Views of adolescent female youth on physical activity during early adolescence

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Abstract

Early adolescence is a time when a transition away from sport and physical activity participation is at its highest level among female youth (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). This has led to the identification of barriers and facilitators of physical activity participation for adolescent females. Consequently there have been calls to overcome barriers and augment facilitators via the creation of gender-relevant programming. Despite these calls and efforts, a gender disparity remains, and a detailed understanding of how girls experience and interpret physical activity within the context of their lives is still lacking. The current project aimed to gain further insight into the foregoing using tenets of Interpretive Phenomenology to further understand the lived physical activity experiences of females during early adolescence, delineating their barriers to participation and the factors enabling participation. Five themes were identified and made into vignettes to facilitate understanding from adolescent females' perspectives: friends or don't know anyone, good or not good enough, fun or not fun; good feeling or gross; and peer support or peer pressure. The physical activity promotion implications for female youth are discussed within the context of these themes.

Key words: Physical activity, female, youth, qualitative.

Introduction

There is a growing interest in the physical activity levels of children and adolescent youth from health (e.g., Dietz, 1994; Magarey et al., 2003; Sherar et al., 2008) and psychological perspectives (e.g., Biddle et al., 2004; Clark et al., 2011; Rutten et al., 2007; Shields et al., 2005). Such interest is due to the clear indication that physical activity decreases with age, particularly during adolescence, with girls being less active than boys at all ages (Biddle et al., 2004; Hedstrom and Gould, 2004; Trost et al., 2008; Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Further, adolescent females are an important focus due to the risks of a sedentary lifestyle and the benefits of an active lifestyle among female youth being well documented (see Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Institute, 2004; Dietz, 1994; Healthy Active Kids Canada, 2009).

Early adolescence is a time when a transition away from sport and physical activity participation is at its highest level among female youth (Hedstrom and Gould, 2004). The World Health Organization (2008) published a report that found Canadian female youth are consistently less active than boys from 11 to 15 years and females have a greater reduction in participation during the same time. In the United States, Pate and colleagues (2007) found that girls' participation in vigorous physical activity declined from 45.4 percent in the eighth grade to 34.1

percent in grade 12. It was also found that the probability that girls would participate in several forms of vigorous physical activity in the 12th grade was directly related to participation in those activities in the eighth grade, with those less engaged likely to become non-participants.

Accordingly, the barriers and facilitators of physical activity participation for adolescent females have been identified, with research suggesting intrapersonal (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived competence, self-image), social (e.g., peer influence) and environmental factors (e.g., gender-relevant physical activity programming, accessible vs. inaccessible facilities) as relevant (Biddle et al., 2004; Brett et al., 2002; Brooks and Magnusson, 2006; Daniels & Leaper, 2006; Dwyer et al., 2006; Everheart and Pemberton, 2001; Ferreira et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2010; Rees et al., 2006). Consequently, there have been many calls to overcome such barriers and augment facilitators, by creating gender-relevant programs that encourage/facilitate physical activity for adolescent females (e.g., Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2010; Cheng et al., 2003; Everheart and Pemberton, 2001).

Despite the identification of barriers to adolescent female physical activity participation and subsequent calls to address them, a gender disparity remains, and a detailed understanding of how girls experience and interpret physical activity within the context of their daily lives is still lacking (Clark et al., 2011; Yungblut et al., 2012). The aim of the current project was to gain further insight into the foregoing by employing an interpretive qualitative approach (i.e., Interpretive Phenomenology and vignettes) to further understand the lived physical activity experiences of females during early adolescence, delineating their barriers to participation and the factors enabling participation. In order to further contextualize our study and its contribution to the literature, a more detailed review of the qualitative research pertaining to girls' physical activity experiences is necessary.

Review of qualitative research literature

Qualitative studies have highlighted the particular relevance of gender-specific programming, with studies suggesting that the social and cultural context are important influences on adolescent females' physical activity experiences and physical activity behaviour. Depending on the qualitative approach adopted, various insights have been gained.

Whitehead and Biddle (2008) conducted a focus group study and found that less active girls held more stereotypical views in relation to appearance than active girls, viewing it impossible to be both sporty and feminine. Similarly, Dwyer et al. (2006) found in their focus group study that girls expressed looking good for others

(i.e., wearing make-up) and being physically active as incompatible. However, they also found that some girls challenged feminine "ideals" and were thus able to renegotiate gender stereotypes, making it more likely that they participated in sport. A systematic review of qualitative studies has echoed the findings of barriers unique to adolescent female physical activity participation such as being socially self-conscious to show an unfit body, lacking confidence to execute skills, or appearing too "masculine" (Allender et al., 2006).

Vu and colleagues (2006) also found in focus groups with adolescent girls in middle school (i.e., grades 7-8), that some activities were described as more "gender appropriate" (e.g., dance) than others (e.g., sports), with those less appropriate contributing to a fear of negative reactions from boys, contributing to deterred activity participation. Focus groups with adolescent boys reinforced these findings, with boys suggesting that girls who participated in sport were "too aggressive" or "tomboys". Boys also acknowledged that they teased female participants for not being as competent when competing side by side (e.g., during informal soccer matches during a lunch break).

