

Reconstructing the Community-Based Youth Sport Experience: How Children Derive Meaning from Unstructured and Organized Settings

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Youth sport participation often provides the most salient forum for connecting sport with local communities. In this phenomenological examination of preteen youth sport participants, we consider the experiences and attendant meanings derived from participation in both organized and unstructured youth sport settings within a community. Phenomenology offers a paradigm for understanding youth sport participation, not in terms of the dialectical differences between the settings, but in terms of how the experiences in the different settings inform one another in the creation of meanings for participants. The analysis reveals that playing in unstructured settings actually changes the way participants think about their experiences playing organized sports (and vice versa) with both settings providing meaningful experiences capable of connecting participants to the community. Therefore, taxonomically separating the experiences engendered in the organized and unstructured settings creates a false dichotomy that fails to account for the important meanings to emerge from their synthesis.

As I sat and observed the boys run, wrestle, and scream their way across the playground, picnic tables, and basketball court, two cars pulled up in the otherwise vacant parking lot. Out of the first stepped a middle-aged, athletic-looking African-American man carrying an unzipped duffle bag with small orange cones and two footballs poking out of it. From the passenger side of the other car (a BMW SUV), a gawky, 14/15 year old white teenager emerged wearing Nike Dri-Fit from head-to-toe and shiny new Nike cleats. The man and the teenager briefly shook hands before making their way through the anarchic, cacophonous madness of the boys running virtual circles around them like they weren't even there. About a minute behind, the mother of the teenager scurried through their wake to take her place watching the teenager follow the warm-up instructions of the man on the field adjacent to the playground. This is one of the more defining moments of my months spent exploring youth sports in the community: a literal juxtaposition of the transition that these boys are likely to undergo in the next 2-3 years. On the playground, the boys play without supervision, their initial focus (playing pickup basketball) long abandoned for the opportunity to run and scream without purpose. Fifty yards away, the

teenager practices running different receiving drills as the man passes him the football and instructs him on the nuances of planting his feet and turning his hips. There is no joy, no real rapport: this is work, a business transaction. I approach the mother and ask her about her son. She says that he wants to make varsity next year as a freshman so that he can have a greater chance for exposure to college scouts over a longer period of time. The man, she says, used to be a high school coach at one of the high schools in the district, but now just does personal training. I thank her for her time and head back over to the playground area where David is fighting back tears after Wyatt threw a wayward traffic cone (presumably left by a school official after Friday afternoon pickup) at his hand. I cannot help but note another odd juxtaposition in the use of the cones between the boys and the adjacent training session—one for play and many for work. I ask the boys what they think about the teenager and the trainer—they hadn't noticed them. Somewhat astonished, I pressed further. Yes, they acknowledged, they can see them, but they didn't notice them until I brought it up. Does that speak to the all-encompassing nature of their play or the mundanity of this presence? How do they traverse these two worlds? (Field Notes, 10 September)

Although the boys described in the preceding field notes may have been so engulfed in their play that they failed to notice the teenager working toward a college scholarship on the next field over, the same cannot be said for most sport researchers. In fact, the academic

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study of community-based youth sport has dedicated considerable energy to understanding the teenage boy working in a structured, organized sport environment to achieve an elite outcome (e.g., Helsen, Starkes, & Hodges, 1998). The efforts of sport managers to understand elite athlete performance have been driven in large part by the emergence of the study of sport development, which endeavors to understand and evaluate the programs and systems used to recruit, retain, and advance athletes to the highest levels of performance. As the study of organized youth sport has become more elaborated over time, both within sport development and more broadly sport management, researchers generally have failed to “notice” the youth playing in unstructured settings. The singular focus on understanding the outcomes of organized sport participation is not surprising, however, as it mirrors the overall societal shift toward valuing sport—particularly youth sport—for the outcomes it can produce (cf. Ogden, 2002). Unstructured sport settings, on the other hand, are often characterized as play, and therefore are perceived to offer little opportunity for the types of extrinsic outcomes that are socially valued, such as winning, earning college scholarships, and ascending to the professional ranks (cf. Kohn, 1992). This emphasis on organized sport and consequent de-emphasis of sport played in unstructured settings is problematic for scholars and practitioners interested in advancing the field of sport development to produce both better athletes and better people for several reasons.

