

## **Implementation and perceived benefits of an after-school soccer program designed to promote social and emotional learning: A multiple case study**

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies such as self-awareness and relationship skills are predictors of academic success, overall well-being, and avoidance of problematic behaviors. Among school-aged children, research has demonstrated that well-implemented programs teach SEL competencies and life skills (e.g., leadership, responsible decision making) that can transfer to other settings. Similar claims have been made in the field of sport-based youth development (SBYD), however, the SEL framework has not been widely applied in sport programming. Implementation, student learning, and transfer of learning in SBYD programs designed to promote SEL require further exploration. Therefore, the current study examined the implementation and perceived benefits of an after-school soccer program designed to promote SEL. Participants were six coaches and 51 students from three different sites where this program is offered. A multiple case study design was used, integrating data from customized feedback surveys, interviews, systematic observation, and field notes. Results indicated the program reflects many SBYD best practices. Although implementation varied between sites, program culture and core values were consistent. Evidence indicated students learned and applied SEL lessons in the soccer program and that transfer beyond the program was promoted. Participants were most likely to report transfer to the school setting, therefore, future studies should examine this topic more directly. Other implications for research and program implementation are discussed.

## Introduction

Evidence demonstrates the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) as part of students' overall education. Social and emotional learning researchers posit that five core intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies can foster development across a variety of academic and extracurricular practices (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). These competencies are: self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision-making. According to a meta-analysis of 213 studies, participants in school-based SEL programs had significantly higher performance compared to those in control groups on academic achievement, classroom behavior, the ability to manage stress and depression, as well as improved attitudes about school, peers, and self-image (Durlak et al., 2011). A more recent meta-analysis of 82 studies indicates that such benefits are often sustained upon follow-up (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Programs that promote SEL competencies and associated outcomes are especially relevant in urban school districts where high rates of poverty, crime, low educational attainment, and poor health outcomes disproportionately impact minority youth (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Jonathan & Duncan, 2010; Kozol, 2012; Office of Civil Rights, 2016, 2018).

There is a great deal of overlap between the personal and social skills

promoted in SEL and positive youth development programming (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Taylor et al., 2017). This includes programs that use sport as a context for promoting youth development, often referred to as sport-based youth development (SBYD; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Most SBYD programs use sport as a vehicle to foster the development of positive life skills (e.g., leadership, self-control) rather than solely physical sport competencies (e.g., throwing, strength) (Petitpas et al., 2005). In SBYD, the focus is on the strengths and potential of youth rather than deficits or risks (Gould & Carson, 2008). Within this framework, youth build transferrable life skills, comparable to SEL competencies (Jacobs & Wright, 2014; Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Wright, 2017) that can be taught, practiced, and transferred to other settings for the purpose of enhancing personal and social growth (Gould & Carson, 2008). The effectiveness of SBYD programs designed for and implemented with minority youth attending urban schools has been substantiated in practice for decades (Hellison, 2011; Hellison & Walsh, 2002; Petitpas et al., 2005; Wright, Li, Ding & Pickering, 2010). Research on several after-school SBYD programs has shown improvements in students' responsibility and social skills in the program setting as well as reports of life skill transfer (e.g., self-control, persistence, goal-setting) to the classroom setting (Gordon, Jacobs, & Wright, 2016; Jacobs,

Lawson, Ivy & Richards, 2017; Martinek, Schilling & Johnson, 2001; Walsh, Ozaeta & Wright, 2010).

In the current study, we examine a well-established SBYD soccer program that explicitly promotes SEL with students from marginalized communities in a large urban setting. Considering the relevance of the SEL framework, best practices from the SBYD field, and the importance of program implementation, the current study employed a multiple case study design to examine the implementation and perceived benefits this after-school program which is sponsored by the philanthropic arm of a professional soccer organization in a large city in the Midwestern United States. The program has been operating at multiple sites for several years and has received national recognition for its quality and contributions to the surrounding community.

### **Transfer**

Transfer of life skills in SBYD is a topic of much discussion (Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Pierce, Gould, & Camiré, 2017). Many programs focus exclusively on behavior change in other settings as evidence of transfer. This simplistic and narrow view is problematic in many ways. For example, it fails to capture important affective and cognitive aspects of learning. An alternative perspective promoted by Jacobs and Wright (2018), suggests that transfer can manifest in various ways, i.e., youth demonstrating motivated use, experiential value, and/or an expansion of perception about the life

skills they learn. They base their thesis on the transformative experience framework (Pugh, Linnenbrink-Garcia, Koskey, Stewart, & Manzey, 2010), which conceptualizes transfer as a set of distinct yet inter-related components.