Beyond the above focus group studies, qualitative studies employing interpretive approaches (i.e., insight is sought into how descriptions and meanings of activity impact daily life) have provided further insight into girls' involvement in sport and physical education contexts (e.g., Gibbons & Humbert, 2008; Gilbert, 2001; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Humbert, 1995). The findings of these studies are unique, rich and varied, with such studies problematizing a male oriented physical education curriculum as exclusionary (see Brown, 2000; Flintoff and Scranton, 2001) and/or limiting due to the focus on evaluation and skill development, which ultimately takes away from enjoyment or does not accommodate physical activity preferences (see Brown, 2000; Humbert, 1995). Though this research is limiting as it was done solely in the physical education context, such studies have added further insight into understanding the socio-cultural context as an important influence on adolescent female perceptions and physical activity behaviour.

Feminist researchers have also explored girl's perceptions and experiences of physical activity and sport within physical education contexts (Azzarito, 2009; Azzarito et al., 2006; Evans, 2006; Hills, 2007). Such research explores particular meanings and social norms surrounding physical activity for girls (e.g., some activities are appropriate if "feminine", being active is intertwined with appearance ideals) by attending to how dominant discourses concerning gender "construct" physical activity in a narrow manner (Azzarito et al., 2006; Evans, 2006). Similar to interpretive research findings, the physical education context and curricula often privilege sport and competition, valuing boys' skills and competencies and emphasizing narrow meanings/definitions of "fit" (Flintoff and Scraton, 2001). Girls are then placed in a paradox, whereby they must negotiate their enjoyment and display competence, but within the confines of cultural demands concerning femininity (Azzarito, 2009; Azarito et al., 2006; Evans, 2006).

While informative, the foregoing literature has tended to either negate exploring, or made less mention of, what also may be pleasurable and empowering about physical activity and/or physical education curricula for adolescent girls. As mentioned, Dwyer et al. (2006) found that some girls actively challenge feminine "ideals" and were able to renegotiate such gender stereotypes, making it more likely that they participated in sport. Similarly, Azzarito et al. (2006) also found that girls may actively renegotiate dominant gendered expectations in school physical education contexts. Flintoff and Scraton (2001) also noted that girls experience pleasurable moments in their activity outside of physical education contexts. Further research is warranted to better understand girls' experiences with physical activity in order to understand both the empowering and disempowering potential of physical activity in the context of their lives. Additionally, as alluded to, further research is needed that explores physical activity more broadly, outside of physical education contexts.

A recent interpretive qualitative study by Clark et al. (2011) exploring adolescent girls' conceptions and experiences of physical activity underscores the importance of considering the full range of experiences of what it is like to be physically active and how girls' daily lives are impacted. Consistent with the above research reviewed, Clark and colleagues found that while physical activity was defined and experienced within narrow ideals (e.g., appearance, competition), they also found that unstructured activity was viewed positively as it allowed for self-expression and creativity. Further research was called for with a continued focus on the range of embodied movement experiences (i.e., empowering and disempowering) in various contexts (i.e., not only physical education) order to better understand and eventually harness the potential of physical activity to positively impact adolescent girls' lives. Therefore, the present study was conceived to extend the existing qualitative research by gaining a better understanding of the lived experiences of adolescent females in relation to both sport and physical activity engagement during early adolescence. The intention is to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of why female youth participation rates are so low as well as what may be positive about physical activity, from the perspectives/voices of the participants in one geographic region. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the current views held by early adolescent female youth about sport and physical activity programming?
2. What experiences with sport and physical activity programming did female youth encounter during early adolescence and what are the current views held by mid and late adolescent female youth about sport and physical activity?
3. How do mid-to-late adolescent females believe their experiences during early adolescence influenced their current activity levels?
4. How do the views about sport and physical activity programming held by physically non-active adolescent

females compare to physically active adolescent females within and across stages of adolescence?

5. What are effective practical strategies from the vantage point of the participants for engaging adolescent female in sport and physical activity programming during early adolescence?

6. What are the issues, challenges or barriers that adolescent females perceive as important for their involvement in sport and physical activities?

Methods

In order to gain further understanding of the perspectives of adolescent female youth and answer the above research questions, the current study was grounded in Interpretative Phenomenology (IP; see Smith 2004). The underlying assumption of IP is that participants make sense of their personal and social worlds *through the meanings that particular experiences hold to them* (Smith and Osborn, 2008). In order to gain such an understanding, a particular approach to gathering, analyzing and interpreting data is required. With IP the active role of the researcher is emphasized through interpretative processes of data collection and analysis. Smith (2004) outlined three characteristics of IPA: (a) idiographic; (b) inductive; and (c) interrogative. Data analysis begins with the first case and continues until saturation is reached. During analysis the researcher remains flexible and allows themes to emerge. Finally, although each case is considered independent of pre-conceived hypotheses, the results are integrated by discussing how the current study relates to the extent literature.

Researcher's assumptions

In-line with an IP approach, bracketing is an important process to consider. Bracketing is a scientific process whereby the researcher suspends his/her "presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences" (Gearing, 2004, p. 1430). Schinke and da Costa (2000) suggested that sport researchers take particular measures to be aware of their own assumptions and biases and the influence of these throughout the research process. To further identify subjective perceptions a research logbook was employed throughout this project by the lead investigator.

