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Peace and Development Indicators in Liberia Youth through Sport for Development Programming --Manuscript Draft--

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Programming

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Abstract

Sherrod (2017) called for more empirical research on strategies designed to foster positive development among youth in the majority world and sport has been identified as a potentially effective grassroots developmental intervention (United Nations, 2005; Whitley, Massey, Camiré, Blom, Chawansky, Forde et al., 2019). Thus, the present study explored peace and youth development indicators in marginalized youth participating in a sport for development program in Liberia. Recognizing the extreme challenges confronting Liberian youth from a civil war and Ebola crisis, a sport for development program called Life and Change Experienced Through Sport (L.A.C.E.S.) was established in the country in 2007. L.A.C.E.S. seeks to cultivate aspects of positive youth development including social responsibility, close personal relationships, peace, and purpose to support the healthy development of Liberian youth. Using surveys translated into Liberian English, semi-structured interviews, and a photojournalism activity, researchers worked with over 180 youth across three Liberian communities at the beginning and end of one year of the L.A.C.E.S. program. Surveys indicated decreased attitudes toward violence and increased social responsibility, purpose, and relationship with coaches. Interviews explored these indicators of development, and a photojournalistic methodology investigated the experiences, conditions, and relationships that cultivated and impeded the healthy development of Liberian youth. Implications of these findings for promoting peace, purpose, and positive development among other majority world youth are addressed.

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Kaufman and Halperin (1997) identify the unique role peace initiatives organized by local actors, often called grassroots initiatives, play in promoting cooperation and relationship building as well as strengthening local capacities. O'Brien (2005) in her Convergence Framework for Critical Peace Building, recognizes people-to-people, or people-centered, programs as important peace-building tools. O'Brien argues that conflict resolution starts with an approach to reconciliation that is relationship-centric, uses strategies that build on sharing common interests and developing mutual understanding, and extends existing, local resources to affect change. Sport has been identified as a potentially effective method of grassroots peace intervention (United Nations, 2005; Whitley, Massey, Camiré, Blom, Chawansky, Forde et al., 2019). Sport for development and peace (SDP) programs use sport or physical activity to promote positive change, encourage social inclusion, and build peace in targeted, at-risk groups (Coalter, 2007; Lyras & Peachey, 2011). However, empirical work substantiating the impact of these programs on individual peace indicators is limited (Whitley et al., 2019).

Attitudes are formed through direct or observational experience and social factors, such as norms and expected behaviors, and through learning (e.g., conditioning and observations; Choe, Zimmerman, & Devnarain, 2012; Slovak, Carlson, & Helm, 2007). A key aspect in this concept of attitudes as it relates to peace is the perception of oneself within this society. If youth feel integrated into society and as though their experiences and behaviors matter, they are more likely to act accordingly by taking responsibility for themselves (Levitt, 2014). Individuals who learn to be in relationships with close others can transfer their senses of connection to the larger world as they become increasingly aware of their common humanity and responsibility to the greater good (Levitt, 2014). Encouraging this ever-widening circle of responsibility among young people

represents a central aim of positive youth development research and practice. The relationships included in youth's circle of responsibility make up their social capital, which refers to the relationships people form with one another, and how the contributing parties benefit from those relationships (Spires & Cox, 2016). Improved community relations (Heness, Ball, & Moncheski, 2013), positive family dynamics, and increasing socioeconomic status (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995) can influence the production of social capital for disadvantaged youth. Therefore, this study aimed to explore peace and youth development indicators in marginalized youth participating in a sport for development program in Liberia.

Peace and Development Indicators

Research has shown that marginalized youth often believe they cannot make a difference in their society (Black, 2010), and are deeply conditioned to believe that it does not matter what they accomplish (Stoneman, 2002). Stoneman (2002) found that youth who come from low-income backgrounds view themselves by and large as irrelevant, just as most of the rest of society views them. Therefore, these youth do not engage in civic or community affairs because it seems, for them, there is no value in participation. Another factor that may deter these youth from actively participating in their communities is the amount of violence that occurs; youth who were exposed to more violence in their neighborhoods are less likely to contribute to them (Chen, Propp, & Lee, 2015). Nonetheless, these youth often feel excluded from their communities, which contributes to their overall lack of perceived social responsibility (Black, 2010). Reasons for this gap in civic engagement may be a lack of access, resources, and opportunities to engage for those underprivileged youth. In order to understand social responsibility among youth of lower socioeconomic status, it is important to examine their development and ways to optimize it.

Researchers have argued that individual growth and well-being enable positive relationships, and positive relationships strengthen first familial and communal bonds, and later broader societal bonds (Roffey, 2012) which may moderate violence. Urie Bronfenbrenner once famously said, “Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her,” (as cited in Brendtro, 2006, p. 162). Youth who have a relationship with a mentoring adult deal more effectively with problems that can cause anger (Spencer, 2007). Thus, it seems that closeness with parents or other adults can help decrease engagement in harmful activities and help youth manage their problems in more effective ways. On the other hand, low levels of closeness to parents may be associated with loneliness, depressive symptoms, and negative self-esteem (Birkeland et al., 2014).

