

PARTICIPATION STYLES IN YOUTH SOCCER

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## ABSTRACT

A small number of researchers interested in the ecology of physical activity settings has made a significant contribution to the literature by examining how the participation styles of children, youth, and adults can differ during the same program. The purpose of this study was to describe the participation styles of 52 children enrolled in one under-12 youth sport soccer program. Secondary participants were the program's six instructors.

Data were collected using four qualitative techniques: non-participant observation, formal interviews, informal interviews, and stimulated recall interviews. They were analyzed by employing the techniques of analytic induction and constant comparison. Seven participation styles were identified. Unlike those described in previous studies, these participation styles were not based on a hierarchy in which those at the top learned to bully and humiliate those at the bottom. Potential reasons for this finding are examined.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I send many thanks to all my family, friends, and colleagues during this process.

And most of all, thanks to the Lord above for the blessings I enjoy every day.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The majority of sport pedagogy research conducted to-date has tended to assume or infer that the experiences of all participants in a given instructional context are similar. A small number of critically oriented researchers interested in the ecology of physical education, physical activity, sport, and exercise settings, however, has made a significant contribution to the literature by illustrating that this is not the case (Bain, 1985; Bennett, 2000; Griffin, 1984; 1985; Pope & O'Sullivan, 2003; Zmudy, Curtner-Smith, & Steffen, 2009). These researchers have used qualitative methods to describe the various participation styles of pupils in school physical education, youth in “open gym” sessions, children in summer camps, and university students taking part in activity classes and have revealed that participants in the same instructional setting often have very different experiences. In addition, three of these studies (Griffin, 1984, 1985; Pope & O’Sullivan) involving children and youth have unearthed deeply disturbing hierarchies of these various participation styles which serve to teach those participants at the top to bully and dominate, make the lives of those at the bottom miserable and humiliating, and prevent the realization of conventional psychomotor, cognitive, and affective goals.

Griffin (1984, 1985) was the first to reveal the damaging impact of the hierarchy of participation styles that could exist within what appeared to be a decent standard of middle school physical education. Within mixed-gender classes on various sports and games, she noted that at the top of the girl’s hierarchy were *athletes* who were well-skilled, participated

vigorously, and were the primary concern of teachers. Slightly less skilled but, at times, as motivated as the athletes were *junior varsity players*. Conversely, while *cheerleaders* were keen for their teams to do well during competitive lesson segments, they were not interested in playing themselves and the unskilled *lost souls* appeared to be confused, frightened, and timid. Similarly, while some *femme fatales* had the skill to participate successfully in game play, none was interested in doing so. Instead, their priorities were their appearance and attracting boys. At the bottom of the girl's hierarchy were *system beaters* who did everything possible to avoid taking part in lessons and often achieved this goal by producing excuse notes written by other teachers, doctors, and parents.

At the bottom of Griffins' (1985) boy's middle school physical education hierarchy were the poorly skilled *wimps* who were teased and abused by other pupils (and some teachers) and often denied the right to participate in class activities even if they wanted to. *Invisible players*, on the other hand, were loners who were skilled at feigning participation in game play when they were actually doing nothing of the sort. At the top of the boy's hierarchy were *machos* who were aggressive, brash, very well skilled, and viewed by other pupils as class leaders. They were also the chief tormentors of the wimps, often put down boys in other categories, and ignored the girls. *Junior machos* aspired to be machos but had less skill and physical presence and often attempted to gain status by belittling girls. Finally, *nice guys* possessed skill levels which matched those of machos but were usually supportive of girls and did not engage in verbal or physical abuse of other boys.

Pope and O'Sullivan's (2003) study of non-instructional "open gym" sessions at a high school and in different community contexts revealed a similar and equally disturbing hierarchy to those described by Griffin (1984, 1985) which they referred to as "Darwinism in the gym" (p.

311). Within this hierarchy, pupils were classified as *bullies*, *jousters*, *posers*, *benchies*, *hangers*, *venerators*, and *contestants*. Negligible adult supervision allowed relatively large, physically able, and aggressive African-American boys to dominate these sessions. Consequently, most gymnasium space was used for playing basketball and the majority of pupils were prevented from taking part. Moreover, boys new to the sessions who possessed the physical characteristics which made them eligible to play had to “serve time” (Pope & O’Sullivan, p. 311) before being permitted to do so.