Reflexive interview

Prior to commencing the project, a reflexive interview was conducted with the lead investigator by the second author (male) and another faculty member (female) to identify assumptions and biases about the project. The lead author was a doctoral student with extensive experience working in community sport programs as part of Girl Guides Canada. Questions asked during the interview pertained to (a) personal sport background; (b) interest in youth sport participation; (c) the development of questions; and (d) anticipated results for the proposed study. The reflexive interview was recorded, transcribed and summarized and results were discussed with the second author and the female youth panel. Results were used to further develop open-ended questions inclusive of all participants (e.g., those who were regularly active, those

who were inactive) to ensure a safe space for participants to express experiences without feeling judged or pressured, regardless of their physical activity participation levels.

Reflexive logbook

To further enhance researcher awareness, the lead author / investigator acknowledged subjective perceptions related to the research topic by maintaining a logbook throughout the project. Within the logbook, thoughts and intuitions were recorded. Meetings, informal discussions, literature, and thoughts about the research project were also documented. The use of a logbook allowed the first author to trace decision-making patterns throughout the study, enhancing the ability to more accurately recall events that might have seemed unimportant at the time but became relevant later on. By documenting thoughts and ideas new assumptions and biases not recognized during the bracketing interview were further identified. These reflections allowed the lead investigator to add follow-up (i.e., probing) questions during the interview to gain further information pertaining to participants' current (e.g., females n grades seven and eight) and future (e.g., high school) physical activity experiences.

Participants

This study was approved by the authors' Research Ethics Board (IRB) and also from the research committees at the two local school boards where participants were recruited. The lead investigator contacted teachers for permission to include students from their classrooms to participate in the project. Teachers identified students that fit the recruitment criteria (e.g., grade, age, participation level) and assisted the lead investigator with distributing and collecting research consent forms. Consent to participate was sought from parents/guardians and assent was obtained from each participant. Two cohorts of participants were included to glean the unique perspectives of female youth. The early adolescent cohort was comprised of 15 participants and the mid-to-late adolescent retrospective cohort was comprised of 20 participants with active and non-active females being equally represented within the cohorts. The latter group served to provide a more global retrospective description of the topic matter, having experienced their transition from primary to secondary school, along with the associated challenges. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on activity level and grade (Smith and Osborn, 2004). Participants in the early adolescent cohort ranged in age from 12 to 14 with a mean age of 13 and participants in the mid-to-late cohort ranged in age from 15 to 18 with a mean age of 16. Within each cohort a quarter of the students indicated less than 5 hours per week of physical activity, half reported five to ten hours of physical activity and a quarter reported more than ten hours of physical activity per week. The geographic location for this research project is for the most part culturally homogeneous. As a result, the authors chose not to provide the ethnicity of the participants, so as to ensure participant anonymity.

Female youth panel

The intent through the female youth panel was to add an

additional layer of female youth inclusion throughout the project, from question development through analysis. The panel was created with three female youth, one from each stage of adolescence, not participating in the interviews to assist with the research project, from question development through analysis. The interview topics and questions were developed using a contextually informed panel (i.e., three adolescent girls not participating in the interviews), built with age pertinent wording. The panel was also consulted on aspects of recruitment, interview location, and duration, and throughout the analysis. Thereafter, each member of the panel was consulted individually on an ongoing basis throughout the research project to provide feedback. Panel members were consulted after 10%, 35%, 50%, and 100% of the analysis was completed. Even the thank you gifts at the study's end were carefully conceived in consultation with the youth panel (e.g., "cool" pens, stickers, and pencil cases as a kind token everyone would use).

Data collection

Within IP the interview strategy is to encourage participants to speak about the phenomena with as little prompting as possible (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Conversational statements such as "Please tell me about…" were effective for allowing participants to talk about aspects of the topic that were most memorable or relevant in their lives. Careful consideration should be taken to ensure that the wording of questions does not lead the participant to believe there is a desired response. When asking a question there can be an implied sense that there is a right or wrong answer associated with the questions. Conversational statements were employed as a method to engage the participants as the experts throughout the data collection.

Individual interviews

Each participant engaged in at least one interview and one focus group with the lead investigator. The initial semi-structured interview, comprising eight potential topics, averaged 45 minutes in duration and took place at each participant's school (see Table 1). Participants were asked to discuss their experiences with physical activity.

Throughout the interviews, participants were asked follow-up questions to deepen explanations. Patton's (2002) technique of probing (i.e., detail probes, elaboration probes, clarification probes, and contrasting probes) was employed. Upon completion of initial interviews the first four participants from the early adolescent cohort were asked back for follow-up interviews (two months after initial interviews) based on the need to deepen their responses.

Focus groups

Participants across the age cohorts were then invited to a verification focus group held at their school to discuss the emerging themes. At the beginning of each focus group, comprised of 6-8 participants, the first author presented the preliminary analysis of the data. She explained how the data were analyzed and then, what each theme and sub-theme meant, followed by anonymous examples of data for each theme and sub-theme. Within each verification focus group (four total), then, participants were asked to comment and elaborate upon the emergent themes and sub-themes. Finally, the focus groups served as an opportunity to share with the participants what the aggregate experiences of the participant group were and also, a few proposed solutions to this social problem of female youth engagement in sport and physical activity. Each focus group began with a power point presentation of the results. With the results visible to the participants, a space was opened for candid discussion and also, feedback regarding the emergent results.