Motivated use represents the behavioral component of transfer that describes youth applying the desired behavior in a context that is not required, or intending to use the behavior while weighing that decision against conflicting or supporting environmental factors (Jacobs, Lawson, Ivy, & Richards, 2017). The other two components central to conceptual model for life skills transfer (Jacobs & Wright, 2018) address cognitive and affective processes. Experiential value represents youth valuing and assigning meaning to learned life skill content, while expansion of perception represents youth thinking about life skill material in new ways. In sum, Jacobs and Wright (2018) posit that transfer of life skills in SBYD be viewed as series of interconnected and overlapping processes involving cognitive, affective, and behavioral change.

### **Program Implementation**

There is extensive agreement among sport (Gordon et al., 2016; Petitpas et al., 2005) and non-sport (Catalano et al., 2004) scholars that the strength of implementation in a personal-social development program is crucial to program success. Petitpas et al. (2005) recognize that programs (especially multi-site programs) can enhance their impact by at-

tending to issues such as the recruitment, selection, training, and ongoing support provided to individuals implementing the program. They also recommend that a well-defined program with a written curriculum and other resources can help to support consistency and fidelity to the program model. The curriculum for the soccer program in the current study was based in the SEL model promoted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL; see <http://casel.org>) which highlights the following core competencies: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Several curricula have been tested in classroom and school-wide settings using this CASEL framework, however, none have been published using sport as the program content. Therefore, this customized written curriculum was developed to include over 20 lessons in which soccer skills and content were introduced each week and integrated with a specific SEL skill aligned with one of the core competencies. Regarding implementation, experts in the field stress the importance of systematic program evaluation as a way of understanding and continually improving such programs (Jacobs & Wright, 2018; Petitpas et al., 2005; Weiss, Bolter, & Kipp, 2014). These recommendations informed the current program evaluation design which is explained more fully in a later section.

In SBYD programs designed to teach life skills and promote transfer, Petitpas et al. (2005) argue coaches need to un-

derstand the program context and adapt intentional strategies to promote transfer. Another important factor in the transfer process is student awareness and appreciation of both the sport content and the life skill content (Jacobs & Wright, 2018). This is often enhanced through structured discussions about life skills as they apply to sport as well as their application in other contexts (Hellison, 2011). It is important to empirically explore how program implementation influences student learning and the transfer of important life lessons outside of sport (Gordon, Jacobs, & Wright, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the implementation and perceived benefits of an after-school soccer program designed to promote SEL. Specific aims were to (1) identify and describe the essential characteristics of the program, (2) understand how the program is implemented across sites, and (3) examine the connection between implementation and perceived benefits.

## Method

The current study uses multiple methods to develop case studies for the purpose of program evaluation (Stake, 1995). Case studies are often recommended for program evaluations, especially when multiple sites are involved and researchers wish to examine similarities and differences in a program's implementation (Patton, 2015). This approach has been identified as particularly relevant in the evaluation of multi-site SBYD programs (Petitpas et al., 2005).

## Participants and Setting

The three program sites selected for this multiple case study will be referred using the pseudonyms Sutton, Erickson, and Thompson. All sites were operated during after-school hours at public elementary schools in a large urban school district in the Midwestern United States. These are neighborhood schools with open enrollment for students in the surrounding neighborhood for grades preschool through eighth.

Regarding demographics, Sutton has an enrollment of 617 students (98% Hispanic; 2% African American) with 91% described as low income, 45% limited English, and 16% chronic truancy (i.e., absent from school more than 5% of the year without valid cause). Erickson has an enrollment of 1,467 students (95% Hispanic; 2% Caucasian; 1% African American; 1% Asian) with 82% low income, 49% limited English, and chronic truancy at 15%. Thompson has an enrollment of 941 students (78% Hispanic; 22% African American) with 88% low income, 30% limited English, and chronic truancy at 20%.

Each site offered the same soccer program sponsored by the city's professional soccer team. During the year this study was conducted, approximately 15 sites operated. These three were purposefully selected (Patton, 2015) in conversation with the program's director because they afforded the best opportunity to see the program implemented as intended due to a stable coaching staff that had demonstrated a high level of

commitment to the program. Each site held practice two or three times per week for 1.5 hours and was run by two teachers recruited from the local school. In total, six adult coaches (3 male; 3 female) and 51 (43 male; 8 female) students ranging in age from eight to 11 years old participated in this evaluation. Although the number of female students was lower, the proportion is representative of these sites and the program overall. All coaches and students who participated in the current study are Hispanic which is representative of the selected case study sites. Parental consent for participation in the evaluation was provided at the time of enrollment in the program and verbal assent was given by all participants prior to data collection. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the lead author's university.

## Procedures and Data Collection

**Feedback survey.** Customized feedback surveys were created for this project and administered to coaches and students. Both surveys included several forced-choice items that directly addressed key features or stated goals of the program as well as commonly reported experiences and benefits reported for similar programs. Such customized surveys are valuable because they have a high level of content validity (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015) and relevance to the program of interest (Patton, 2015). Such instruments have demonstrated utility in the evaluation of sport for development programs (Hellison &

Walsh, 2002; Wright, Jacobs, Ressler, & Howell, 2018). The bank of items used in the current study were developed in conversation with the program director, piloted the previous year, and deemed relevant and useful to the evaluation. Only item level analysis was conducted on these items as opposed to aggregating their ratings into a scale score, hence, there was no need to assess them for internal consistency (Patton, 2015; Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2015).