Examinations of weight training and fitness classes taken by university students (Bain, 1985; Bennett, 2000) also revealed different participation styles but did not provide any evidence of the sort of destructive hierarchies described in the previously conducted school-based studies. Bain, for example, identified two groups of students who participated in class activities with some enthusiasm and labeled them as *serious walkers* and *serious runners*. In contrast, the students she categorized as *social interactors* and *absentees* showed little interest in course content. The students studied by Bennett were classified similarly. Specifically, they were observed “*sweatin*” or “*slackin*.” Those in the former group were subcategorized either as *ex-athletes* or their *side-kicks* while the latter group included *manipulators*, *socializers*, *minimalists*, and *underachievers*.

Finally, a more recent study of elementary and middle school children’s summer adventure camps (Zmudy et al. 2009) also revealed a wide variety of participation styles (*go-getters*, *explorers*, *limelight seekers*, *fear conquerors*, *chickens*, *light hikers*, *ground supporters*, *rough housers*, and *mini-rough housers*) but an absence of any negative hierarchical structure and, consequently, no signs of bullying. The researchers speculated that this was due to low

pupil-teacher ratios; high levels of instructor pedagogical skill, management, and supervision;  
and a focus on affective objectives.

## CHAPTER II

### PURPOSE

Taking part in organized sports outside the school setting is generally considered to be a positive and nurturing experience for children and youth. Moreover, the inference is that children and youth who participate in the same organized sport program have a similar experience. Based on the limited amount of research reviewed in the preceding section of this paper, this may not be accurate. It could be, for example, that children and youth enrolled in organized sport programs have very different experiences, some of which are not as positive as intended. Moreover, it could be that the same kinds of dysfunctional hierarchies that have been found in school physical education and school-based open gym sessions also exist in youth sport programs. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to describe the participation styles of children enrolled in one organized youth sport program.

### CHAPTER III

#### PARTICIPANTS

Primary participants in the study were the children enrolled in one under-12 “developmental soccer league” in one town (population = 90,000) in the southeastern United States during the Fall, 2010. Thirty-seven boys and 15 girls, mostly with middle-class backgrounds and aged 8 to 12, enrolled in the program which was open to children of all abilities. The majority of the children’s skill levels were relatively low in general and their experiences of soccer were minimal.

Secondary participants were the lead instructor of the league and his five co-instructors. The lead instructor was an experienced youth soccer coach who has worked in the league since its inception 6 years previously. He was also an experienced physical education teacher and physical education teacher educator, possessed a doctorate in sport pedagogy, and the English Football Association’s teacher’s certification. In addition, he was the first author of a book on the subject of soccer coaching. Two of the co-instructors were male undergraduate students enrolled in a physical education teacher education degree program and one was a female graduate student enrolled in a master’s degree program in sport pedagogy who had played soccer for a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I university team. A fourth co-instructor was a male undergraduate student, enrolled in both journalism and management degree programs, who had just been recruited to teach a local high school girl’s soccer team and possessed the Alabama High School Athletic Association coaching certificate and the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) Grade 8 referee’s certificate. The final co-instructor was an experienced male parent

volunteer who had worked in the developmental league for 8 years. He also possessed the USSF D license for soccer coaching, the National Soccer Coaches Association of America Regional Goalkeeping certificate, and the USSF Grade 8 referee's certificate.

## CHAPTER IV

### SETTING

The developmental soccer league met twice a week at 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for a total of 16 sessions. The first three sessions were 60 minutes in duration and were devoted to teaching basic soccer skills and strategies. During these sessions, children participated in approximately 40 minutes of skill practices and drills and 20-minutes of small-sided game play. Thereafter, Tuesday sessions continued to be hour-long sessions devoted to basic skills and strategies (dribbling, tackling, passing, kicking hard, finding space, denying space, and communicating) and followed the same organizational pattern. Thursdays, however, involved children playing in more formal 4 vs. 4 games with modified rules against peers of similar, size, experience, and ability. Games were divided into four quarters of approximately 8 minutes and officiated and coached by the instructors. Children wore team uniforms and teams were named after towns in Britain to encourage affiliation. Despite the relative formality of Thursday game nights, the goal was to provide an instructional environment focused on the same skills and strategies emphasized in the practice sessions. Consequently, instructors continued to teach within games and put little focus on the score or result. Parents of the children enrolled in the program were present at all sessions. The official objectives of the developmental league, which were provided to parents in the form of a handout during a pre-league organizational meeting, are shown in Figure 1.