First, the emphasis on organized sports paints an incomplete picture of the lived experiences of youth sport participants in a community. Although it may be useful in an academic exercise to differentiate sport participation into taxonomic categories and then focus empirical inquiry on the setting that is perceived to be more salient for certain goals, organized sport is only one component of a child’s overall youth sport experience. Understanding a child’s youth sport experience without considering what he or she does in an unsupervised, unstructured setting has the potential to overlook important experiences and developmental processes that occur outside of an organized setting. Moreover, to homogenize the youth sport experience as simply organized sport ultimately devalues the important role of play in the overall development of children (e.g., Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2008).

Second, research highlighting the purported outcomes of sport participation without consideration of the meaningfulness of the actual experience of participating creates an axiological orientation where the outcomes of participation are valued over the experience. Yet, Chalip, Csikszentmihalyi, Kleiber, & Larson (1984) assert that understanding the experiences of playing sports themselves may prove to be as important as the long-term developmental impact “From the point of view of significance to a person’s development, it might be argued that the sum of discrete, immediate experiences is as important, or more so, than the long-term ‘effects’” (p. 109). In other words, the experiences associated with playing youth sports (in any setting) may provide a critical understanding

of a child’s overall youth sport participation that is not captured in an *ex post facto* measurement of an outcome.

To this point, the major contributions in the literature examine the impact of critical shifts in the nature of children’s sport participation on their psychological well-being and their development as athletes in an organized sport setting. Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin (2005), for example, investigate at what age it is developmentally appropriate for children to shift from playing a diverse range of sports to specializing in the particular sport they aim to pursue at the highest level. Helsen, Starkes, & Hodges (1998), on the other hand, examine the influence of time spent in deliberate play versus deliberate practice in predicting athletic outcomes for young athletes playing organized sport. In both cases, and in virtually all of the studies related to youth sport, the implicit goal of the research is to ascertain how best to initiate and sustain a child’s participation in organized sport. Sport researchers often overlook the positive experiences fostered in less structured community sport settings such as pickup sports and neighborhood play, in turn creating a monolithic representation of youth sports that belies the experiential diversity of sport for children.

Nearly three decades ago, Chalip, et al. (1984) concluded in their study related to variations in formal and informal sport experiences that “sport participation cannot be discussed in the simple good-versus-bad terms which have characterized much of the youth sport debate” (p. 15). Yet, broad generalizations are precisely how sport continues to be conceptualized. Green (2008) notes that “sport has been treated as if it were a unitary experience. That is, all sport is seen as the same; it is assumed to provide the same benefits to all participants no matter the program or context” (p. 138). While the majority of research on the outcomes of youth and adolescent sport participation has focused on either its potential long-term developmental benefits (e.g., Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003) or its ability to predict future levels of physical activity (e.g., Perkins, Jacobs, Barber, & Eccles, 2004), few empirical accounts have examined the sport experience beyond an organized sport context. Moreover, fewer accounts have considered how participating in organized sports *and* playing informal sports complement one another in contributing to the meaning of a child’s overall experience of playing sports. From a sport development standpoint, articulating a more complete understanding of how the experience of playing sports across different settings influences child participants can inform both systemic efforts to recruit, retain, and advance children through sport development systems and program-level efforts to facilitate the positive aspects that children can derive from sport participation.

Literature Review

As Green (2005) notes, the theoretical basis for sport development research derives from the dual need of sport managers to cultivate elite athletes for international competition and to encourage mass rates of sport

participation. While these two enterprises reflect fundamentally different pursuits, they become intertwined through the need of elite sport to draw from a mass pool of sport participants to find those relatively few athletes capable of high performance (Bowers, Chalip, & Green, 2011). In Green's (2005) pyramid model of youth sport development, the relatively few high-performing elite athletes are supported by a broad participation base from which they ascend.

With sport development emerging as a more prominent field of inquiry in the United States, researchers have reengaged with tracing the social and political origins for sport systems that emphasize a singular focus on organized sport while rejecting more playful sport forms (e.g., Bowers & Hunt, 2011). During the late 1970s and early 1980s, sport scholars considered the impact of the movement toward organized sport on the nature of the experience for the child/adolescent participant, and consequently began to frame the discussion in terms of organized settings *versus* unstructured settings. Devereux (1976) provides one of the most enduring analyses on the sociocultural repercussions of Little League supplanting backyard baseball as a child's primary sport experience suggesting, "Almost all of the opportunities for incidental learning which occur in spontaneous, self-organized children's games have somehow been sacrificed at the altar of safety (physical only) and competence (in baseball only)" (p. 69). Following this rumination on the direction of the sport experience for children, other scholars began to demonstrate that organized sport may not be as beneficial an experience for children in terms of building character (Kleiber & Roberts, 1981) and fostering upward social mobility (Watson, 1977), as was traditionally thought.