When youth are homeless or marginalized, support from adults is something they often lack. Developing close relationships with other adults in addition to—or instead of, when a parent is not present—can also be beneficial (Heness et al., 2013; Mason, Hajovsky, McCune, & Turek, 2017). Coaches may be one potential significant relationship. Youth athletes have reported closeness, which is the emotional interdependence that contains relational properties such as liking, trusting, and respecting one another (Phillipe & Seiler, 2006), with coaches is fundamental for the relationship to thrive and to be healthy (Rhind & Jowett 2010). Moreover, athletes who report a close relationship with their coaches have shown higher sport persistence (Rottensteiner, Tolvanen, Kontinnen, & Laasko, 2015) and greater satisfaction with sport (Jowett & Nezlek, 2012). Individuals who learn to be in relationships with close others can transfer their sense of connection to the larger world as they become increasingly aware of their common humanity and responsibility to the greater good (Levitt, 2014).

Engaging in purposeful action may represent another way for youth to engage with their communities. Discovering a purpose in life, which refers to a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once personally meaningful and contributes to the world beyond the self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003), is crucial to contribution. Purpose is appropriately positioned as a central element of positive youth development, as it relates to a host of desirable outcomes. For instance, empirical studies consistently find that individuals with a purpose in life are happier (French & Joseph, 1999; Lewis, Lanigan, Joseph, & de Fockert, 1997), more hopeful (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009), and more satisfied with their lives (Gillham, et. al., 2011; Peterson, Parks, & Seligman, 2005), and purpose has even been linked to better physical health and longevity (Boyle, Buchman, Barnes, & Bennett, 2010; Krause, 2009; Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987). The presence of purpose not only benefits youth, but also enriches the communities in which youth live (Benson, 2008). Consequently, supporting purpose development among youth may present an opportunity to support peace through community development.

Context: Liberia

Liberia is Africa's oldest republic, gaining independence in 1847 and modeling their Constitution after that of the United States; currently, it is occupied by 4.6 million people (Liberia country profile, 2018). Despite efforts to maintain peace following a military coup in 1980, the country experienced two brutal civil wars between 1989 and 2003 that cost the lives of more than 200,000 people (Liberia country profile, 2018). As a result, a huge proportion of the population was displaced, much of the productive capacity and physical infrastructure of the country was destroyed, and family and community ties were eroded (Levey et al., 2013).

While the entire country is still recovering, youth have been severely affected (UNICEF, 2016; World Bank, 2019). It is estimated that over fifty percent of Liberia's current population is under the age of eighteen. The recent civil war and Ebola outbreak have overshadowed intentional efforts by communities, schools, and parents to intentionally cultivate purpose, social connections, values and ethics. Because of years of trauma, a recent report from the World Bank Group (2019) on youth violence in Liberia indicates that these youth feel excluded and have perceptions of unfairness and injustice that often leads them to respond with violence.

Because of the status of youth in Liberia, the Life and Change Experience through Sports (L.A.C.E.S.) organization was developed. Founded in Liberia in 2007, L.A.C.E.S. uses mentor-based soccer and kickball leagues as an avenue to teach children life skills. The goal of L.A.C.E.S. is to develop positive role models and leaders with a sense of purpose and direction that will buffer against recruitment into negative groups and, ultimately, will help safeguard Liberia from another civil war. The L.A.C.E.S. program is a 40-week sport for development program that includes 32 weeks of full programming and 8 weeks of modified programming during the rainy season. Full programming involves the youth split into teams with designated coaches with two practices per week, one game each weekend, and monthly family visits by staff for all youth. Additionally, meals are served with each training session (i.e., 3 times per week). Practices involve life lessons based on the six L.A.C.E.S. values (self-esteem, respect, teamwork, discipline, honesty, and fair play) and sport skill development (kickball for the girls and soccer/football for the boys). The lessons are taught in an interactive and discussion-based format based off of a set curriculum and activities. Values are emphasized in both off field discussions and on field sport activities. Coaches are trained in the curriculum prior to the start of the season and then weekly coaches' meetings and training to discuss weekly lessons, challenges, and

highlights. During the eight weeks of modified programming, coaches conduct family/home visits monthly and gather the youth twice a week to discuss trauma healing lessons and play fun indoor games.