Data analysis

Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead author. The data were then analyzed inductively leading to further data collection in a cyclical process, with earlier collections and analyses informing those that followed. The data were coded inductively using key words (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008), with each key word borrowed directly from the interview transcripts. The codes and emergent themes and sub-themes were then identified by the first author with input from the female youth panel. Female youth

Table 1. Semi-structured interview guide (questions and probe examples).

1.	To begin, can you please tell me what being physically active means to you?
2.	Please tell me about a time when you were physically active and enjoyed it.
	- Why was it enjoyable?
3.	Please tell me about a time when you were physically active and did not enjoy it.
	- Why didn't you enjoy it?
4.	Please take me through what you do in a typical week
	- What do you do in class, recess, outside of school? (organized or independent)
	- Who do you participate in [insert activity mentioned] with?
	- Why do you participate in [insert activity mentioned] with?
5.	Is there an activity that you would like to participate in but do not?
	- What is it?
	- Why do you not participate?
	- What activities at school?
	- What activities at home/community?
6.	Can you please tell me how physically active you think you will be in high school?
	- What might influence your physical activity participation?
7.	What thoughts are you currently having about the interview or physical activity in general?
8.	Are there any other questions I should have asked you about your physical activity but didn't?
	- What should I have asked?

panel members provided feedback on context and meaning through various phases of the analyses (see section about expert panel). For example, the panel assisted in the depiction of how early adolescent females distinguished between friends, peers, and people who were unknown, but contributive to the social context. Third, each participant was provided with a copy of her verbatim transcript and preliminary coded data as the first part of a member check. Therein, each participant was asked to remove any words from their interview regarded in retrospect as inaccurate. Concurrently, the participants were asked to comment on the provisional analysis, including the delineation of the thematic analysis in terms of coding and categorization. Thereafter, the researcher returned to the analyzed data and revised the participants' words and the larger analysis accordingly. Fourth, focus groups were conducted to refine and deepen the data. During the focus groups, participants provided further explanation of themes in the form of a second member check by giving examples and discussing the importance they placed on each theme in their overall experiences with physical activity. Fifth, the data were presented to the second author, where the coherence of the final analysis was considered. What follows within the results is confined to the presentation of themes and first order sub-themes.

Vignettes

Vignettes were ultimately created from the data for each theme (i.e., friends or don't know anyone; good or not good enough; fun or not fun; good feeling or gross; and peer support or peer pressure). Vignettes have been traditionally provided to participants as hypothetical situations upon which participants respond to the vignette in the form of data. More recently, researchers have employed vignettes to present results for the reader to gain a deeper sense of the participants' lived experiences (Ely et al., 1997). Thus, presenting IP themes in the form of vignettes is in-line with the underlying philosophy of IP, as the creation of vignettes not only centralizes participants lived experiences and voices, but makes them more accessible to those outside of the experience (Ely et al., 1997; Smith, 2010; Yungblut et al., 2012). Moreover, within the physical activity domain, the use of vignettes to illustrate the experiences of physical activity engagement has surfaced. Dubuc et al. (2010) used composite vignettes to present the burnout experiences and psychological recovery processes of adolescent female gymnasts. Blodgett et al. (2011) employed vignettes in the form of short co-authored narratives to feature participant empowerment strategies through sport science research with marginalized populations. Recently, the utility of constructing vignettes from IPA data to further understand adolescent female's physical activity experiences has been demonstrated (see Yungblut et al., in press).
The above vignette studies not only emphasize the importance of centralizing participant voices as within the present study, they further represent a novel strategy toward communicating and understanding adolescent females' physical activity experiences (Smith, 2010; Smith and Sparkes, 2009). The composite vignettes are thus a mix of participants' voices blended into a narrative for each emergent theme (Ely et al., 1997; Spalding and Phillips,

2007). The vignettes were developed by the researcher from the participants' words, with feedback from the female youth panel elicited to illustrate lived experiences in story format. To ensure the vignettes encapsulated participants' experiences, the vignettes were constructed from the analysis, with each theme and sub-themes (see Table 2) integrated into the narratives. These vignettes were subsequently evaluated by the expert panel.

Trustworthiness

The authenticity of this project was enhanced using transactional validity guidelines proposed by Cho and Trent (2006). In qualitative research, transactional validity is used to achieve a higher level of accuracy and consensus for the interactive process that occurs between the research, the researched, and the data (Cho and Trent, 2006). Within the current project various steps were utilized to enhance transactional validity. The interview schedule was designed with open-ended questions and conversational statements, which together, allowed for follow-up questions, to establish mutual understanding between each participant and the researcher. Transcripts and themes were discussed with the female youth panel to gain input and focus groups were held to facilitate the interpretation of data whereby the power of determining the results of the study was shared among the participants, the female panel, and the researchers.