**Systematic observation.** The Tool for Assessing Responsibility-based Behavior (TARE) 2.0 is an observation system that assesses, in 3-minute intervals, teacher and student behaviors that are commonly observed in quality SBYD programs. Content validity and inter-rater reliability exceeding 80% for this instrument has been established in two separate studies (Escartí, Wright, Pascual, & Gutiérrez, 2015; Wright & Craig, 2011). Behaviors are rated on a five-point (0-4) scale indicating the strength of implementation. The TARE includes nine teacher behaviors: modeling respectful behavior, setting expectations, creating opportunities for success, fostering social interaction, assigning tasks, promoting leadership, giving choice/voice in the program (e.g., creating opportunities for students to make decisions and share their opinions), providing roles in assessment, and promoting transfer of life skills, SEL competencies, and values learned in the program through discussion or prompted reflection. The TARE also includes nine types of student be-

haviors/interactions: participation, engagement, showing respect, cooperating, encouragement, helping others, leading (e.g., being a team captain or leading warm-up exercises), expressing voice (e.g., sharing opinions or suggestions), and asking for help. This instrument has proven useful in numerous program evaluations, indicating that the more coaches employ responsibility-based teaching strategies, the more students engage in responsible and prosocial behaviors (Escartí et al., 2015; Wright & Irwin, 2018). The first, third, and fourth authors conducted observations after all participated in training sessions involving video and live practice. All three demonstrated at least 80% inter-rater agreement. Each of the three case study sites was observed three times (2 regular practice; 1 game day) and each site was observed by two observers.

**Field notes.** Each member of the research team recorded ethnographic field notes after meetings, site visits, and/or TARE 2.0 observations. These field notes enabled researchers to document interactions, conversations, and key events. In addition to documenting factual information, researchers recorded impressions and reflections on the program and the research process itself.

**Artifacts.** Numerous existing materials were reviewed to describe and interpret the program. These included printed materials such as the coaches' manual, student logbooks, program descriptions, and game day schedules. Video demon-

strations of soccer drills and web-based resources were also reviewed.

**Interviews.** All six coaches and several students from each school participated in interviews. Many interviews were brief and conversational in nature, lasting only five to ten minutes. Such interviews took place before and after practice sessions, during breaks, etc. If they were more informal conversations that were not captured on audio-tape, they were recorded in field notes. Three of the coaches (one from each site) also participated in a lengthier (approximately 60 minutes) semi-structured interview (Amis, 2005; Patton, 2015). These interviews were conducted at a time and place selected by the coach (usually after a practice session at their site). Sample questions asked of the coaches are, “What do you think of the SEL component of this program?” and “How do you know if the students are understanding the SEL concepts you are promoting?”. Sample questions asked of the students are, “Tell me how you feel about this program?” and “Can you give me an example of a social skill you talk about in this program that you use in other places like at home or in school?”.

### **Data Analysis**

In the first phase of data analysis, quantitative and qualitative data sets were analyzed separately. Quantitative data from the TARE 2.0 observations and customized feedback surveys were analyzed descriptively (i.e., means, standard deviations, and frequencies). Qualitative

data sets were reviewed multiple times by the first and second authors until units of meaning and initial codes could be developed (Patton, 2015). These codes were refined and then applied to the data set and a thematic analysis was undertaken. The development and refinement of themes was an iterative process involving both inductive (data driven) and deductive (theory driven) reasoning. This analytic approach has proven useful in other sport research (Amis, 2005; Wright et al., 2018). After the first and second author agreed the themes were robust, distinct, and complimentary, they were shared with the other two authors who concurred.

Although researchers were aware of site level differences in the first phase of analysis, the second phase emphasized cross-case comparison (Stake, 1995). Similarities and differences in the findings from phase one were reviewed. Triangulation in terms of methodology (qualitative and quantitative), data sources (interviews, field notes, observations, surveys, etc.), and participants (coaches and students) contributed to the development of each case study. These cases were reviewed by members of the research team individually. After team members had drawn initial interpretations regarding key features of each case as well as similarities and differences across cases, the team met to debrief and deliberate until consensus was reached regarding key findings and theoretical implications.

## **Trustworthiness**

Members of the research team were contracted as external evaluators for this program. This afforded access and the opportunity to co-interpret findings with the program director who served as an evaluation partner and key informant (Patton, 2015). While this relationship strengthened access and the accuracy of the report, this relationship and the potential pressure to provide favorable results may present a concern. To avoid any such bias, we relied on peer debriefing, searches for disconfirming evidence, and member check conversations with three of coaches (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). These processes either contributed to (e.g., inclusion of areas for improvement identified in the search for disconfirming evidence) or affirmed (e.g., no concerns or gaps identified in member check) our analytic process.