Recently, however, a few sport scholars acknowledged that organized sport ought to be merely one component of an increasingly incomplete sport participation spectrum. In his indictment over the field of sport management's emphasis on elite development through an organized sport context, Zeigler (2007) wondered, "Where is the evidence that organized sport's goal is based on tenable theory consonant with societal values that claim to promote the welfare of all?" (p. 298). Green (2008) similarly challenges sport managers to take a more proactive, participant-centered approach to the design and implementation of programs in multiple contexts, and cautions that a *laissez-faire* approach reliant on organized sport alone may produce unforeseen or incompatible outcomes. Yet, in spite of the importance of understanding the experiences occurring within multiple sport participation contexts, perceived challenges to the dominance of organized sport—like those offered by modified sport programs attempting to provide an experiential compromise between organized and informal sports—are often met with skepticism about their legitimacy (Green, 1997). While the efforts of a small percentage of researchers and practitioners suggest incremental progress in considering the sport experience as the sum of participation in a variety of contexts, many researchers and practitioners

still adhere to a more dichotomous view of playing sport in organized *versus* unstructured settings.

In terms of youth-related research on sport context, Recours, Souville, & Griffet (2004) examined 878 French secondary school students about the motivations driving their sport participation and found that females were motivated more by sociability while males were motivated by competition and exhibitionism. Perhaps correspondingly, females also preferred an informal sport context, while males reported a higher preference for formal sport contexts. In another French study of 728 teenagers, Waser, & Passavant (1997) found that differences existed in the likelihood of participating in formal versus informal sports depending on the gender, as well as the socioeconomic status, of the respondent. In this case, females were curiously more likely to participate in a formal setting because of a lack of structured social opportunities accompanying informal sport, while respondents of lower socioeconomic status were more likely to participate in an unstructured sport setting because of the financial constraints of organized sport participation.

In one of the few U.S. based studies of context, Knoppers, Zuidema, & Meyer (1989) asserted the importance of understanding the differences in the experiences of playing in different sport contexts. In their analysis of 312 Midwestern sport summer camp attendees, the researchers indicated that participants valued competitiveness and winning in both organized and unstructured settings, although reported much higher levels in organized settings. The authors suggest that "perhaps, then, the term 'professionalization of attitudes' should be rephrased to 'professionalization of situations'" (p. 75). Somewhat similarly, Ogden (2002) presented a qualitative analysis describing how youth baseball players in the Midwest have increasingly shifted their sporting experiences from the unstructured, "pickup" settings toward organized sport to pursue elite development during their increasingly limited leisure time. Like Devereux (1976) before him, Ogden (2002) is concerned about the detrimental impact that this shift might have on the development of critical interpersonal and social skills that are better fostered within the informal sport context. Yet, the months of immersion in the present research context and the myriad moments like the one described in the opening field notes entry highlight a potential limitation of these few studies on the experiences of multi-setting sport participation. In each of these studies the emphasis is on differentiating one setting from another, rather than seeking to understand what emerges from a child or athlete-centered consideration of how the experience of participation *across* different settings contributes to the overall meaning derived from sport participation.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of playing sports as it is experienced by preteen boys in a "sport-centric" community. Through understanding the meaning of playing sport for these boys, this research can make two significant contributions to extending the current youth sport development literature. First, this study reasserts the importance of

the unstructured sport setting as a meaningful context that impacts both the child and the child's participation in organized sport. As a result of this assertion, considering organized sport in isolation risks creating an inaccurate understanding of sport in the lives of its youth participants. Second, by situating the experiences of the child as the focal point for understanding youth sport participation, the process of playing sports is positioned as an equally important component of the community sport delivery equation. In this regard, the experiences of playing sports are posited to be as important as the outcomes that derive from participation.