The organization has conducted programming in several communities, however participants in this study were from three communities within Margibi county: 1) a city in North Central Margibi county, 2) a rural town hit hard by Ebola in Southwest Margibi county, and 3) a rural town in Southeast Margibi county. Margibi is home to just over 200,000 people and is known for numerous rubber plantations, home to Firestone and Salala plantations (Liberia Institute of Statistics & Geo-Information Services, 2015). During the civil war, it was said to be one of the largest counties to have maximum displacements (Nmoma, 1997), thus disrupting political, social, and economic systems in the county as well as Liberia as a whole.

Current Study

To learn more about effective strategies for encouraging peace and positive development among youth in West Africa, a year-long study mixed methods study was conducted. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. *Can participation in a sport for development program increase social responsibility, close personal relationships, peace, and purpose among Liberian youth?* To address this question, surveys were administered at the beginning and end of the program year.
2. *How did participation in a sport for development program cultivate these important indicators of positive youth development?* Interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to explore indicators of healthy development.
3. *What experiences, relationships, and conditions cultivated and stymied healthy development among Liberian youth?* To address this question, a photojournalistic methodology was

utilized where a subset of the youth were given cameras and asked to take pictures of the people, places, and things that helped and hindered their healthy development.

Method

Participants

The research participants in the pre-test group were 181 Liberian youth, ages 9-13 years old ($M=10.93$, $SD=1.35$), who participated in the program during the 2016-2017 session, from three areas in Margibi County: North Central ($n=74$), Southwest ($n=40$), and Southeast ($n=49$). For the post-test, 162 participants completed the surveys from the three sites: North Central ($n=57$), Southwest ($n=71$), and Southeast ($n=53$). Approximately 80% of the participants in North Central lived on the street, while approximately 23.5% in Southwest and 9% in Southeast did. As far as school attendance, 88% were not attending in North Central, 38% in Southwest, and 7% in Southeast, and just over 50% eat 1 meal or less per day in Southwest and Southeast, and 90% in North Central (see Table 1 for more demographic information).

Instruments

There were five components of the survey, and participants completed each measure described below. The entire survey was translated into Liberian English by L.A.C.E.S. staff. Participants also completed a semi-structured interview followed by a photovoice task.

Background information. In addition to the four instruments used, a demographics survey was designed based on the information needed by the researchers and the sport for development organization. It included questions regarding age, gender, year in the program (i.e., first, second, or third), number of meals provided per day (i.e., 1 or less, 2, or 3), living situation (i.e., on the street, with parents, with someone besides parents), and school attendance (i.e., not attending, attending sometimes, attending most days).

Closeness. The Closeness Survey (Uleman, Rhee, Bardoliwalla, Semin, & Toyama, 2000) was used to evaluate how close participants feel to their parents, L.A.C.E.S. coach, peers, siblings, and community. The scoring for the survey includes six different pairings of circles, ranging from not close to very close as depicted by the spatial relationship between the two circles. A higher score indicated more perceived closeness, and Cronbach's for this survey ranges from .88 to .91 in previous studies (Uleman et al., 2000).

Purpose. The Search Institute Sparks Survey (Search Institute, 2014) assessed the participants' sense of purpose by evaluating their involvement with interests and activities that engage them to be their best (Search Institute, 2018). Example items included, "When you are doing your spark, how often do you feel bored?" or "I want to use my spark to help others" and were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale with ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). A higher score indicates a higher sense of spark, or early purpose. This survey has been used with other youth populations (e.g., Ben-Eliyahu, Rhodes, & Scales, 2014), and has demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of .76 (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2014; Search Institute, 2018).

Attitudes toward Violence. The Teen Conflict survey (Bosworth & Espelage, 1995) with 6 items (e.g., "It's okay to hit someone who hits you first" or "If I refuse to fight, my friends will think I'm afraid") were evaluated by participants on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The original scale uses a five-point scale, however this study used four for consistency with the other scales used. A higher score on the survey indicated a stronger, more favorable attitude towards violence. This survey was reported to have an internal consistency range of .71 to .84, and validity has been supported by correlations with bullying in other studies by the authors (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999; Dahlberg, 2005)

Social Responsibility. The 6-item Social Responsibility Scale (Flewelling, Paschall, & Ringwalt, 1993) was used to assess civic responsibility and awareness and included items like, “It is hard to get ahead without breaking the law now and then” or “What I do with my life won’t make much difference one way or another.” Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with a higher score indicating higher levels of social responsibility. This survey has been found to have internal consistency of .89 (Dahlberg, 2005).

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol. An abridged version of the Youth Purpose Interview Protocol (Andrews, Bundick, Jones, Bronk, Mariano, & Damon, 2006) was administered as a three-part protocol designed to assess positive youth development and purpose as well as ask about participants’ experiences in L.A.C.E.S. Part one asked youth to reflect on the things that mattered most to them (e.g., What are some things you really care about?), and part two encouraged youth to consider ways they could use their skills to contribute in meaningful ways to the broader world (e.g., What are some things you’re really good at? Have you ever thought about how you could use those skills to make a difference in the world around you?). Part three probed the reasons behind and the plans for the things that mattered most to the young person (e.g., You mentioned that X is really important to you. Has this been important to you for a long time? Do you think it will be important to you in the future? Why or why not?).