Table 1.

*Objectives of the Developmental Soccer League*

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- Develop children's basic soccer skills
  - Develop children's understanding of soccer tactics and strategies
  - Develop children's understanding of sporting behavior and fair play
  - Develop children's passion for participating in physical activity in general and soccer in particular
  - Enable children to participate in two weekly sessions of vigorous health-promoting physical activity
  - Enable children to participate in practices and competitive game forms that are congruent with their developmental needs
  - Create a positive and welcoming learning environment in which children feel comfortable and grow in confidence
  - Develop a sense of camaraderie and affiliation between and among children, coaches, and parents
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## CHAPTER V

### DATA COLLECTION

Four qualitative techniques were employed to collect data on the children's participation styles. The primary technique was *non-participant observation* of practices and games during which extensive field notes were taken. In addition, two of the co-instructors (Rachel, the female graduate student, and Greg, one of the male undergraduate physical education students) were *formally interviewed* using a semi-structured format (Patton, 1990). The goal of these interviews was to confirm or refute the researchers' perceptions about emerging participation styles and to gain insight into the instructors' perceptions of and attitudes toward these participation styles in terms of their positive or negative impact on developmental league objectives. Formal interviews involved asking both co-instructors the same lead questions but allowed for multiple follow-up prompts. They were approximately 45 minutes in duration, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Whenever the opportunity arose, *informal interviews* of instructors, children, and parents were carried out. These took the form of short conversations just before or just after practice and game sessions, during rest or water breaks, or while parents were observing practices and games. Field notes were written about the contents of these conversations as soon after they took place as possible. Again, the focus of these informal interviews was to gain data that supported or refuted the researchers' emerging perceptions regarding children's participation styles.

Finally, two co-instructors (Rachel and Greg) completed a 45-minute *stimulated recall interview* shortly after the conclusion of the developmental league. Two different protocols were

employed during these interviews. The first involved showing the instructors several short segments of filmed practices and games illustrating various participation styles identified by the researcher. Instructors were asked to comment on and compare and contrast these participation styles. The second involved showing the instructors lengthier segments of practices and asking them to describe any additional or different participation styles they identified. Instructor responses during stimulated recall interviews were also audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

## CHAPTER VI

### DATA ANALYSIS

The standard interpretive methods of analytic induction and constant comparison (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) were used to code and categorize the data. This process was guided by constructs and concepts from the previous research on participation styles in physical activity settings. Credibility and trustworthiness of the participation styles revealed was established through the use of multiple data collection techniques, the search for negative and discrepant cases, and asking the instructors to review and provide feedback on the final report.

## CHAPTER VII

### RESULTS

Seven participation styles were identified during the course of developmental soccer league. These were *most valuable players* (MVPs), *ball hogs*, *chest thumpers*, *pawns*, *drama kings*, *free spirits*, and *goofballs*.

#### **MVPs**

The four girls and four boys who comprised the MVP group were relatively well skilled, tried hard, and sporting. During practice sessions, they listened intently to the instructors and were focused on improving their skill and understanding of soccer. They were “self-starters,” began tasks quickly with little or no prompting, and stayed on task throughout the drills, practices, and small-sided games. MVPs appeared to have had some previous experience of soccer, learned skills at a faster rate than their peers, and comprehended and executed basic tactics and strategies in short time.