Research Context

“Riggins” (a pseudonym) is a predominantly white, upper-middle class suburb in a major central Texas metropolitan area where sports—most notably football—are the lifeblood that both reflects and reinforces the core values of the community. Although the vitriol and fervor surrounding sport in Riggins does not quite approach the levels of Dillon, the fictitious town depicted in the acclaimed television series *Friday Night Lights*, the role of high school football as the unifying agent of the community is nevertheless palpable. The eight campus, 7,000 student school district hardly approximates the images of small-town Texas high school football that have been depicted in the media; the fact that the lone high school in the district has won five state championships in a row and produced numerous high-profile, Division-I student athletes, however, speaks to the “sport-centric” character of the community. This type of sustained excellence on the community’s athletic fields has a discernible impact on the types of financial and temporal resources dedicated to building and sustaining its youth sport programs. It is difficult to determine whether the success of the high school has filtered down to the youth sport association, or the success of the youth sport association has driven the success of the high school—likely a combination of the two—but the importance placed on sporting excellence in this community is without question.

As a result, children in this community are provided virtually every resource and opportunity to succeed as athletes. Whereas most boys and girls rely on municipal parks and community recreation programs to serve as sport providers, the townspeople of Riggins created a private youth sport organization that oversees the administration and funding of nine different sports serving over 4,500 children. The organization has also constructed athletic facilities that teams may use for both practice and games. The implicit and explicit emphases placed on sporting success within Riggins may inherently change the meanings of the experiences for children participating in youth sports. In fact, the sport culture of the community, perhaps more than any other single factor, influences the nature of the lived experiences of these children. Unlike at-risk populations living in impoverished, under-resourced communities that often act as a ball-and-chain—a burden they must carry and ultimately

overcome if they are to “succeed” in the conventional sense—children in Riggins start their lives with more than many ever achieve: they use top-end, association-owned sports complexes for practices and games; they play in uniforms and with equipment made of a professional grade; and, they have coaches and parents willing to dedicate any amount of time and money to see them achieve success. As a result of their surroundings, however, the boys examined in this study must overcome a different type of environmental byproduct—expectations.

In the months before the formulation of this study, one of the parents involved in the Riggins Youth Association (RYA) began feeling concerned about what he viewed as an increasing over-emphasis on structure, winning, and success for children participating in youth sports in the community. He worried that the demands associated with playing organized sport were undermining the development of a general love of outdoor physical activity. Working with RYA, this parent developed what became known as “Sandlot Nights,” which were evenings when RYA would open up the facilities so that parents could drop off their children to play informal sports, using the organization’s fields and equipment with minimal adult interference. A critic might question whether having to structure an activity where children could play in an unstructured environment defeated the fundamental purposelessness of play. But, the amount of scheduled, structured activity was so pervasive that this RYA administrator believed the only means of helping parents connect with the need for their children to play was to find a place for it in their schedules.

In practice, these events were never quite as free from adult intervention as play theorists and developmental psychologists might hope them to be (e.g., Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978), but the realization of the overall concept of letting kids play for the sake of playing was incontrovertible. On average, the “Sandlot Nights” took place once every few weeks from June until September, and drew anywhere from 60 to 100 participants. With the start of youth football in September, however, the “Sandlot Nights” lost their momentum and fell off the RYA calendar. In spite of this shift away from the “Sandlot Nights,” many of the children (even those playing organized football) continued to make time for regular informal sport participation.

A Phenomenological Approach

In adopting an integrative view of the experiences of playing sports in multiple settings for preteen boys in this community, the boys’ construction of meaning is explored through the lens of phenomenology, an approach that increasingly has been championed as useful for sport researchers over the past few years for its methodological rigor and explanatory potential (e.g., Brown & Payne, 2009; Craig & Butryn, 2012; Hogeveen, 2011). As van Manen (1990) asserts, phenomenology is the study of the individual’s life-world, as experienced rather than as conceptualized, categorized, or theorized. Phenomenology

aims for a deeper understanding of the meaning of everyday experience that, as Heidegger (1962) posits, exists in the transaction between an individual and a situation so that the individual both constitutes and is constituted by the situation. In service to the objective of the present research, phenomenology facilitates an immersive understanding of participant experiences in a manner that generates a “thick description” of the life-worlds of the participants (cf. Geertz, 1973).