Triangulation of methodology, data sources, and participants noted above was also a key strategy used to promote trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In addition to a focus on reflexivity in our peer debriefing sessions to be aware of and minimize the impact of any bias on our work, we were also cognizant of potential tension or power-imbalances that might have influenced participants (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2015). Specifically, researchers and the program director made it clear to the participating coaches when they were invited to participate that the purpose of the evaluation was to better understand the program and identify opportunities for improve-

ment. It was explained to them that their sites were selected because they were considered effective coaches and there was no reason for them to feel coerced or threatened by the process.

## **Results**

### **Program Organization**

Based on conversations with the program director, review of artifacts, as well as direct observation and interviews with coaches, the program appeared to be comprehensive, well-defined, and organized. Curriculum materials included a booklet of lessons for coaches with suggested lesson plans for the entire season. Regarding soccer, the lesson plans included warm up exercises, soccer skills and drills, and diagrams for plays. Regarding SEL, each lesson plan included a topic (e.g., communication, self-control, leadership) and vignettes or scenarios to be shared with students to prompt discussion of that topic. To compliment written materials, coaches were given access to online video resources demonstrating the soccer skills and drills. Videos were provided because it was known many of the coaches had limited soccer experience themselves. All students were provided with weekly logbooks that facilitated organization and communication tasks (e.g., sharing the tournament schedule with family) and SEL activities (e.g., setting a soccer goal or classroom behavior goal). Students received trophy stickers for each task/activity completed. Various incentives were offered to



students who earned all of the possible trophies.

Soccer was the sport focus of the program, but in discussing the overall curriculum, coaches more often referred to the SEL component. A coach from Sutton commented, “The program comes with a well-organized curriculum for SEL. A lot of students need that type of curriculum as it helps them develop their social and emotional skills.” Another coach, from Erickson, even wondered if expectations related to SEL were too high. Discussing the students’ weekly logbook assignments, he stated, “Sometimes students had a hard time filling in content for the workbooks and we had a hard time integrating the SEL content into their day. This could be simpler to make it more feasible for the coaches and kids.” However, according to one of his own students, the logbook was straightforward and routine, “He gives us homework and then on Thursday we come back [and share]. It’s like teamwork, relationships, and responsibility.”

The program director and her staff are involved throughout the season. They deliver a coach training workshop before the season begins to share the program philosophy, discuss logistics such as scheduling, demonstrate sample lessons, and provide coaches (new and returning) an opportunity to ask questions and share insights. They communicate and provide ongoing support throughout the season including two site visits to practice sessions. They also organized game

days at the end of the season at the professional team’s indoor practice field.

The coaches appreciated the range of resources and support provided to them. Even when they discussed problems that arose, they could identify resources that were in place for them. In his interview, a coach from Erickson stated, “I think some of the coaches might need more direct help with curriculum. [The program director] already came to our school to help with the program. I think having a liaison helps provide support to our coaches.” A coach from Sutton explained, “Sometimes it’s difficult to understand the skill to be taught that week... I looked online at the program website [for help] and when I went to the soccer games on Saturdays I would talk with the different coaches.”

Strengths related to program organization were corroborated by coach responses in their program feedback surveys. All six coaches indicated they were *extremely satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* on items related to the organization of practices and game days, site visits by program staff, communication and involvement by program staff, soccer equipment, instructional resources, and student logbook.

### **Core Values**

The curriculum, training, resources, and support reinforced the primary focus of SEL development. The program director reported that understanding and commitment to promoting SEL was an important criterion in selecting and re-

taining coaches. Coaches described their coaching philosophy and the core values of the program accordingly. The coach at Erickson reported,

The coach needs to be intentional with what the goals are. What I tell my coaches is it's not about the wins and losses, but about kids developing socially and emotionally... soccer should be the vehicle to assist kids in life.

This commitment to developmental goals over competition was stressed by most of the coaches. A coach from Sutton, stated,

A priority was getting the fundamentals down but more being a role model through mentoring them as people and having good character on and off the soccer field. I tried to diminish the mentality of wins versus losses and switch to a growth mindset.

The coaches across sites shared a student-centered focus and valued establishing relationships with their students. One coach from Erickson shared,

I really enjoyed the experience as a coach and a mentor and want to give these kids a chance. I love that when these kids have issues and need support they can go to their coach, and that coach can then go to their teacher and give them the support they need.

Coaches often talked about their students' needs in light of their family and community contexts. A coach from Thompson said, "I do think they like

the social emotional as it helps them in the school community and the home." A coach from Erickson mentioned the importance of the program for some students, "Especially with the immigration stuff that's going on right now, it's so important to have something they belong to." Finally, a coach from Sutton explained:

Many parents are worried about letting kids outside to play soccer because of shooting and violence in the neighborhood. And if they come from a single parent family it's hard for them to get to practices or games in the community as maybe their parents have to work or can't afford to take them.