Photovoice Protocol. At the end of the first interview, each participant was given a camera and asked to take about 25 pictures of the places, people, and things that helped them develop and the places, people, and things that held them back. They then went out into the community with a L.A.C.E.S. staff member, took pictures, and the next day completed a second

unstructured interview during which they explained what each picture was of and why or how the subject of the photo facilitated or hindered their development.

Procedures

Data collection was a partnership between the local, Liberian L.A.C.E.S. coordinators and U.S.-based researchers. Upon the primary researcher's university IRB approval, the U.S. research team worked with L.A.C.E.S. staff and other Liberian experts to modify the questionnaires for cultural relevancy. A basic pilot-read with Liberian youth not in the program was completed before finalizing the surveys. Consent and assent forms and surveys were slightly modified to match local Liberian English to assist with comprehension.

Pre-test data were collected at the beginning of November (less than one month into the program year), as the research team traveled to each of the program sites. Post-test data were collected in mid-May, which was 1-2 weeks from the end of the program. Collection sites were at local schools close to where the children lived, and collection lasted 2-3 days per site. Parental or guardian (often community elders) was obtained through the assistance of the program staff; upon approval, the study was explained to respective youth and if interested, the youth provided written assent. For the pre-test, the first author collected data with the assistance of three Liberian interpreters. The surveys were read to the youth in groups of 2-3.

Youth who were interested in participating in the interview met with researchers after the completion of the post-test survey. They were interviewed individually with a U.S. researcher and a Liberian interpreter, using the semi-structured protocol (average time 40 minutes), which was recorded. At the conclusion of the first interview, participants brought in one of their coaches to discuss the photovoice task. The coach and youth took about 60-90 minutes to take pictures and then returned the camera. At the end of the data, we downloaded the pictures. Then the next day

returned to complete the photovoice protocol, reviewing and discussing each picture with the youth and a Liberian interpreter.

Design and Analysis

The study relied on an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clart, 2011), which requires researchers to first conduct quantitative analyses and subsequently to employ qualitative research methods. Neither qualitative nor quantitative methods alone would have provided the comprehensive insight we sought regarding peace, purpose, and positive development among Liberian youth. Accordingly, a mixed methods design was warranted. To address the first research question, regarding whether participation in the sport for development program effectively fostered positive development among Liberian youth, we compared pre and posttest scores on the survey measures with a MANOVA based on time (pre vs post) and location with 5 dependent variables (closeness was separated by coach and community). Because the North Central location was in its first program year and participant demographics differed at each site, results were analyzed cumulatively by site.

To address the second research question, regarding if (and how) participation in a sport for development program supported healthy youth development, we conducted youth interviews and reviewed transcripts identifying themes using an epistemological constructivism approach (i.e., knowledge is constructed and subjective).

To address the third research question, regarding the experiences, relationships, and opportunities that supported and hindered the youths' healthy development, we conducted a second interview that was unstructured and guided by the youths' photographs of the people, places, and things that helped and hindered their optimal development.

Both interviews were coded using a conventional content analytic approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which is an inductive method for identifying patterns and themes in the data. It is useful for describing a phenomenon from a participant's perspective, and it can be used to code a variety of qualitative data, including photographs and transcripts. Conducting a conventional content analysis is a flexible, iterative process that requires the researcher to move back and forth between photographic and interview data and an emerging coding scheme. To structure this process, the present study employed a constant comparative approach which represents a process of continually redesigning the research in light of emerging codes and relationships among the variables (Glaser, 1965). Members of the research team read through transcripts noting themes and patterns that emerged within and across participants. In this way, the study utilized both idiographic and nomothetic data analytic approaches (Allport, 1962). Emergent trends and patterns served as the basis for code generation. Subsequent transcripts were reviewed both for the emergence of new themes and for the presence of existing ones. After the coding scheme was finalized, all transcripts were recoded to provide a sense of the frequency of codes across participants.