The choosing of teams, the tears shed over a skinned knee, the arguments over whether the ball crossed the goal-line before a player was tackled: each of these experiences combines to create a shared world that these boys inhabit. The meanings of these physical experiences of play, however, do not develop in the mind of the child until they are recounted on the playground the next day or debated at the sleepover later that evening. For example, when reflecting on “playing football in the backyard,” the lived experience takes on its own atmosphere and tone. The conversations in this space become conversations different from those had at the family dinner table or in an organized sport setting; the feel of being tackled by bare arms and shoulders feels distinct from being tackled in full pads. There becomes a unity to the experience of “playing football in the backyard”—saying they are “going to play football in the backyard” conjures up a unique essence that is different from anything else they may do. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) notes, phenomenology is the study of this essence. It is the type of science that gives reflective expression to the quotidian; everyday experiences become meaningful and interpretable as we give memory to them by talking. Thus, phenomenology offers a powerful ontological framework for understanding the experience of playing sports for the boys in this community that captures the essence of what it means to play in this “shared world.”

Data Collection

In accordance with phenomenological research, data collection proceeded in a manner that “creates a multilayered

text about the meaning of the human experiences under inquiry” (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000, p. 58). The genesis of this “text” emerged from the synthesis of “interactive” interviews aimed at eliciting “narrative texts” from the participant and naturalistic and participant-observer field notes designed to yield a “field text” from the researcher. In this study, 10 preteen boys from Rig-gins comprised the sample (see table 1), with participant recruitment facilitated through the aforementioned parent/coach/board member who originally set out to organize the “Sandlot Nights”—phenomenologists consider a sample size of 6–9 participants to be sufficient, depending on the quality of data obtained from each participant (Morse, 2000). Given the importance of understanding the meanings of the experiences for the participants, this particular study restricted its analytic purview to boys. While there are undoubtedly meaningful differences between the experiences of boys and girls at this age (as with other ages, ethnicities, and abilities), it is important to adequately investigate each segment in sufficient depth to produce valuable insights, rather than providing a superficial understanding of a broader participant range.

Due to the sensitive nature of working with children, the study underwent meticulous human subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval that required both the assent of the child participants and the consent of their parents. Drawing from over ten years of experience coaching and working with children (ranging in age from 6–17), the researcher worked to minimize potential age and status barriers between himself and the boys. Still, eliciting responses from preteen boys offers significant challenges, which were navigated through interpersonal approaches centered on actively participating with the boys in games of catch, for example, during interviews and focusing on having the boys tell stories instead of answer questions.

To elicit a more contemporaneous narrative from these participants, the research adopted a longitudinal, prospective approach whereby the researcher conducted “close observation” (van Manen, 1990) of participant experiences in both organized and informal sports contexts

Table 1 Characteristics of Participants

Pseudonym	Organized Sports	Age (at start of study)
David	Baseball, Basketball, Football, Lacrosse	11
Wyatt	Baseball, Football, Lacrosse	12
Nate	Lacrosse, Football	11
Matthew	Baseball, Basketball, Football, Wrestling	12
Christian	Baseball, Basketball, Football, Wrestling	12
Cooper	Baseball, Football	11
Darren	Baseball, Football	11
Steven	Baseball, Basketball, Lacrosse, Football	11
Patrick	Baseball, Basketball, Football	12
Kurt	Baseball, Dirt Bike, Football	12

and conducted semi-structured, conversational interviews about their experiences in these different settings (cf. Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). Each of the interviews was recorded using a digital audio recorder and later transcribed for analysis. In addition to close observation and interactive interviews during the ongoing “Sandlot Nights,” the researcher also observed and interviewed the participants before and after participation in organized league games.

Overall, the period of data collection lasted approximately 11 months. Close observation and interactive interviews served as the primary means of data collection, but participants also wrote a reflective written account of the experiences in each participative context that represent their favorite and least favorite memories of playing sports in unstructured and organized settings (cf. Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). In addition, throughout the duration of the project, the researcher maintained a personal reflective journal to provide a forum for the subjective consideration of his thoughts, emotions, and ideas related to the research experience.

Several interview approaches were used to elaborate on the developing understanding of the meaning of the experience of playing sports for these boys. Three interviews over periods of up to 30 min were conducted with each participant. These more structured interviews afforded the participants an opportunity to clarify and explain earlier discussion and observations. In addition to the longer, more structured interviews spaced throughout the data collection period, participants also offered smaller interview snippets ranging from 3–15 min, often conducted *in situ* while the researcher and the participant played sports together. Periodic group interviews also were conducted throughout the study in an attempt to create a more communal environment that might foster a different type of sharing and reflection. In total, approximately 15–20 interviews (of various lengths) were conducted with each participant.