Results

Five interrelated themes were identified by participants as influencing their physical activity participation levels: (a) friends or don't know anyone; (b) good or not good enough; (c) fun or not fun; (d) good feeling or gross; and (e) peer support or peer pressure (see Table 2). While distinct, all of these themes and physical activity experiences are tied to the social context. It should be noted that the terminology employed is simplistic and indicative of the participants' terminology, even when findings (forthcoming) offer variations that include moderate views. Trends in the participants' lived experiences of physical activity during adolescence are provided first through a description of the theme followed by its respective vignette, which includes the participants' words, to illustrate each theme. While the themes at first glance may appear as dichotomies, they instead reflect the complexity of how physical activity is conceptualized and experienced by adolescent females (i.e., not as an "either or", but as a simultaneous contraction). The vignettes further illustrate/reflect the presence of both themes present in the girls' narratives.

Friends or don't know anyone

Participants indicated they would be more likely to try new activities during early adolescence when participating with friends. Friends were important as they did not judge the participants' capacities to perform within the activity. Participants defined their friends as people they knew well and were comfortable around. In particular, friends were viewed as more likely to enhance physical activity enjoyment by either making participants more confident about performing the skills and/or allowing

Table 2. Early and mid-late adolescent explanations about physical activity.

Vignette theme	Sub themes - skeleton	Adolescence Meaning units Early/Mid-late	Mid-to-late adolescence Meaning units Early/Mid-late
Friends or don't know anyone	Ease of participation Comfort level Assistance Social decisions	64 / 12	94 / 31
Good or not good enough	Skill level Embarrassing situations Ease of participation Pressure Cues from others Discovering skills	27 / 29	57 / 69
Fun or not fun	Presence of others Skill level Feelings Ease of participation Competition Pressure	40 / 20	66 / 28
Good feeling or gross	Feelings about self Fitness level Atmosphere Others' impressions Hygiene	32 / 13	33 / 23
Peer support or peer pressure	Judged Feedback Encouragement Acceptance	8 / 20	19 / 31
		171/94	269/182
	Total: 716	**265**	**451**

Note: The meaning units in each cohort are presented by positive aspect / negative aspect

them to reduce the seriousness of sports by way of making jokes and bonding with others. Conversely, not knowing anyone while participating in physical activity elicited stress about not being good or skilled enough to perform the activity, with fear of judgment from others emerging as the primary concern. Participants in mid-to-late adolescence indicated that the presence of friends was most important during early adolescence and progressively through high school as they became more comfortable participating in physical activity, with their personal interests deciding which activities to choose rather than choosing activities based on the presence of friends.

Vignette
Having friends there makes it a lot easier; it makes it more comfortable to do sports, and because you get to spend more time with friends, you look forward to the activities. I like how I develop friendships in sports. With your friends you feel more comfortable, you're used to being yourself, even if you're acting stupid or silly around them, you're not afraid to actually try. If you didn't know anyone it would be uncomfortable, you wouldn't know their personalities, how they are, there wouldn't be anyone to talk to you or help you. You wouldn't really go to someone that you're not friends with for help or tips - things that you can go to your friends for. The first time we did the run, it was pretty bad because I don't think I knew a lot of people. The second time I knew everybody so it was more fun. Sometimes sports can be hard, especially if none of your friends are athletic and you're the only one that's into sports. I have friends that are not into

sports and so I'd be hanging out with them instead of doing sports. But the friends that I met in sports, they're nicer and they're not into the bad stuff. I just tried out for volleyball and I found that I made closer friends so I just continued with it.

Good or not good enough
During early adolescence fears of not being good enough to participate figured prominently in physical activity meanings and experiences. As alluded to above, this experience of not being good enough was tied to the anticipation of fear and social influences and/or the social context. In particular, making an error could result in possible public embarrassment thereby diminishing social standing. Being considered skilled at the activity made participation easier as the fear of being singled in front of others out or letting a team down was greatly reduced, although not completely eliminated. Individual activities were experienced as less stressful because there was no added pressure of letting team members down by not performing well. Participants indicated that they were rarely told upfront whether they were good enough. Rather, they learned that others perceived them as not good enough based on cues from peers and through teachers. Participants in the mid-to-late adolescent cohort affirmed that emphasis during early adolescence was placed on sports, where there would be a winner and a loser. Participants in the mid-to-late adolescence cohort indicated that they were exposed to more options for physical activity in high school and no longer thought primarily of sports as the exclusive form of physical activity. Both cohorts ex-

plained that they preferred activities when participation was the emphasis.

Vignette

I've tried skiing and I'm really bad at it. I have bad balance so I probably won't go again. If you're good at it, you have skills, you know that you won't be embarrassed around people you may or may not know. If you're terrible at something, sometimes you feel like you're letting the team down if it's a team sport. You're just going to feel a lot of pressure because they're depending on you to be good. Other people notice it and then you just catch on that you're not the greatest player, if they're not giving you the ball. Then in gym, they make the teams "fair" because it has to be an even number of strong and weak players on each team. So you automatically cross yourself out. I eventually stopped trying to do well in gym because I didn't care - I wasn't going to be good at it anyway. I never got the chance to try because I was just discouraged from grade seven. I used to think that I was bad at sports in elementary school because the only sport we played in class was basketball, which was the only sport I think my elementary gym teacher knew how to play. So I was like 'oh well, I'm not good at sports and then I got to high school'.