As illustrated by the following data extract, when participating in small-sided games that were not directly overseen by one of the instructors, MVPs took the lead in terms of organizing and officiating with the goal of getting game play started quickly and keeping it flowing and fair:

In a 3 vs. 3 small-sided game, many of the boys are goofing around, jumping on top of each other, and clinging to each other when the ball is both dead and live. The ball is kicked out of bounds. Michelle<sup>1</sup> [an MVP] is trying to get everyone’s<sup>7</sup> attention focused

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all individuals in this paper are fictitious.

on an upcoming goal-kick by calling for control. She shouts, “Hey, we’re in a game here!” and runs off to retrieve the ball. When she returns to the field, Michelle places the ball down and yells, “Hey! Here comes a goal kick.” She waits patiently for the other players to focus before she takes the kick to restart play. (practice session 7, field notes)

During formal game nights, MVPs often took center-stage, were highly visible, obviously enjoyed the competitive experience immensely, and scored the majority of the goals for their respective teams. Unlike many of the lesser skilled players and some who were equally skilled, MVPs also looked to pass to open teammates, gave them instructions (“mark ‘em up guys,” “move up field”), and cheered them on from the sidelines regardless of the score. Moreover, and as recognized by the instructors, MVPs had a better understanding of and appreciation for the concept of equal playing time:

They [i.e., the MVPs] were good and they knew it, but they also knew they had teammates that wanted playing time and wanted to score. . . . You could just talk to them about equal playing time and they understood it. (Greg, stimulated recall interview)

Finally, MVPs’ actions during game play indicated that they were fairly modest despite their success:

Tyler rips a long shot into the net for a goal, his third of the game. He turns around immediately and jogs back to his side of the field, ready for the other team’s kickoff with a neutral look on his face. (Burnley vs. Portsmouth, game session 1, field notes)

### **Ball Hogs**

The ball hogs were four technically well skilled, competitive, and physical boys who, like the MVPs, appeared to have had some previous experience of soccer. Unlike the MVPs, however, ball hogs tended to practice exclusively with other ball hogs and often failed to listen to instructions. Instead, they talked quietly among themselves in small groups on the periphery of the group and out of the direct line of sight of the instructors. Moreover, ball hogs modified practices and drills or stopped participating in them altogether if they ran for any length of time:

David, the lead instructor, demonstrates proper heading technique with one of the children, while the rest sit and watch in a huddle. Then he tells the children to get into groups of four and practice heading in similar fashion. The four ball hogs get into a group together and do the practice correctly for about a minute. Then they change the practice by attempting diving headers, leaping forward across the ground. The boys stay off task in this manner until the practice is stopped. (practice session 4, field notes)

During small-sided games which were not directly supervised by instructors, ball hogs took the lead in terms of refereeing and team selection. However, they were often observed stacking teams in their favor and had little concern for fairness:

At the start of a 3 vs. 3 small-sided game session, the instructors are splitting their allocated children into teams. On one field where there is no instructor yet, John [a ball hog] has decided to split up the teams up himself. He tells three of the less skilled players, “You guys can have that goal. Me and Jordan [an MVP] are gonna be down here and we get the ball first.” (practice session 3, field notes)

During the formal game nights, ball hogs were very competitive and result-focused. They had two main objectives: scoring as many goals as possible and winning the game. The second goal, however, was subservient to the first and they played with a “dribble and shoot first, pass second” mentality, even if they realized that passing was a better option. On the rare occasions ball hogs passed the ball it was usually to a well-skilled teammate and as a last resort:

Jason [a ball hog] dribbles the ball down the field. He takes the ball toward the goal where he is met by a pack of defenders a couple yards out from the goal. His teammate, Susan, is standing in front of the wide open goal and calls out to Jason, “I’m open!” Jason continues to dribble into the pack of the defenders until he loses the ball. (Blackburn vs. Manchester, game session 3, field notes)

Finally, and in direct contrast to MVPs, after scoring a goal it was common for ball hogs to engage in fairly elaborate celebrations, and “announce the score” loudly to everyone around:

John controls the ball down the field, dribbles in between the defenders and shoots from several yards away. The ball slams into the back of the net and he jumps up in the air and yells, “Yeah! That’s four [goals]!” He runs a sort of mini victory lap, making a half circle around one end of the field and looks toward his teammates as if he’s anticipating their congratulations. He gets a high five from a teammate and settles back down, taking his place on his side of the field. (Manchester vs. Liverpool, game session 4, field notes)