Results

Survey Findings

To address the first research question, a multivariate analysis was conducted. We first ran descriptive statistics and tests for normality. A Shapiro-Wilk's W test was run and a p -value of $<.001$ was obtained, meaning it is reasonable to conclude normal distribution. The data were then screened for missing data and violation of assumptions prior to analysis. However, because of the unequal sample size of locations, the Box test of the covariance and the Levene's test of the variance had some assumption violations, so equal n 's were formed, using the smallest n with

complete data, which was Southeast with 34. Then 34 cases were randomly selected from each of the other locations, and all assumptions were met. Significant interactions across time were found when sites were collapsed: 1) decreases in attitudes toward violence from pre-intervention ($M=15.75$, $SD=2.78$) to post-intervention ($M=12.70$, $SD=3.52$), $F(1,100)=54.96$, $p<.01$; 2) increases in social responsibility from pre-intervention ($M=2.29$, $SD=.61$) to post-intervention ($M=2.91$, $SD=.68$), $F(1,100)=49.84$, $p<.01$; 3) increases in closeness to L.A.C.E.S. coaches from pre-intervention ($M=5.11$, $SD=1.17$) to post-intervention ($M=5.45$, $SD=1.07$), $F(2,100)=5.91$, $p<.05$); and 4) increases in sense of purpose from pre-intervention ($M=2.73$, $SD=1.85$) to post-intervention ($M=4.28$, $SD=2.48$), $F(1,100)=27.86$, $p<.01$; and 3)

Upon review of the results by site, results indicated increases in perceptions of closeness to L.A.C.E.S. coach were the largest in North Central. More specifically, there were differences in perceived closeness to the community $F(2,100)=24.95$, $p<.01$, which increased over time at the Southwest ($M_1=3.38$, $SD_1=1.63$; $M_2=3.50$, $SD_2=2.05$) and Southeast ($M=3.18$, $SD=1.59$; $M=3.97$, $SD=1.59$) locations, but decreased for North Central ($M=2.85$, $SD=1.54$; $M=1.29$, $SD=.72$). Levels of reported social responsibility also varied between locations ($F(2,100)=25.67$, $p<.01$), with Southwest showing a small increase ($M=2.38$, $SD=.62$; $M=2.88$, $SD=.49$), Southeast a large increase ($M=1.90$, $SD=.47$; $M=3.34$, $SD=.60$), and North Central a small decrease ($M=2.58$, $SD=.52$; $M=2.50$, $SD=.66$).

Interview Findings

To gain an understanding of how participation in a sport for development program helped positive youth development, we consulted the semi-structured interview transcripts. Here several themes emerged (see Table 2). First, most youth reported that the character and virtue lessons, which focused on topics such as fair play, honesty, and kindness, facilitated their positive

development. For instance, in explaining what a typical program day was like, an early adolescent told us about the lessons: “[They teach] us how to be good in the future.” In the wake of multiple civil wars and the Ebola epidemic, support structures such as families, churches, and schools, which might otherwise have shared these lessons with youth, were largely destroyed. As a result, many of the youth only received these kinds of lessons from the program, and youth recognized the important role they played in their healthy development.

Many youth also noted that supportive relationships with adults, especially with coaches, facilitated positive development. One early adolescent noted: “Coach Jane-¹ she’s like a mother- she listens more, helps with Bible study, tells me about Jesus and that ‘Jesus loves L.A.C.E.S. children.’” Since many youth live on the streets, the mentor-mentee relationships were particularly important to them. Coaches, the youth told us, serve as surrogate parents. Although these relationships were particularly important to homeless youth, young people from all three sites reported that supportive relationships with coaches facilitated their healthy development.

In addition to finding support in the character and virtue lessons and the caring relations with adults, some youth also said the program’s provision of basic needs, such as food, bolstered their healthy development. For instance, when asked who was helping him become the person he wanted to be, a male youth replied, “[The program], they give us clothes to wear. They give you food to eat.” Given that a significant portion of the youth in this sample only eat once a day, the food provided by the program was critical.

Finally, some youth also reported that the program was effective because it taught them how to get along with their peers. Youth talked regularly about sharing food and other scarce resources with friends. In addition to encouraging youth to provide practical support to one

¹ Names have been changed to protect participants’ privacy.

another, the program coaches and lessons also encouraged youth to provide psychological support to peers and to avoid conflict with them. When asked if there were any arguments among her peers in the program, a female youth said, “Nobody causing no problem. No fighting. No pinching your friend. (Why?) Our coach tell us, don’t be acting wicked. Love your friend.”

Photojournalism Findings

Guided by youths’ photographs, unstructured interviews revealed supports and impediments to development. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the themes that emerged here echoed the themes that emerged above. In other words, the program encouraged healthy development by providing many of the things that enabled healthy development more generally. For instance, just as youth identified access to supportive adults as one of the ways the program supported their development, they also identified access to supportive adults (in and outside of the program) as critical to their healthy development:

Youth: [Shows a picture of his mom]. That my mom. Anytime she feel happy, I happy too.

Interviewer: When does your mom feel happy? How do you help her feel happy?

Youth: By doing the good things.

Interviewer: How does she help you?

Youth: She do good things for me too.

Access to caring and supportive adults was the most prevalent theme to emerge as a critical component of the Liberian youths’ conception of positive youth development.