Following the extended close observation and interviews of each participant, participants provided reflective written accounts of the two experiences in each participative context that represented their favorite and least favorite memories of playing sports in unstructured and organized settings. Given the hermeneutic nature of phenomenology, an opportunity to compose stories about their experiences provided a type of reflection different from that associated with answering verbal questions (cf. Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Combined, these data collection tactics provided a range of opportunities for the participants to consider the meanings of the experience of playing sports. In all, this analysis drew from a broad spectrum of data which included the researcher’s personal reflective journal, transcribed participant interviews, field notes from close observation of participation, and the boys’ written stories about their experiences.

Data Analysis

After constructing the narrative texts from the interviews and reflective written exercises, and the field texts from

observations and other contextual fora, the dialectical process known as the hermeneutic circle guided the interpretation of the data (cf. Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000).

The specific data analysis was based on the six-stage approach adopted from Ajjawi & Higgs (2007), and explicitly incorporates the recommendations of Lincoln & Guba (2000) to promote trustworthiness and authenticity of both the analytic process and the findings. The recommendations to promote trustworthiness and authenticity included the researcher maintaining a personal reflective journal (as mentioned), the creation of an audit trail (including raw data, data reduction products, data reconstruction products, process notes, intention notes, and developmental notes), and consultation with another researcher throughout the research process to confirm the interpretation of the data. Additional trustworthiness derived from the collegial feedback gleaned from the presentation of this analysis at two different academic conferences throughout the duration of the project.

After transcribing and consolidating the data into NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software, we used the software to facilitate the aforementioned six-stage approach adopted from Ajjawi & Higgs (2007). The first stage was “Immersion” and was comprised of organizing the various sources of data into texts, iterative readings of the texts, and the formation of initial interpretations before coding. Next, the “Understanding” stage required the delineation of first-order (participant) constructs through inductive, line-by-line *in vivo* coding. Although *in vivo* coding is often associated more with grounded theory research, its use in phenomenology is advised by both Saldaña (2009) and van Manen (1990) as a means of preserving the voice of the participants. Given the inherent inarticulateness of preteen boys, it was important to take measures that grounded the researcher in their voice throughout the process—to both “give voice” to a population that often has little voice in research and to further promote authenticity by helping the researcher resist the temptation to extrapolate beyond the child’s words and meanings at this early stage of analysis. For example, let us consider a direct quote from Matthew, a participant in our sample, who said in an interview that, “When I’m playing on the main fields I am more nervous than when I play in my backyard and I try to play as hard as I can.” At this stage, we maintained the complete quote, which served as our first-order, *in vivo* code to preserve the integrity of the statement. Third, the “Abstraction” stage involved the identification of second-order (researcher) constructs derived from the initial inductive coding, followed by the grouping of these constructs into subthemes based on the four phenomenological life-worlds: corporeality, temporality, spatiality, relationality (cf. Munhall, 2007). At this point, the aggregated *in vivo* codes from each of the participants were organized within the four life-worlds based on their reference to the child’s experiences within a given space or environment (spatiality), embodied experiences (corporeality), experiences situated in time (temporality), or their inter-subjective experiences with others (relationality). To continue with

the example of Matthew's quote from above, at this stage his quote was consolidated into the 'Matthew' section within the 'Spatiality' life-world subtheme.

During the fourth stage, "Synthesis and Theme Development," the individual participant sections within each subtheme were consolidated into broader themes that were then further elaborated and compared across the sample. Within each of the four life-world groupings, thematic patterns were identified through situating the experiences in the particular life-world. For example, the spatiality grouping containing Matthew's initial quote and others with similar properties contributed to the generation of a specific theme identifying the relationship between the experiences of the boys' kinesthetic movements and the influence of the physical setting of their play. Fifth, in the "Illumination and Illustration of Phenomenon" stage, themes were contextualized within the existing research literature and the interpretations reconstructed into narratives. At this point the meanings of the experiences identified in the earlier stages informed the construction of an original narrative aiming to capture the essence of the lived experience of playing sports for these boys (which was instrumental in understanding this holistic experience, but which has been omitted from the manuscript due to spatial limitations). Finally, the "Integration and Critique" stage enabled the interpretation of the findings and a critique of the themes, particularly with respect to how the findings extend current epistemological understandings of youth sport programming and development. For example, drawing from the *in vivo* code of Matthew's original quote and its subsequent contribution to the inductive creation of broader themes exploring the relationship between physical setting and play, we developed a particular understanding that "changing settings changes behaviors," as well as the other key findings described in the forthcoming results section.