## **Chest Thumpers**

The chest thumpers consisted of five boys and one girl with a reasonable level of skill and tactical understanding. While they were not as skillful as the ball hogs and could not dominate game play to the same extent, chest thumpers were similarly motivated and possessed what co-instructor Greg termed a “win at all costs mentality.” As illustrated by the following data extract, chest thumpers were also quick to let other children know when they were successful and more likely to be observed engaging in off-task behaviors or modifying practices and drills than ball hogs:

Jackson begins to juggle and announces his number of juggles after each attempt. “Oh, I got five!” he yells to a friend. After a few more tries, he begins bouncing the ball back and forth off his elbows. He looks to his friend to see if he’s amused, then looks up to see if an instructor is watching. No instructor is in the immediate area and he continues the practice in this manner. (practice session 3, field notes)

Rather than sharing some of the refereeing duties during small-sided games, chest thumpers verbally contested officiating decisions and goals scored by other players:

In a 3 vs. 3 small-sided game, a long shot from Jesse skids across the ground and narrowly makes it in between the cones for a goal. He raises his arms in the air and begins to jog back to his side of the field. Dean [a chest thumper] shouts to Jesse, his opponent, “Hey, that didn’t go in!” . . . Dean then watches his teammate dribble the ball out of bounds. An opposing player, Michelle, announces a kick-in for her team, Dean steps in and says, “What? It’s our kick. Let me have it.” (practice session 6, field notes)

Chest thumpers were extremely competitive on formal game nights to the extent that one co-instructor, Greg, observed “that they became frustrated with their teammates,” and often criticized them. For example, an errant pass from a teammate during game session 4 drew the comment, “What the heck!?” from Dean. As illustrated by the following data extracts, chest thumpers were also observed stealing the ball from their own players and protesting vehemently when substituted:

Heather is dribbling the ball quickly down the field towards an empty goal. Her teammate, Joey [a chest thumper], runs alongside her. About 5 yards out from the goal, Joey runs in front of Heather, steals the ball, scores, raises his arms in celebration, and shouts, “Yes!” (Everton vs. Burnley, game session 6, field notes)

Kirk is called off the field during a game to substitute out. His team is winning by several goals and he wants to keep playing even though it is his turn to sit out. He looks upset and questions the instructor several times as he comes off the field, saying, “I have to come out already? But I haven’t even scored yet.” (Manchester vs. Blackburn, game session 3, field notes)

### **Pawns**

Ten boys and six girls were categorized as pawns. These children possessed less skill and understanding of soccer than the MVPs, ball hogs, and chest thumpers and were physically smaller and slower than the children in these other groups. During practices, pawns listened to instructions, stayed on task, tried hard, appeared to be content, but maintained a low profile and were “quiet.” This meant they had relatively little interaction with other children or the instructors and tended to “blend into the group,” “stay in the background,” and “kind of get lost.” In addition, instructors had more trouble “remembering their names” than those of children in other categories.

During small-sided and formal games, pawns were active although somewhat hesitant, unconcerned about the result or scoring goals, got less touches on the ball than children with more skill, and were observed “giving way” to MVPs, ball hogs, and chest thumpers:

During a small-sided game, the ball is kicked out of bounds for goal-kick. Allie (a pawn) runs to retrieve the ball and returns to the field and places it down. Her teammate, John (an MVP), jogs toward her. Without exchanging words, she turns away and runs up field, leaving the goal-kick for John to take. (practice session 4, field notes)

### *Drama Kings*

The drama kings were five low-skilled boys with little or no previous experience of soccer. During practice nights, they appeared to have little interest in the practices, drills, and

small-sided game in which they were asked to participate and were often observed engaging in “off-task” behaviors and “horse play.”

There was one night when it seemed like every time I turned my back, Ramsey and Roger were messing around. I remember once, as soon as I turned around to their game, Roger was riding on top of Ramsey like a horse. I had to get on to them a bit, but they just weren’t really into it unless it was a “real” game. (Greg, formal interview)

During formal game nights, however, drama kings were transformed and highly motivated. Although their low skill level and weak grasp of strategy prevented them from taking a physical lead, they were highly involved emotionally “cheering” and “raising their arms” after their team’s score, but utterly dejected with “drooped heads” and “kicking the ground” after their team’s concession of a goal, and crying at the end of games their team had lost. Moreover, the fact that drama kings were motivated to win and score goals during formal games but were often unable to do either was a source of frustration that prompted some poor behavior:

A loose ball bounces in front of the blue team’s goal. A defender tries to clear the ball away, but the ball takes an awkward bounces off the defender’s leg, sending the ball into his team’s own net. Ramsey stomps over to his teammate who has just scored the own goal and pushes him to the ground saying, “What’d you do that for?” The teammate is upset and looks distressed. An instructor immediately steps in and pulls Ramsey aside to discuss his actions. (Liverpool vs. Chelsea, game session 6, field notes)

### **Free Spirits**

The free spirits were four boys and three girls with a low skill level and a very limited comprehension of basic soccer tactics and strategies. Despite these limitations, they were invariably cheerful, energetic, and positive, and very keen to participate and learn. They listened well during practices and were rarely off-task. Further, they gave tremendous effort throughout the program and did not allow their relative lack of success to dampen their spirits. Typical free spirit behavior during practice nights is described in the following data extract:

During a new whole-group practice, one player is selected to be the “bulldog” in the middle of the field and is told to tackle other players as they try to dribble from one side

of the field to the other. David also explains that when a player is tackled he/she also becomes a bulldog. Lauren, a free spirit, is tackled immediately and laughs as she watches her ball sail down the field . . . . The practice is repeated three times. . . . Lauren is eliminated first every time. Each time she responds with a laugh and smile, and immediately switches to her “bulldog” role in which she tries hard to tackle other players but has no success. Regardless, she continues to smile and laugh. (practice session 10, field notes)

Free spirits played confidently, enthusiastically, and with considerable enjoyment during formal games despite scoring very few goals or getting many touches of the ball. They were the least competitive players on their teams, showed no interest in the score whatsoever, and did not “back down” or show any subservience to larger and more skilled children. Their main strategy was to “boot” the ball up the field whenever the opportunity arose. The following field note extract describes behavior typical of free spirits during formal game play:

Elliot’s team wins a corner-kick. . . . He runs off the field to retrieve the ball. “Okay, it’s a corner kick for the red team,” announces Rachel, the instructor officiating. Elliot mistakenly places the ball in front of the goal as if he’s setting up a goal-kick. Rachel chuckles and says, “It’s a corner-kick, Elliot. Let’s put the ball over on the corner of the field over there.” Elliot laughs, too, as he jogs over to the corner-kick spot with the ball in his hands. (Tottenham vs. Portsmouth, game session 3, field notes)

### **Goofballs**

Five boys and one girl with relatively low skill levels comprised the goofballs. These children appeared more interested in entertaining themselves and their peers with alternative activities than learning to play soccer. During practice nights, goofballs’ time-on-task was fleeting and frequently gave way to joke telling or impromptu games of tag. Additionally, intentional hand balls and prolonged stoppages of play were common during small-sided games in which goofballs were involved. The following field note excerpts illustrate typical goofball behavior during practices:

As a bouncing ball comes towards Shane, he slaps it down with his hand and immediately laughs. Another boy tries to set up the free-kick and Shane playfully yells with a smile,

“That’s my ball!” He stands directly in front of the ball with a smirk on his face, obstructing the other boy from taking the free kick. (practice session 9, field notes)

Gina chases John throughout the small-sided game. She isn’t aware of the ball or the other players, but is intent on catching John. She yells “Come here!” and “I’m gonna get you!” while she chases him down. When she gets close enough, she grabs his shirt, tugs on it, and proudly announces, “I got you!” (practice session 10, field notes)

Goofballs also showed little interest in soccer during formal game play only making an attempt to play the ball when it came near them. This lack of interest meant that they were often observed “staring into the distance” when on the field and “engaging in horseplay,” joke telling, or chatting to their parents about something other than soccer when substituted and on the sidelines. The following field note excerpts illustrate typical goofball behavior during formal game nights:

Shane stares overhead and points up to the sky in the middle of a game as a remotely controlled airplane flies overhead. “Hey, look at that!” he says, standing still and oblivious to the game going on around him. . . . A teammate dribbles past Shane as he continues to watch the plane overhead. (Liverpool vs. Chelsea, game session 6, field notes)