### **Flexible Implementation**

Even though coaches at different sites varied in their interpretation and implementation of the curriculum, there was a clear program culture which created a consistently positive learning environment. As stated by a coach from Thompson:

Some days we are already familiar with the curriculum and so we'll change it up depending on what the needs are of that time... [the students] have been in school all day and just wanna have fun...

They [program representatives] are flexible with us and let us take the program and be flexible, but still incorporate SEL.

Systematic observation methods were used to document coach and student

behaviors in the program. Although variations existed site to site, Table 1 illustrates that across sites coaches were extensively seen modeling respectful behavior for their students ( $M = 3.59, SD = .73$ ), setting clear expectations ( $M = 3.23, SD = .99$ ), and making sure all students had opportunities to be successful ( $M = 3.01, SD = 1.02$ ). Of the remaining strategies, which tend to be more empowerment-based, all were employed to some extent with the most common being fostering social interaction among students ( $M = 1.62, SD = 1.05$ ) and giving students choices and voices in the program ( $M = 1.57, SD = 1.40$ ).

Regarding student behaviors (see Table 2), students were most often observed participating ( $M = 3.62, SD = .73$ ), engaging ( $M = 3.42, SD = .85$ ), and demonstrating respectful behavior ( $M = 3.36, SD = .80$ ). They were also often ob-

served cooperating with their peers ( $M = 2.71, SD = 1.15$ ), encouraging others ( $M = 1.46, SD = .98$ ) and expressing voice ( $M = 1.48, SD = 1.20$ ). Less often, but in some instances, students were observed taking on leadership roles ( $M = .99, SD = 1.13$ ), helping others ( $M = .52, SD = .88$ ), and asking for help ( $M = .20, SD = .42$ ). In sum, observational data indicated coaches employed similar strategies in delivering the program and students engaged in many positive behaviors and experiences. This includes areas of strength (e.g., culture of respect and high levels of engagement) as well as opportunities to improve (e.g., increasing leadership and other empowering experiences).

As shown in Table 3, students had positive perceptions of their experience in the program. Overall, students ( $n=51$ ) agreed that their coaches support them (96.1%), think they are important

Table 1.

*Means and standard deviations for coaching strategies observed across program sites*

	<i>Erickson</i>	<i>Sutton</i>	<i>Thompson</i>	<i>Total</i>
Coaching strategy	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Modeling Respect	3.14 (1.00)	3.74 (.44)	3.88 (.33)	3.59 (.73)
Setting Expectations	2.65 (1.31)	3.40 (.65)	3.65 (.60)	3.23 (.99)
Opportunities for Success	2.82 (1.28)	3.22 (.90)	2.94 (.81)	3.01 (1.02)
Fostering Social Interaction	1.04 (1.00)	1.90 (.99)	1.92 (.92)	1.62 (1.05)
Assigning Tasks	.20 (.60)	.45 (.90)	1.58 (1.05)	.71 (1.04)
Leadership	.20 (.63)	.48 (.96)	1.96 (1.18)	.84 (1.21)
Giving Choices and Voices	.69 (1.26)	1.22 (.94)	2.92 (.94)	1.57 (1.40)
Role in Assessment	.24 (.62)	.48 (.90)	.13 (.33)	.29 (.69)
Transfer	.37 (1.08)	.28 (.62)	1.23 (1.59)	.60 (1.20)

Table 2.

*Means and standard deviations for student behaviors observed across program sites*

	<i>Erickson</i>	<i>Sutton</i>	<i>Thompson</i>	<i>Total</i>
Student behavior	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Participation	3.45 (.88)	3.53 (.78)	3.90 (.31)	3.62 (.73)
Engagement	3.27 (.98)	3.31 (.90)	3.71 (.50)	3.42 (.85)
Showing Respect	3.08 (1.06)	3.45 (.63)	3.54 (.58)	3.36 (.80)
Cooperating with Peers	2.08 (1.26)	2.62 (.97)	3.50 (.68)	2.71 (1.15)
Encouraging Others	1.02 (.95)	1.31 (.94)	2.10 (.72)	1.46 (.98)
Helping Others	0.24 (.59)	0.29 (.56)	1.08 (1.16)	0.52 (.88)
Leading	0.45 (.78)	0.60 (.70)	2.02 (1.19)	0.99 (1.13)
Expressing Voice	0.82 (.93)	1.16 (.85)	2.56 (1.07)	1.48 (1.20)
Asking for Help	0.14 (.35)	0.19 (.44)	0.29 (.46)	0.20 (.42)

(84.3%), expect them to do their best (94.1%), and serve as positive role models (86.3%). Students reported feeling motivated to do well (94.1%) and that they felt good about themselves (86.3%) and safe (84.3%) in the program. Regarding peer interactions, results indicated 88.2% of students perceive getting along well and encouraging each other. Students were positive, but slightly less so, regarding their level of decision making in the program (74.5%).

