africa. The study focused specifically on youth in the rural area located in Ingwavuma, northern KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. The organisation works with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to develop sport development programmes consisting of regular league-based matches known as the DreamLeagues, which are played in schools every week. The DreamLeagues sport development programme aims to encourage youth to participate in football and netball activities and strives to enhance sport skills as well as

social development skills.

The aim of this study was to explore youth experiences of a rural South African sport development programme and to identify factors that have influenced said experiences. To achieve the aims of the study, we explored youth development using the Youth Developmental Experiences Through Sport (YDETS) theoretical framework. The YDETS framework emanated from the model for the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework and Self-determination Theory (SDT). The YDETS framework bears some similarities to the model of Positive Youth Development through Sport (PYDTS) developed by Holt et al (Holt, Neely, Slater, Camiré, Côté, Fraser-Thomas, MacDonald, Strachan, & Tamminen, 2017). For example, the notion of social contexts reflects the PYD climate and external assets components identified in the model for PYDTS (Holt et al., 2017).

**Methods**

*Research design*

This study followed a qualitative, descriptive research design, and was positioned within the parameters of an interpretivist discourse. Qualitative research is rooted in the philosophy of empiricism, follows a flexible approach, and emphasises the perceptions and experiences of the participants (Kumar, 2019). Therefore, this study used a flexible design, which allows the methods of inquiry to evolve contextually in response to the data gathered (Sarantakos, 2013). The research design of this study was influenced by the intent to explore the views and experiences of participants.

*Research sample*

The sample of this study was composed of South African youth who live in the rural area of Ingwavuma, KwaZulu Natal, and had participated for a minimum of two years in the Dreamfields sports development programme. The purposive sampling in selecting the participants from three high schools was based on the premise that the schools had implemented the sport development programme for more than four years and had participants between the ages of 14 and 20 years who were willing to participate in the study. The various stages and sampling strategies used to recruit and select the participants from three high schools in Ingwavuma, are presented in Figure 1. The sample size in the first phase of data collection consisted of 31 participants; 23 participants were included in the second phase (Figure 1).

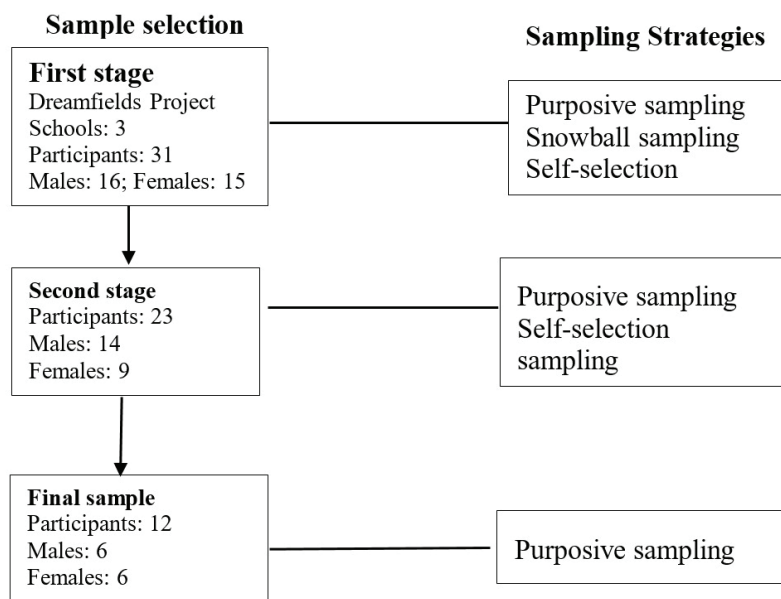


FIGURE 1. Sample selection and sampling strategies

According to O'Reilly and Parker (2013), the qualitative researcher should be flexible when considering sampling and focus more on sample adequacy and data saturation rather than sample size. This resonates with Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe and Young (2018): the more insights and information provided in the sample, the smaller the sample required in the qualitative study. In the context of this study, most of the responses from the participants data were the same and repetitive. Having considered all of this, the sample size had decreased from 31 to 23 participants. We further considered reducing the sample size to 12 participants - six males and six females, aged between 14 and 17 years. The decision to reduce the sample size stemmed from Manson (2017) and Bell, Harley and Bryman (2022), who imply that the emphasis of qualitative inquiry should be based on generating quality, detail, and sufficient depth of information rather than on acquiring a fixed number of participants.