James is standing near the halfway line while the opposing team moves the ball toward his team’s goal. . . . He continues to stand there, twiddling grass between his fingers, while members of the other team repeatedly shoot. . . . Shane turns to a player on the other team and begins talking to him, his back to the play they converse. (Liverpool vs. Chelsea, game session 6, field notes)

## CHAPTER VIII

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the children who participated in the youth soccer program were found to have engaged in various and different participation styles. Obviously, this finding mirrors those of earlier studies asking the same question in different contexts (Bain, 1985; Bennett, 2000; Griffin, 1984; 1985; Pope & O'Sullivan, 2003; Zmudy et al., 2009). Of equal importance, however, is that unlike the studies previously conducted with children of similar age who participated in similar activities in school physical education (Griffin, 1984, 1985), the different participation styles observed in the present study were not based on a hierarchy in which those at the top learned to bully and humiliate those at the bottom and, regardless of their participation style, the vast majority of children appeared to have a positive experience. The main reason for this appears to be the difference in focus, intent, and pedagogical skill between Griffin's (1984, 1985) physical education teachers and the present study's instructors. Specifically, while a closer examination of the teachers in Griffin's (1984, 1985) studies suggested that they were "going through the instructional motions" without any real educational aims, the instructors within the current study monitored, supervised, and managed the children in the soccer program closely and were clearly focused on realizing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor goals. That is, they displayed behaviors similar to those of the adventure educators observed by Zmudy et al. It appeared to be these instructor behaviors

that served to confine and downgrade the anti-social behaviors of children that were in operation (e.g., chest thumpers' criticisms of other children) before they escalated to bullying.

Despite the absence of bullying observed in the soccer program and the instructor intent and skill, it should be emphasized that the participation styles identified in the current study did still form a hierarchy in which those relatively well-skilled children at the top (i.e., MVPs, ball hogs and chest thumpers) generally got more from the program in terms of learning and pleasure than those relatively unskilled children at the bottom (i.e., pawns, drama kings, free spirits, and goofballs). Moreover, there were components of the higher-order participation styles which served to negate learning and improvement such as the ball hogs' unwillingness to pass during game play and obsession with scoring. In addition, the participation styles observed in the current study appeared fairly stable across the course of the program. Participation styles were not modified, altered, or shaped by the instruction, instructors, or children during the course of the program and children did not shift from one participation style to another.

It should also be acknowledged that there were some similarities between the participation styles in the present study and those identified in past research. For example, bullying aside, the current study's MVPs, ball hogs, and chest thumpers behaved in a fashion somewhat similar to Griffin's (1985) nice guys, machos, and junior machos and there were elements of Griffin's invisible players within the present study's pawns, free spirits, and goofballs. Furthermore, in congruence with all the previous studies completed in this line of research, the range of participation styles identified in the current study existed on a continuum of relevance. At one end of this continuum were styles that indicated that what the soccer program had to offer was relevant and of interest to the children. At the other end of the

continuum were styles suggesting that the program content was of little interest to the children practicing them.

The overemphasis on winning by the ball hogs, chest thumpers, and drama kings, no doubt due to prior socialization, is also worth examining at this juncture. This mentality served to undermine the learning and enjoyment of those children on whom it was inflicted and of those children who were afflicted by it. The fact that it was largely kept in check again appeared to be due to the instructor focus, the promotion of the program as a “fairly gentle instructional experience,” and the fact that a large proportion of parents appeared to be attracted to the program because their children had suffered previously when enrolled in so-called “competitive” versions of youth sport.

The main practical implication of this study, and others like it, is to make instructors aware that the experiences of their charges can vary greatly and that some children get a good deal more from their teaching than others. Knowledge of children’s participation styles in youth sport programs should also allow instructors to make conscious and deliberate changes in their pedagogies in order intervene when these styles have a negative impact and promote a more equitable, effective, and positive learning environment. To this end, future studies in this line might examine different types of youth sport programs taught by different types of instructors. For example, it would be useful to discover the extent to which the participation styles of children in youth sport programs staffed mainly by parental coaches with limited pedagogical training, experience, or expertise, and with a greater focus on competition, differ from those identified in the current study. In addition, studies which examine the effect of age, activity, socioeconomic status, race, gender, and geographic location on children’s participation styles in youth sport programs could all prove valuable.

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