Youth also reported that maintaining a belief in God helped their well-being. Following years of missionary work in the country, most Liberians identify as Christian (U.S. State Department, 2010). Perhaps in response to this and in response to the Christian messages

L.A.C.E.S. shared, youth acknowledged the role faith and a relationship with God played in supporting their healthy development. For instance, a youth talked about how her relationship with God helped her. When asked what was particularly important to her, she explained:

Youth: To go to church.

Interviewer: Church. Yeah? Ok. Why is church so important?

Youth: Because when you go to church, you can be blessed

Interviewer: How are you blessed?

Youth: By going to church, by learning God's word, by doing all of it

Interviewer: Ok, what are some blessing that you get?

Youth: For him to help me to go to school, for him to help me to learn good things.

In addition to taking pictures of and discussing the things that helped their well-being, youth also took pictures of and discussed the things that hindered their development. In many cases, youth reported being held back when they lacked the resources that helped them grow and develop. More specifically, just as access to food enabled thriving, a lack of food hampered it. In fact, the lack of food was the most commonly referenced challenge to healthy development.

Youth said things like this participant:

Interviewer: So, it's a picture of food. Why did you choose to take a picture of food?

Youth: Because I eat it. I like it.

Interviewer: I like food, too. Is food important to you?

Youth: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you have enough food, or do you need more food?

Youth: I don't get enough good.

Interviewer: Does that make it hard?

Youth: Yeah.

Some youth also identified the lack of other basic needs, such as the lack of a sanitary environment and a safe place to live, as conditions that hampered their healthy development. Youth in the South West location, where Ebola first broke out, were particularly likely to talk about the lack of sanitary living conditions. For instance, in reference to a picture she took of a garbage pile, a South West youth explained, “People live beside it. Mosquitos. Poor sanitation, which can give people diseases.” Homeless youth in the Central location were particularly likely to take pictures of homes and explain how the lack of a safe place to live hindered healthy development, but youth from all three sites identified the lack of safe living conditions as problematic.

Youth: (Shows a picture of the bush) People do bad things. This is where criminals come, hide inside, and then go burglarize. I have to stand watch instead of do homework.

Interviewer: Why is this happening?

Youth: Do bad things to someone. Do things they are not supposed to do. Hurt someone. . . They killed my grandfather.

In addition to identifying the lack of basic needs, youth also cited the lack of education as something that impeded their healthy development. When asked why he wanted to go to school, an early adolescent male who was not attending school explained, “Because I think school is important to us. We are the leaders. We are the future leaders of this country so need to go to school and become a better person tomorrow.”

Just as most youth identified access to supportive adults as helpful to their healthy development, some also talked about how the lack of these relationships stymied their growth. An

early adolescent from Central Margibi County talked about how the lack of supportive adults in his life contributed to his homelessness:

Interviewer: How did you end up on the street?

Youth: My mom too wicked. She doesn't show concern for me. She would tell me to leave the house. But she would hurt me so I left. And this is how I came across gangsters who smoke and drink. And I had to survive. So I became friends with these people. And this is how I got here.

Finally, some youth reported that the presence of drugs and alcohol in their communities impeded their healthy development. An early adolescent took a picture of a bar.

Interviewer: Where are we here?

Youth: I don't like that area.

Interviewer: What don't you like about it?

Youth: People can go there and smoke. Gangsters go there and do drugs in the unfinished building.

Interviewer: What does that mean for the community when people do that?

Youth: They go steal.

Like this young person, others identified the presence of alcohol and drugs as problematic features of their communities. In other cases, youth admitted to using alcohol and drugs even though they acknowledged that doing so hurt their chances of developing in positive directions.

Discussion

To broaden understanding of the conditions that encourage peace and positive development of youth in the majority world, the present study explored attitudes towards violence, social responsibility, spark/purpose, and personal relationships in marginalized youth

participating in a sport for development program in Liberia. Overall, youth did decrease their attitudes towards violence, and increase their sense of purpose, their social responsibility, and close relationships, especially with coaching mentors.

Both survey data and interview findings indicated that attitudes toward violence decreased and purpose, social responsibility, and relationships with L.A.C.E.S. coaches improved across the three program locations. These findings indicate improvements in peace indicators and youth development indicators, as identified by Benson (2006) and Lerner (2004). Emergent themes suggested as a mediating program factor are providing lessons around character and virtue development by in and out of sport. In many parts of the world, having an extracurricular program share these lessons would have served to reinforce lessons parents, teachers, and others imparted. But, for many of the Liberian youth, the program was the only source for these important lessons. Many of the youth we interviewed had never known their parents. Passed from relative to relative or neighbor to neighbor until they were old enough to survive on their own, they had minimal access to adults, churches, schools, and other institutions that under different circumstances likely would have conveyed these important lessons.