### Developing SEL Skills

Multiple data sources shed light on what students learned about SEL in the program as well as how they were given opportunities to develop these skills. For example, in the coaches' feedback survey, all six *strongly agreed* or *somewhat agreed* they had seen improvement in the students'

behavior (social and emotional skills) in practices and during game days. All coaches agreed the program had a positive influence on students' attitudes about themselves (e.g., confidence) and that it improved their students' soccer skills.

When asked to explain what they learned in the program related to SEL, students were able to give specific examples related to soccer. A male student from Erickson shared, "Sportsmanship is when you have to follow rules." One of his female teammates provided a more specific example, stating, "How to lead other people to be better. Like if someone is on defense and they're too far up, and you could tell her to come down a bit more." Additional examples were shared by two different students at Sutton. One stated, "For self-control, it's for me, keep attention, like don't show

Table 3.

*Percent positive responses about program experience (n = 51)<sup>a</sup>*

Item	<i>Erickson</i> (n=18)	<i>Sutton</i> (n=13)	<i>Thompson</i> (n=20)	<i>Total</i> (n=51)
The coaches in the program support me.	100.0%	92.3%	95.0%	96.1%
Students in this program encourage each other.	88.9%	100.0%	80.0%	88.2%
The coaches think I am important.	88.9%	84.6%	80.0%	84.3%
I feel safe in this program.	94.4%	76.9%	80.0%	84.3%
The coaches are positive role models.	94.4%	84.6%	80.0%	86.3%
The coaches expect me to do my best.	100.0%	92.3%	90.0%	94.1%
I want to do my best in this program.	100.0%	92.3%	90.0%	94.1%
I get to make decisions or choices in this program.	77.8%	84.6%	65.0%	74.5%
I get along well with the people in this program.	88.9%	100.0%	80.0%	88.2%
I feel good about myself in this program.	94.4%	92.3%	75.0%	86.3%

<sup>a</sup> Note: positive responses from 5-point rating scale were *Agree* and *Strongly Agree*

off. Don't be mean or say bad words to each other." The other added, "If there's player on another team and they fall or get hurt- today someone got hurt, and I helped her; it made me feel better because it's helping me become a better person". Yet another female student from Sutton reflected the core values of the program, saying:

I learned about sportsmanship and how to be a good person on my team. You should be kind. The other players are supporting you and helping you be better. It's about helping and not just about winning. One time, in a soccer game I fell, but then everyone just stopped playing and my team mates helped me up.

The coaches used a range of strategies to infuse lessons about SEL into the soccer experience. One coach from Thompson described several examples of integrating SEL competencies in soccer:

Every practice we do leadership. As soon as we start practice we have students lead exercises. At the beginning, no one wants to participate and everyone is shy, but as we get further along we see more leaders. Whenever we're getting ready to do a soccer drill we have students help take out balls and cones and get ready for the game, which helps them learn responsibility. Whenever we do drills or meetings/huddles, we ask them what did they like about today's

practice, what didn't you like, what could work better?

Discussion and debriefing are central to the program's approach to helping students learn SEL terms and concepts and understand their application in soccer. A coach from Sutton described ways she capitalizes on peer support and leadership to facilitate this learning process:

I ask students at the end of the activity what they found difficult and why. Then I target those who responded easy and ask them to help their teammates in describing what made them successful and how they can be more successful. This really fosters that caring mentality and helps them realize that they can draw positivity and strength from peers.

### **Indication of Transfer**

Coaches extended on group discussions to promote transfer. One coach from Thompson explained:

We always have group time in the beginning even if it's just five minutes. We talk about how they can use the skills at home and ask about if they used this in the classroom. We always ask them about their day and the teachers and homework etc., what they can do better or change.

Several coaches alluded to conversations with fellow coaches, students, and classroom teachers about students developing confidence, overcoming shyness, and applying lessons from the program at home

and in the classroom. In their feedback survey, all six coaches indicated the program seemed to enhance students' motivation for school. Five of the six strongly *agreed* or *somewhat agreed* that the program had helped their students improve their behavior in the classroom. One reported not being sure about this and could *neither agree nor disagree*.

Table 4 summarizes the percent of affirmative responses given by students on items in their feedback survey that asked them to indicate how much they agreed the program helped them improve on a range of skills. While patterns varied slightly across the three sites, the most positive responses overall ( $n = 51$ ) related to doing their best in school (94.1%), being a good student (94.1%), and making good choices (94.1%). The item that received the fewest positive responses was about staying calm when upset (76.5%).