Fun or not fun

Having fun was the primary reason why participants engaged in physical activities. The girls who had low physical activity participation levels tended to focus more on what made activities "not fun" while those that participated regularly in activities focused on what was fun about physical activity. As with the previous two themes, social influence remains "infused" in these physical activity experiences of adolescent females. Having fun was paired with having friends present during the physical activity, or participating in activities where skill was not emphasized. In relation to organized physical activity (i.e., physical education class, organized sport teams), participants did not think that adults understood the importance of having fun while engaged in such activity. Interest in participating declined as soon as an activity was experienced as unpleasant, with this view confirmed across the participants. When recalling physical education classes considered as the most fun, participants described classes that allowed students to choose between two consecutive games with one being competitive and the other not keeping score. Participants also experienced enjoyment in classes that included activities that did not involve games with a definitive winner (i.e., competition was not emphasized).

Vignette

I think it's fun if you have your friends and it is fun if you're good at the sport. Fun is something that you can do that makes you feel good. If something is fun then you'll always be looking forward to it, you'll be happy to go do it, you'll want to do it. And then not fun, it's when you don't have people to talk to, and you don't know anybody. Basketball with my class isn't fun because the kids push and you get hit with the ball. Even if you're an active person it doesn't mean you're going to enjoy every

single sport that you play. I find if you're not keeping score a lot of people will play. If it's just for fun people will be like 'oh, ok, people aren't judging me right now because I just totally shot that right into the net'. Then, there is the added pressure of parents. Some adults try to live their dreams through their children and they really try to force their children to do sports that they dreamed about. Maybe we don't find fun in their interests.*

Good feeling or gross

Across cohorts, participants generally recognized that there was a change toward wanting to look good to impress others during early adolescence and found it difficult to maintain a feminine image (e.g., not aggressive, pretty, not sweaty) while being physically active. Working up a sweat and being physically active was described as feeling good during participation, but having to return to class or go to other activities without having a chance to shower or change was an unpleasant experience. Participants described the good feeling they experienced with physical activity as being a combination of a sense of accomplishment and feeling physically strong and healthy. The ability to change for physical education classes varied by school from having to participate in regular school clothes to being allowed to change into gym clothes. Participants in the mid-to-late adolescence cohort indicated that although facilities were available once they got to high school they were often not allotted the time to shower and change before attending the next class. Participants admitted to reducing their participation level in physical activity, particularly physical education class, when they had other activities they wanted to look good for after class. The good feeling associated with physical activity was not considered to outweigh the idea of "feeling gross" when choosing whether or not to participate in physical activity.

Vignette

When I train, I'm sweating, I probably smell, but right at the end of the activity, I just feel so good about myself. It's about enjoying what you're doing and being proud of yourself for being there. I know I'm getting so much faster, I'm gaining a lot of strength, I don't care about the sweat in that moment; it just shows me that I'm pushing myself as hard as I can. If you're tired you just don't feel like you can get into the groove and you feel like your legs are heavy it's just not a good feeling. I'm an outdoor person and I like to do physical activities outside because then I don't feel like I'm suffocating. It's good if you're bored to do something like going for a jog or bike ride - things that feel good. I don't like to get sweaty in gym class, but if it's an after school sport and I'm staying after school just specifically for that sport, I say there's nothing wrong with getting sweaty. At this age a lot of the girls are trying to impress guys, they don't want to look bad for guys, and they want to look good so the guys will pay attention. Some girls don't like to get sweaty because they think it is unattractive, they're worried about their hair and their makeup. At school we have to do a workout and then we have to go right back to class. I find I feel better when I can shower rather than just putting my clothes back on and going to the next class all sweaty.

Peer support or peer pressure

As mentioned across other themes, there was a sense that peers were judging performance during physical activity and would express their judgments by snickering, funny looks, or making comments to friends. Participants indicated that peers rarely made direct comments to them but yet they were certain they were being judged. Although participants generally recognized the importance of providing encouragement to others, there did not appear to be comfort in providing encouragement to people outside of close friends. The mid-to-late adolescence cohort acknowledged that during early adolescence they were "too concerned" with what their peers thought. Once in high school participants thought it was more important to participate in activities that you like and it was possible to meet new people with shared interests.

Vignette

People who are your peers, people are not so comfortable with; you're always going to be worried about whether they judge you. They don't have the same feelings for you as your friends do. What happens a lot is, someone will miss a shot in basketball and then two friends will go to each other and say, 'she's terrible, she can't make the basket.' They don't say it directly. Or they'll roll their eyes, just subtle things like that, well, not really subtle. I knew a girl that wanted to try out for teams last year but it was nerve racking because the grade eights were stuck up. Sometimes you'll be playing a sport and then everyone just snickers. Sometimes they'll say something, if you just make a dumb mistake, then they'll say 'come on, why didn't you do that.' You shouldn't really care what the other people think of you because you can be your own person but they [peers] are there. If you miss a basket and you're all depressed and then everyone comes up to and is like whoa, that was so close, you can do it next time that would get me up.