Another mediating factor for healthy development, according to the youth, was access to caring and supportive coaches. This conclusion echoes Bronfenbrenner's (as cited in Brendtro, 2006) and other youth development scholars recognition of the key role caring adults play in positive youth development (Benson, 2006; Lerner, 2004). Coaches were young adults from the youths' communities, and in some cases they served as parental figures, providing practical support and care to the youth as well as encouragement and direction. Furthermore, coach relationships are vital as athletes who have closer relationships with their coaches tend to

demonstrate higher persistence (Rottensteiner et al., 2015), greater satisfaction in the relationship (Jowett & Nezlek, 2012), and stay in their respective sports or program.

Reported increases in closeness are likely to be a protective factor for youth in the L.A.C.E.S. program by discouraging them from engaging in harmful activities and enabling them to cope with their problems in a healthier, more productive way. In youth populations, closeness with parents has been shown to be a protective factor suicidal ideation (Liu, 2005), smoking cigarettes (Wilson, McClish, Heckman, Obando, & Dahman, 2007), and adjustment difficulties (Attar-Schwartz, 2015). Research further indicates that youth who have a relationship with an adult mentor have been shown to cope more effectively with anger inducing problems (Spencer, 2007), which is particularly important for these participants since the majority of them lived on the street or with someone other than their parents, oftentimes due to the Ebola outbreak.

Unfortunately, the participants living on the street in North Central reported relationships with their community as less-close. Forced autonomy that comes with living on the street creates a sense of isolation and alienation (Barker, 2014). Social support and closeness are essential components of fostering healthy behaviors and coping mechanisms, and homeless youth must rely on social networks they have created themselves, rather than family. Homeless youth who do not have these close relationships are more likely to engage in risky behaviors while living on the street (Ennett, Bailey, Federman, 1999). Lower levels of perceived closeness have been associated with loneliness, depressive symptoms, and fewer opportunities to learn social skills, as well as decreased self-esteem (Birkeland et al., 2014), which can be detrimental to homeless youth and potentially make it more challenging to re-enter society due to a lack of emotional intelligence and life skills.

Limitations and Future Research

This study highlights the need to learn more about positive youth development among youth in the majority world, but it is not without its limitations. Although results indicate that the L.A.C.E.S. program increased indicators of positive development, we do not claim all these youth, many of whom were homeless and malnourished, could be said to be thriving. At the same time, we would not want to claim that none of them are. To determine this, a fuller understanding of what constitutes thriving in this population is needed (Sherrod, 2017). To achieve this, a study not only of Liberian youths' conceptions of thriving, but also of local adults' and community leaders' conceptions of thriving, is needed.

Another study limitation had to do with the way Liberian youth interact with adults. The Liberian culture is a top-down, authoritarian culture (Šváblová, 2016). Education consists of rote memorization in which teachers lecture to students, church sessions consist of pastors telling congregants how they should behave, and at home parents dictate rules to children. Corporal punishment at home and at school is common. In this broader culture, it is rare for adults to approach youth and ask them to share their opinions in either written or oral format. However, this challenge is part of the reality of conducting research in the majority world. In interviews, youth were brief and seemed- at least in some cases- to try to tell researchers what they thought we wanted to hear. This latter issue arises in most self-report research (Van de Mortel, 2008). To minimize this problem, members of the research team included local Liberian researchers to help put the youth at ease, and relationships with the youth were built prior to data collection.

Implications

These findings have important practical implications for programs intending to support the healthy development of young people in the majority world. First, they suggest that carefully designed sport for development programs can improve peace and healthy development

indications. Sport for development programs should be mindful of participants' conditions and situations since these things clearly influence the sociocultural factors the programs aim to target. These findings provide a positive example of the bottom-up approach sport for development programs can take to benefit youth. Second, since no one program can provide all the things youth need to survive and develop, these findings suggest programs should coordinate their services. Programs aimed at providing youth with food and education should work with programs, like L.A.C.E.S., aimed at providing lessons around character and virtue development. By working together, programs could significantly increase the positive influence they have on the lives of the youth they serve. Third, this finding points to some of the most critical forms of assistance youth in the majority world believe they need to develop in healthy directions (e.g., access to supportive adults, access to basic needs).

Conclusion

This mixed methods study suggests that a sport for development program effectively fostered some key indicators of peace and healthy development among Liberian youth. Findings suggest youth saw access to supportive adults and helpful peers along with access to basic needs (e.g., food, physical activity, life skills, education) as facilitating their well-being. Interestingly, they also pointed to a relationship with God and faith as nutrients that helped them develop. On the other hand, they reported that the lack of supportive relationships, the lack of basic needs (e.g., food, education, sanitary conditions, safe place to live) presented challenges to their healthy development. Although much remains to be done, this study serves as an important early step in understanding how to promote purpose, peace, and the positive development of Liberian youth.