School was the most common setting for examples of transfer. Many examples relating to improved classroom behavior revolved around respect. A coach from Sutton stated, "Some students showed change, whether it's from being so disrespectful to being somewhat disrespectful, but at minimum, change was there. We also saw respect for elders, a big issue students face because they think teachers don't like them." A student from Sutton shared this example, "If [other students] are not listening just tell them, 'hey, you have to listen and be respectful.' Like in art, we have some students who don't respect the teacher, so it's important to tell them this." This example not only indi-

Table 4.

*Percent positive responses about learning life skills (n = 51)<sup>b</sup>*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Erickson</i> ( <i>n=18</i> )	<i>Sutton</i> ( <i>n=13</i> )	<i>Thompson</i> ( <i>n=20</i> )	<i>Total</i> ( <i>n=51</i> )
To make good choices	94.4%	92.3%	95.0%	94.1%
To stay calm when I am upset.	88.9%	76.9%	65.0%	76.5%
To get along well with my family.	88.9%	76.9%	70.0%	78.4%
To talk with my family about things I am doing at school.	88.9%	61.5%	90.0%	82.4%
To do my best in school.	100.0%	84.6%	95.0%	94.1%
To get along well with my teachers.	94.4%	100.0%	85.0%	92.2%
To get along well with other students.	94.4%	100.0%	80.0%	90.2%
To be a good student.	100.0%	92.3%	90.0%	94.1%

<sup>b</sup> Note: positive responses from 5-point rating scale were *Agree* and *Strongly Agree*

cates transfer of the concept of respect, but also leadership.

In addition to positive behavior, examples of transfer in school also related to increased responsibility for academic tasks such as homework and studying. As stated by a student from Erickson, “I use it in my classroom by being a good listener to my teacher, being responsible and doing my homework.” A coach from Erickson contributed this example of students developing skills in soccer and transferring them to school:

Some students see taking responsibility for their position and working hard. They see the needs for improvement and practice and they work on those things every day. Then they use the same strategy to help them in the classroom and studying for tests.

Students also saw ways to connect SEL lessons from the program to their home and family life. A coach from Erickson shared, “We’ve had parents share how students take responsibility at home. They know their responsibility as a son and daughter and this could be with housework or taking care of younger siblings, things like that are really apparent.” A coach from Sutton noted:

Lots of students reflected that they cleaned their room without having their parents ask and would remind their siblings to do the same thing. One student made sure she would get her homework done so that she could go outside and play soccer. That’s the kind of stories I would hear, that they would start doing things on their own without having to be told.

In addition to helping more around the house and taking responsibility for tasks, students shared examples of leadership and helping others, especially with their siblings. One student from Erickson shared, “Sometimes when my mom and sister are doing homework and they need help, I try and help them.” Another student, also from Erickson, offered, “At home, sometimes my brothers don’t do what my mom says and so I tell them to do it.” Finally, one student from Thompson said:

At home I want to do everything  
I can to be a better son. I will take  
care of my sisters and my mom,  
do chores, listen to my parents and  
do whatever they tell me to. And  
to be responsible by doing my  
homework.

As was the case with claims of improvement in the classroom, coaches were cautious about attributing all of these anecdotal reports to the program.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was to examine the implementation and perceived benefits of an after-school soccer program designed to promote SEL. The first aim of this evaluation was to identify and describe the essential characteristics of the program. This aim was met by gathering multiple data sources and integrating multiple perspectives (e.g., coaches, students, program director) to provide a thorough description of the program from planning to implementation. Findings indicated the program is

comprehensive and effectively organized. Many of the best practices for program implementation recommended in the literature were identified in this program, including recruitment, selection, and training procedures for coaches as well as extensive program materials and ongoing support (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Dusenbury et al., 2003; Petitpas et al., 2005). The correspondence between program integrity and perceived quality was similar to that seen in other SBYD studies (Gordon, Jacobs, & Wright, 2016; Jacobs, Lawson, Ivy & Richards, 2017; Wright et al., 2010).

The second aim of the study was to understand how the program was implemented across sites. This aim was met by gathering implementation data at each site with sufficient depth and consistency to facilitate contrast and comparison across sites. As noted by many authors, (Petitpas et al., 2005; Weiss et al., 2014), maintaining fidelity in implementation is a particular challenge for multi-site SBYD programs. In this case, it appeared that a clear program culture and core values were promoted through training and ongoing support, which enabled coaches to implement the program with an effective balance of flexibility and consistency. Cross-case comparison showed slight variation in observed behaviors and participant ratings of perceived benefits, however, more consistency was seen within this multiple case study than reported in other cross-case comparisons (Wright & Irwin, 2018; Wright, Jacobs, Howell & Ressler, 2018). The results



of systematic observations indicated coaches use many strategies that are fundamental in quality SBYD programs although empowerment-based strategies were utilized to a lesser degree.