Discussion

Adolescent females within the current project discussed their experiences of participating in sports and physical activity and identified factors linked primarily to social influences, which, in their view informed how they incorporated or avoided physical activity in their lives. During this critical time, participants often experienced sport and physical activity as a focus on performance and skill as opposed to fun and enjoyment. The complexity and impact of these limited constructions and meanings concerning sport and physical activity is further revealed through our IP study, as girls discussed the limited conceptions of sport and physical activity as "doable" and negotiable if they had a friend to alleviate feelings of dissonance and judgment that may result when not performing sport skills "properly". The limited sport experiences, which were based on limited sport offerings, were thus even more aversive when a lack of meaningful support (e.g., friendship) was available. . While our IP approach was important for identifying this complexity, these findings are not novel among sport and physical activity scholars and resonate with much of the previous literature in this area.

Pate et al. (2007) and Hedstrom and Gould (2004) found that there were social constraints encountered by female youth during this critical time in their development. Similarly, qualitative studies identified in our earlier literature review are informative in further interpreting these findings, as the notion of activity not being fun or "doable" may further relate to the limited social and cultural constructions of physical activity as "sport" and hence more competitive and skill-focused (see .g., Evans, 2006; Gibbons and Humbert, 2008; Gilbert, 2001; Humbert, 1995; Flintoff and Scraton, 2001). These limited socio-cultural constructions of activity appear to culminate in both limited opportunities and limited experiences concerning sport and physical activity in girls' lives.

Within our study findings, friends were clearly an important part of development during all stages of adolescence (Cheng et al., 2003). Girls in the current study indicated that trying new activities, being bad at an activity, or having to do an activity that was boring were considered to be more viable if there was at least one friend present. Friends offered support and encouragement during stressful situations, such as when the participants were competing against males. Friends also allowed one to avoid judgment from others, creating a sense of comfort and avoidance of the unpleasant outcomes often associated with narrow conception of sport and physical activity (Yungblut et al., 2012). This finding is consistent with the findings of Weiss et al. (1996) that within sport contexts peers are inextricably linked with one's self-perceptions and motivational outcomes. Creating opportunities for adolescent females to participate in activities with their friends is one way to make programming relevant to the needs of females during early adolescence. For example, allowing female youth to sign up for activities with at least one friend guaranteed to be on their team, or in their group, might serve as an important catalyst to engagement, and a means to continued participation through enhancing enjoyment (Weiss et al., 1996). At the same time, our study further reveals the complexity of this process, and the various ways in which friends contribute to physical activity engagement (e.g., as a comfort to avoid fear and judgment). This notion is discussed next.

Being good at an activity and demonstrating competence is clearly an important factor in deciding whether one participates. Respondents indicated that they did not wish to enter into activities that they were bad at or perceived themselves as worse at than their peers. As Olafson (2002) found, adolescent females sometimes worry about looking good in front of their peers during physical education classes. Eder (1985) also found that adolescent females are particularly concerned with peer status. It would seem that youth sport contexts are extremely challenging when one is either less coordinated or adept at a skill. The judgment from peers within the context is regarded as subtle, but evident and also, very powerful (Everhart and Pemberton, 2001). With a simple rolling of the eyes, peers could quickly discourage a sensitive and socially aware participant to the point where she might step away from the context, either in search of more inviting and inclusive opportunities, or as, completely demoralized. Given our awareness of how sport opportunities

are sometimes experienced by female youth, one might ponder what can be done to create a more inviting space for all? Perhaps more value placed on participation and a re-assessment by sport leaders within such contexts of what constitutes affirmation ought to be re-visited. Further, how successful female youth sport participants are regarded by the male participants, should also be reconsidered, with more acceptance of female athletic success among peers from both genders. We already know from the work of Brett et al. (2002) that current sport programming is a "gateway barrier" to engagement among the female youth. Previous qualitative studies on adolescent female physical activity participation further underscore this point in light of physical activity programming being gender-biased, privileging male conceptions of sport and/or physical activity (Azzarito et al., 2006; Evans, 2006; Flintoff and Scraton, 2001; Hills, 2007). We must therefore look at, and beyond, the barriers and consider how to create programs that ensure, and in some cases, restore fun, inclusiveness and equality during this highly vulnerable time among female adolescents. Part of accomplishing the foregoing is to "deconstruct" what physical activity is often taken for granted to be, providing more fluid ways of conceptualizing physical activity (Clark et al., 2011; Flintoff & Scraton, 2001). This might include enlarging the notion of what it means to be physically active, what "counts" as physical activity, and expanding where activity takes place (e.g., going beyond structured settings such as gyms, schools). Only including vigorous activity, sport, or limited notions of skill mastery and competition as "real" activity that take place in limited space and places, clearly places adolescent females at a disadvantage for enjoyment and pleasure, and ultimately, regular participation (Clark et al., 2011).