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Table 1

Matched Sample Living Frequencies

Location	Current Living Situation			Average School Attendance			Average Meals Per Day		
	On the Street	Someone not parents	Parents	Not Attending	Sometimes	Most Days	1 or less	2	3 or more
North Central									
pre	23	8	2	29	0	5	29	2	3
post	32	2	0	30	1	1	32	1	1
Southwest									
pre	8	18	8	13	6	15	19	10	4
post	8	7	16	12	1	21	17	11	6
Southeast									
pre	5	7	22	2	13	19	17	12	5
post	1	6	26	3	1	30	21	11	4
TOTAL									
Pre	36	33	32	44	19	39	65	24	12
post	41	15	42	45	3	52	70	21	11

Table 2.

Sample quotations and code frequency by research question

Research questions	Theme	Frequency	Quotation
2. How did L.A.C.E.S. help youth thrive?	Provided character-building lessons	Most youth	Interviewer: How did L.A.C.E.S. help you? Youth: L.A.C.E.S. teach you how to (inaudible), to obey, and not to go on the street and also not to steal and also not to do bad things. Don't be rude. Don't do something you're not supposed to do.
	Provided access to supportive coaches	Many youth	Interviewer: What sorts of things can [your coach] do for you? Youth: She can praise you. She can carry your good name around. She said [name of another L.A.C.E.S. coach] can go to her house, tell her parents about her good. . . . She's like a mother- she listens more, helps with Bible stories, tells me about Jesus and that "Jesus loves L.A.C.E.S. children."
	Provided access to basic needs, like food	Some youth	Interviewer: Who helps you right now? Youth: Who help me now? L.A.C.E.S. tries to help me. Provide food for me to eat. And comfort me. Help me.
3. What kinds of things support youths' positive development?	Encouraged youth to work together	Some youth	Interviewer: What's the main thing you've learned at L.A.C.E.S.? Youth: No man is an island. Interviewer: What does that mean? Youth: One man doesn't score a goal alone.
	Access to supportive adults	Many youth	(Shows a picture of her coach) Interviewer: Tell me, why is [your coach] important to you? Youth: Because she got good ways. Interviewer: What are some of her good ways? Youth: (Inaudible) Translator: When they hungry, they go to [the coach] and she gives them food.
	Access to food	Some youth	(Shows a picture of a palm tree) Youth: I love the way the palm tree looking. It can give you soup.
	Helpful peers	Some youth	(Shows a picture of children) Youth: These are my friends on the street. Interviewer: How do you feel about these friends?

			<p>Youth: I feel fine because I don't got nobody to walk around with.</p> <p>Interviewer: How do they help you?</p> <p>Youth: If they get money they buy something for me, and if I get money, I buy something for them.</p>
	Access to education	Some youth	<p>(Shows a picture of a school) Youth: I love to learn- be coming from school.</p> <p>Interviewer: You like to learn? What does it do for you?</p> <p>Youth: It does many things for us. Help us to learn, find good job.</p>
	Belief in God	Some youth	<p>Interviewer: What kinds of things do you pray about?</p> <p>Youth: If I can ask God for help. If I pray to him, he answer.</p> <p>Interviewer: how does God answer?</p> <p>Youth: If he hear my prater, he answer by giving me what I request of him.</p> <p>Interviewer: What kinds of things do you ask for?</p> <p>Youth: I ask God to guide me, for protection, for helping me in school.</p>
4. What kinds of things inhibit youths' positive development?	Lack of food	Some youth	<p>Interviewer: Why do you steal sometimes.</p> <p>Youth: Because I'm hungry. When I see [food], I do steal it.</p>
	Lack of access to education	Some youth	<p>Youth: I want to go to school. I see my friends go to school in their uniforms. I can feel bad.</p> <p>Interviewer: Why do you want to go to school?</p> <p>Youth: To be a better person. . . . I go to school, I get money, I help people when I get big.</p>
	Lack of supportive relationships	Some youth	<p>Interviewer: What makes it hard for you [to become the person you want to become]?</p> <p>Youth: I need people to help me.</p> <p>Interviewer: Anyone helping you now?</p> <p>Youth: No.</p>
	Presence of drugs and alcohol	Some youth	<p>Youth: Those are street kids, who drink and take drugs.</p> <p>Interviewer: What do you think about that?</p> <p>Youth: Not good for the community.</p>
	Lack of sanitary conditions	Some youth	<p>(Shows a picture of a garbage pile) Youth: Mosquito. It's dirty. Can give sickness to other people. . . . It don't need to be in the</p>

		community. . . . We don't want mosquitoes or any sickness to come grab a child.
Lack of a safe place to live	Some youth	<p>Interviewer: What is <i>really</i> important to you?</p> <p>Youth: What is really important to me [is to] leave from on the streets and come back home. So I can do better thing for myself.</p>

Note: Most youth = 18 or more; Many youth = 13-17 youth; Some youth = 8-12 youth