#### *Ethical clearance*

This study secured procedural ethics by subscribing to the ethical principles of voluntary participation in which the participants could withdraw from the investigation at any time. This study met all the ethical and procedural requirements and was approved by the University of Pretoria's Ethics Committee [UP 19/04/01 SCHWELLNUS 19-001].

#### *Data collection*

To obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, the arts-informed methods of drawings and photovoice was used and combined with in-depth semi-structured interviews to construct data. Arts-informed methods are based on the premise of using art to understand human conditions and experiences through unconventional processes of inquiry (Knowles & Cole, 2008). In the context of this study, arts-informed methods were used to contextualise the dynamic views of the participants and provide depth and complexities of their experiences of the sport development programme.

Data collection was carried out in two phases. The first and second phase took place from 8 March 2021 to 11 March 2021 and 29 March 2021 to 31 March 2021, respectively. Drawings and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used in the first phase as data construction methods. The drawings were used during the first phase of data collection to elicit the participants' views and experiences about the sport development programme. Drawing, as a data generation method, provided the opportunity for constructive engagement with the participants and gain insight into the lived experiences of young people (Capous-Desylla & Bromfield, 2018). The photovoice method combined with semi-structured interviews was used in the second phase for data collection. Photovoice is a method whereby individuals take photographs to capture images that document the reality of their lives and experiences (Nykiforuk, Vallianatos & Nieuwendyk, 2011). The process included semi-structured interviews related to the photos taken by participants. During the interviews, participants were asked to select the two most meaningful or most descriptive photographs from five presented and share their views and experiences. The decision to conduct semi-structured interviews was aimed at creating a comfortable environment for engagement where participants would share their experiences freely. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes, and all the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions focused on the experiences of the participants, perceived outcomes and barriers of the sport development programme, and contributing factors to their experiences.

#### *Data analysis*

In this study, we adopted multimodal data analysis methods, such as semiotic, photovoice, and thematic data analysis. One researcher carried out the data analysis of the drawings, photographs, and interviews. However, the codes and themes that emerged from the three data sets were reviewed by all the researchers for interpretation, and a consensus was reached. The semiotic analysis technique was used to analyse the drawings. The analysis included reviewing each drawing produced by the participants, identifying themes based on the interview and drawing of each participant, and comparing and integrating all the themes that emerged from the participants' data. Subsequently, an adapted photovoice analysis approach suggested by Ciolan and Manasia (2017) was conducted to analyse the photographs. In addition, thematic analysis of the verbal data was applied to support and complement the visual analysis (drawings and photographs). From such analysis emerged meta-themes, which was reviewed from 4 researchers in order to integrate and unify it. The focus was to establish a relational combination between themes to create main themes and interpret the results.

Six main themes emerged from the youths' drawings, photographs and interviews. For the purpose of this article, only the themes related to personal development, social development, and physical development are presented and discussed in the section that follows. Trustworthiness, rigour, and diligence were ensured by crystallising data from the drawings, photographs, and semi-structured interviews. Reflection between the authors and peer debriefing with colleagues were conducted to establish whether the research results were consistent with the data gathered.

## **Results**

The results from the study are presented based on the themes relating to youth experiences of a sport development programme. These include personal development, social development experiences, and physical development.

#### *Personal development experiences*

In this study the participants perceived that their personal development skills had been enhanced because of their participation in the programme. Some of the personal development experiences mentioned by the participants included enhanced confidence, commitment, competence, and determination. The comments below highlight these results:

I managed to play together with my teammates, respect everyone on the sport field and had to abide by the rules. This will help me to continue playing netball because I can work and cooperate with other learners.

The sport programme encouraged me to focus and commit myself to everything I do. I exercise so that I can improve and perform better than before, and so that I do not behave in a bad manner. People can be happy and be proud of me.

The participants indicated that the sport development programme provided opportunities for personal development, (e.g., motivation, a sense of purpose, improved self-esteem, and positive values through interaction with peers, teachers and coaches). In this regard, one of the participants stated:

When I am on the sport field, I should be prepared about what I am going to do, I should do it well, and with confidence. It is important because if you are determined to do something, you will succeed.

Participants frequently described the role of the sport development programme in empowering youth to be responsible and committed. It emerged from the participants' experiences that the

sport development programme offered them the opportunity to improve these important personal development skills.