The third aim of this study was to examine how perceived benefits might connect to implementation strategies. Data gleaned from direct observation and interviews was crucial in meeting this aim. As recommended in the SBYD literature, data showed this program was effective in creating a safe and positive learning environment in which students developed sport skills as well as personal and social skills (Petitpas et al., 2005). Social and emotional competencies were intentionally addressed by the coaches and appeared to be understood, valued, and enacted by the students in the program setting. Participants perceived the program as having a positive impact on students in the classroom (e.g., effort and goal setting) and at home (e.g., responsibility and helping) as reported in previous studies (Gordon, Jacobs, & Wright, 2016; Jacobs, Lawson, Ivy & Richards, 2017; Martinek, Schilling & Johnson, 2001; Walsh, Ozaeta & Wright, 2010).

In the end, data support all three components of the transfer model proposed by Jacobs and Wright (2018) which is comprised of experiential value, expansion of perception, and motivated use. As in other studies of SBYD programs, both life skill learning and transfer of that learning seemed to be connected to the intentional coaching strategies (e.g., discussion, debriefing, and log-

books) consistently employed across sites as well as the common culture and core values of the program (Gordon, Jacobs, & Wright, 2016; Jacobs, Lawson, Ivy & Richards, 2017; Martinek, Schilling & Johnson, 2001; Walsh, Ozaeta & Wright, 2010; Wright, Li, Ding & Pickering, 2010). These strategies are also consistent with recommendations for explicitly promoting transfer (Hellison, 2011; Jacobs & Wright, 2018).

It has been noted that SEL and positive youth development frameworks overlap significantly (Taylor et al., 2017). While the personal and social skills developed in such programs are beneficial to all students, they have heightened relevance for students growing up in marginalized communities and attending urban schools that are fraught with challenges and racial inequities (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009; Jonathan & Duncan, 2010; Kozol, 2012). Similar to findings reported by Gordon and colleagues (2016), the results of the current program evaluation indicate SEL competencies can be aligned to SBYD program goals and activities. As proposed by Wright (2017), the specific teaching strategies and student behaviors assessed by the TARE instrument (Escartí et al., 2015; Wright & Craig, 2011) are useful in identifying what types of youth development experiences occur in SBYD programs. Current results indicate that even in positive and effectively run SBYD programs, there is often room to infuse more empowering student experiences (Hellison, 2011).

Findings presented here correspond with previous reports about the connection between outcomes and implementation in personal and social development programs (Durlak & Dupree, 2008; Dusenbury et al., 2003). Many SBYD studies have supported this proposition based on data from a single-site program directed by SBYD experts (Gordon et al., 2016; Martinek, Schilling, & Johnson, 2001; Walsh, Ozaeta & Wright, 2011). As noted by Petitpas et al (2005), accounting for program quality and consistent implementation is challenging in multi-site community-based programs. This program, supported by the philanthropic arm of a professional sports team in a large city, operates at multiple sites each year and is staffed by local teachers. Therefore, the results of this study have direct relevance to multi-site programs that operate in cities across the United States, especially those serving students from racial and ethnic minority groups who struggle against systemic inequalities in academic achievement (Fiscella & Kitzman, 2009; Goldsmith, 2004; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Reardon & Galdino, 2009) as well as school climate and disciplinary action (Office for Civil Rights, 2016, 2018). This evaluation highlights practical strategies and organizational structures that seem to support an effective balance of flexibility and consistency across such programs.

The current study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research. We purposefully selected three sites known to represent strong imple-

mentation. Therefore, these cases shed little light on barriers and challenges to implementation. Future studies may examine a greater number of sites representing a wider range of implementation. Samples in such studies should represent a greater degree of diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender as the current youth sample was 84.3% male and 100% Hispanic. While coach and student data were sufficient to understand the program experience and immediate perceptions, additional stakeholders such as parents and classroom teachers should be involved as participants in future studies. While classroom teachers could speak directly to transfer in the school setting, parents would be in a position to discuss academic performance and transfer to home and community settings. Consistent with previous studies, school did emerge as the most commonly noted site of transfer in this SBYD program (Walsh, Ozaeta & Wright, 2010; Wright, Li, Ding & Pickering, 2010). While we do not propose that improved academic achievement is the primary goal of SBYD programs or the only meaningful measure of transfer, it is a highly valued outcome and one that connects with SEL programming (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Therefore, future studies interested in this topic should analyze change in academic outcomes at the student level and in comparison to a control group so that effect sizes can be assessed.

In conclusion, the current study provides a detailed description of a

multi-site program in an urban setting that reflects many of the best practices recommended in the SBYD literature (Petitpas et al, 2005; Weiss et al., 2014). This program focused on promoting SEL competencies that have been shown to benefit youth in many ways (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Results indicate that SEL can be effectively promoted through SBYD programming and that coaches and students perceive numerous benefits coming from the integration of SEL and sport experiences. Consistent with the literature and our conceptual framework, it appears that intentional approaches to promoting transfer helped students to understand, value, and apply SEL competencies in school and home settings.

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