More generally, participating in physical activity led to what the girls identified as a good feeling both physically and emotionally. This was found in Clark et al.'s (2011) study whereby adolescent girls' descriptions of activity had more to do with how they felt and the positive emotional experiences created. The girls in our study conceptualized and experienced their activity as a sense of accomplishment derived from participating in physical activity as well as a feeling that they were doing something that was good for their body beyond just appearance. For the most part, the participants enjoyed the feeling of physical exertion and working up a sweat. However, consistent with feminist research findings, our study also revealed that the girls also experienced a paradox when it came to negotiating their physical activity within the social and cultural demands of femininity (Azzarito, 2009; Azzarito et al., 2006; Flintoff and Scraton, 2001), as they were quick to point out the negative aspects and social punishments they might receive if they could not shower or change after physical education classes, recess and lunch breaks, and school team practices fearing how they might look to others, particularly boys. Not being able to shower increased the chance of not being able to maintain peer supported socially acceptable appearance ideals, which was a risk factor in losing social acceptability from peers and in turn damaging self-esteem based on peer feedback. Robinson (2002) identified a social trend where many females feel a strong conflict between being an athlete and being feminine and Inchley et al. (2006) found peers to be a primary source of feedback for the social acceptability of behaviour. The participants acknowledged the challenge of being physically active while maintaining appearances when participating in physical activities. There was a consensus and awareness among the participants that at some point they had chosen not to participate fully in physical education class because they did not want to return to class sweaty or attend a social gathering with friends without a chance to shower and change clothing.

Looking more closely at the challenges that continue to exist, at least for this preliminary pool of female youth within the contexts of sport and physical activity, it is evident why there is an increased decline in participation for females during early adolescence. Not only is the structure of the programs and the social contexts in which they are offered in question, but it also seems that the search for solutions reflects a top-down as opposed to a ground-up approach. Within this IP project, we have sought the active participation of female adolescents throughout the process from its conception through to the authoring of the composite vignettes. Focusing exclusively on the vignettes (see Spalding, 2004), the reader ought to consider why this method of data presentation is potent in relation to participants. Recently, Blodgett and colleagues (2010) employed a similar style of vignette to forefront the voices of marginalized participants from a Canadian Aboriginal reserve. The vignettes provided a space where the participants' voices were centralized. Through conventional methods, be they quantitative or qualitative, participants' voices are often lost (Schinke et al., 2009). Programs and providers may be missing the mark by using limited conceptions of physical activity to design programs and opportunities (or lack thereof), thus placing priority on outcomes (e.g., scoring points, winning games) and also, privileging who tends to be most comfortable on the field of play (e.g., males, girls who are skilled at sport). From the vignettes in our study, the benefits extend beyond the vivid in-depth access into the participants' voices. We propose that vignettes might also be used as an educational and sensitizing tool for service providers. The closing caveat is that more sport researchers ought to consider employing such methods, given that the voices of those who should be centralized tend to be overlooked.

Limitations

The current study was limited to female youth residing within the urban centre of the first author's residence city. Sport and physical activity opportunities, likely vary between regions due to accessibility to facilities and participant base. Secondly, the current project was constrained to the experiences of the adolescent girls and did not expand into a broader exploration of the topic from multiple vantages. Effective strategies to engage female youth in sport and physical activity require a broad understanding of the phenomenon. Consequently, feedback from youth, parents, coaches, sport administrators, and sport organizations might provide a holistic view of how to enhance programs in access and structure. Finally, the

number of participants from each cohort was small due to the qualitative nature of the project. For externally valid trends, researchers might seek feedback from a larger number of participants, representing different geographic locations and a culturally diverse representation.

Implications

Understanding the perspectives of adolescent females engaging in sport and physical activity is one step forward toward developing more opportunities and better experiences for them. The current research project uncovers the first-hand in-depth experiences of the intended participant group, presented through composite vignettes. For those wanting to engage early adolescent females in physical activity it is important to consider the significance these adolescent females place on (a) perceiving themselves as good at the activity; (b) having friends to share the experience with; (c) the ability to have fun while participating; (d) feeling good about themselves during and after an activity; and (e) the effect of peer feedback on self evaluation. When recreational programs are designed to engage early adolescent females, embedded within the programs should be ideas proposed by the youth. Only then might sport researchers and practitioners truly engage in the search for viable solutions and then bring them forward with the support of the intended participants.

Conclusion

In closing, there is compelling evidence that female youth experience varied challenges that sometimes impede their sustained engagement in physical activity. These challenges exist within one Canadian northern city, though clearly, they also exist elsewhere across provincial and national borders. Just as physical activity barriers exist for this cohort and gender of youth, there are also prospective solutions for the intended population. Perhaps the overarching reminder from the current project is that programming intended for a specific population requires engagement from that population long before programming is offered. Precisely, researchers and practitioners who create programs without a full understanding from the intended participant are likely to miss the mark, leading to disengagement, both in the short- and long-term. The solutions to female youth engagement in physical activity are right in front of sport and physical activity staff, though only if they seek to ask those that the programming is intended for.

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Key points

- Please provide 3-5 bullet points of the study.
- Inductive qualitative methodologies can encourage the much-needed voice of female youth in sport and physical activity research.
- Vignettes serve, not only as a method to illustrate data, but also as a medium to teach contextually relevant information to participants and sport science service providers.
- The barriers and solutions to female youth engagement in physical activity are best understood through the perspectives of the intended participant.
- Female youth can serve as central informants in the development and analysis of research projects relating to female youth physical activity.

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