### *Social development experiences*

Programme experiences facilitated social interaction and social development experiences. The programme was perceived by the participants to have provided a socialisation experience for them to interact, encourage new friendships, and enhance positive relationships between teachers and participants. The following views of participants illustrate youth social development experiences:

What I like the most about the sport programme is meeting people I did not know before. I have learned from the players to work well with others, and speak well with them. If we are playing in the playground, we must not shout at each other, do not push them if they step on us by mistake. Coaches also encourage us not to step on each other when we are playing on the sport field. If maybe there is someone who stepped on you, you should apologise.

What I like about the sport programme is that we get along and talk about what we are going to do, and how we are going to do it. We should get along as a team and not hate each other. In case, we finish playing and someone doesn't have money, we buy food and eat together.

The participants attributed the enhanced social development experiences to teacher support. Participants frequently mentioned that they appreciated working together, and strong relationships appeared to be important for most of the participants.

### *Physical development experiences*

Another result that emerged from the participants' experiences was the perceived positive contribution of the sport to improved health and physical development. The participants cited physical development experiences such as enhanced physical skills, sport skills, and physical fitness among the prominent features experienced in the programme. The participants believe that the programme afforded them the opportunity to improve sport skills. Excerpts below illustrate the participants perceived physical development benefits derived from participating in the sport development programme:

I enjoy playing netball. The sport programme has helped me a lot because diseases don't get to me easily - I always exercise.

Soccer helps me to be active, even diseases that can infect me will not be able to make me sick.

The sport development programme has done a lot for me. It has encouraged me to continue being involved in sport so that I can be able to realise my goals of reaching the peak of my performance. When you exercise, you enhance your physical fitness and minimise the risks of injuries. When you exercise, you do not get sick easily.

The participants attributed their good health and physical fitness to the sport development programme. They also ascribed improved sport skills to their participation in the programme. Additionally, participants were convinced that by participating in the programme, their health improved. In the process, they experienced an improvement in their capacity to live healthily.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore youth experiences of a sport development programme. The positive experiences that resulted in the participants' enhanced personal development experiences concur with the notion that positive development occurs when youth's feeling of self-governance and self-direction are aligned with positive experiences through social interaction with the community, family, friends and school (Bowers, Li, Kiely, Brit-

tian, Lerner & Lerner, 2010). In this regard, the participants in this study highlighted the positive role of the programme in enhancing their competencies and providing positive development opportunities for youth gaining personal development skills. This result concurs with the study conducted by Holt and Kacey (2011) who found that individuals acquire personal development experiences through their involvement in organised sport programmes. In this context, personal development experiences are essential to rural youth as it may help them to be effective and have control of their lives.

The results of this study related to social development experiences concur with the assertion that sport programmes could promote social development experiences (Coalter, 2010). According to Camiré and Trudel (2013), the strength of sport development programmes is based on being able to utilise physical activity and sport as a vehicle to promote social development. The results from this study have shown that the sport development programme contributed to social development skills such as creating opportunities for social interaction, connectedness, and improved positive relationships.

The results further highlighted that the participants acquired sport-specific skills through their involvement in the sport programme and guidance by the teachers and coaches. This perspective is consistent with several previous studies focusing on the sport development programme and sport-specific outcomes (e.g., Chinkov & Holt, 2016; Holt & Kacey, 2011; Holt et al., 2009). Arguably, these studies highlight that sport-specific skills in the sport development programme are acquired and enhanced through implicit rather than explicit processes.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to explore youth experiences of a rural South African sport development programme to provide a better understanding of youth experiences of a sport development programme. The results showed that most of the participants in this study considered the Dreamfields sports development programme to be a great opportunity to enhance their developmental experiences through regular sports participation. The sports programme participants mentioned improvement in their level of sports skills and enhanced social competencies as some of the programme outcomes. These results are consistent with the study conducted by Bonell, Hinds, Dickson, Thomas, Fletcher, Murphy, Melendez-Torres, Bonell & Campbell, (2015) which suggests that youth who participate in a sports programme have the potential to develop and enhance their internal assets, such as positive values and self-identity. Therefore, it is important for sport programmes similar to the Dreamfields sport development programme to recognise youth's strengths and deliberately structure their programmes to nurture and enhance individual skills.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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