Results

The findings of this analysis highlight the level of interactivity across organized and unstructured sport settings in the derivation of meaning for youth sport participants. Although there certainly exist qualitative differences in the experiences engendered in organized and unstructured settings, the more salient understanding to emerge from this study is the extent of psychosocial integration between the different settings in contributing to an overall meaning of sport participation. Rather than producing finite, discrete sport experiences and meanings, participation in organized and unstructured settings actually coalesce to shape the life-world of the participant in a manner that alters the overall meaning of participating in sports for these boys. In short, each setting influences the experience of the other. Moreover, for these ten boys growing up in the town of Riggins, the meaning of the experience of playing youth sports is characterized by an underlying search for their place within both the smaller social worlds that exist within the community and the

broader community within which these smaller social worlds exist. Whether attempting to develop a supportive peer group, learning to understand the role that adults play in his development, or becoming aware of how sports connect him to the town, each boy searches for his own small communities to help situate himself as a member of the larger community of Riggins.

Unstructured Settings Influence the Lived Experience of Playing Organized Sports

Conducting research in a community that places such symbolic value on both the perceived developmental benefits of youth sport participation and the significance of achieving athletic excellence (particularly in high school football), one expects to find images of youth sport at its worst, with borderline abusive adults forcibly molding children into miniature simulacra of professional athletes. Yet, in spite of the overt emphasis on athletic success in Riggins, the reality for this group of preteen boys often does not match the preconceptions associated with many of the valid criticisms of contemporary youth sport on a nationwide scale, such as the overemphasis on winning, the application of a professional model to children's play, and the cooptation of the experience by adult coaches and parents. What is unique about the meanings of participating in sports for the majority of these boys are the consistently precocious levels of maturity and perspective reflected in their thoughts about sport's overall place in their lives. A significant part of the maturity and rationality projected by each one of these boys derives from the integration of informal sports experiences within their busy organized sports calendars. The positive repercussions of this integration manifest themselves in three primary, interrelated ways. First, playing in unstructured settings allows the boys to practice moving their bodies in ways that give them greater comfort in the movement required of their bodies in organized settings ("Playing as Practice"). Second, gaining better control over the movement of their bodies in an unstructured setting lets the boys enjoy the public performance of these movements ("Performing as Reward"). Finally, being in charge within the unstructured play environment permits the boys to render their experiences with adults in the organized setting as facilitative rather than controlling ("Adults as Facilitators"). In essence, the "control" developed and felt by the boys in the unstructured settings influences their experiences in the organized settings where they otherwise lack these same levels of control, a key finding that is explored more deeply in the forthcoming sections.

Playing as Practice In their own ways, each of the boys consistently highlight that unstructured settings afford them a chance to practice their sport. While such an assertion might seem obvious, there are significant nuances to the experiences of participating in an unstructured setting, particularly with respect to their influence on perceptions of the experience of participating in an organized setting. Specifically, the

hours of practice accrued during informal sessions allow them to feel a greater sense of control of their bodies and movements playing organized sports. For researchers and practitioners concerned with recruiting, retaining, and advancing young athletes through sport development systems, one of the most salient findings to emerge from this research is the evidence that playing sports in an unstructured setting can actually serve as a pathway for some children to transition into organized youth sports. In other words, the experience of playing informal sports in an unstructured setting can actually beget the experience of playing organized sports. In the current study, Nate's experiences provide a useful lens to understand how the experiences inform one another.

At the conclusion of this study, Nate planned to try out for 7th grade football in the fall. Although a common rite of passage for most boys of his age in Riggins, during the initial months of this study Nate expressed a great deal of ambivalence, if not trepidation, about trying out for football. He felt he was under-prepared physically and lacking the requisite skills to earn a spot on the team, so he planned to simply avoid the process altogether lest he set himself up to be ridiculed. What follows is a statement by Nate during the first interview of the study:

I don't really play sports much. I always have homework and stuff. Plus, I don't have any brothers or anything. It's just me and my 15 year old [twin] sisters, so we don't really do that. I don't have time to play organized sports, and I'm not good enough, so I don't want people to laugh [at me].

What changed over the ensuing months to shift his intention toward trying out? According to Nate and many of the other boys in the study, unstructured settings offer them a forum to hone the skillful movement of their bodies and an opportunity to try different tactics and techniques without fear of repercussion. In the second interview conducted with Nate the next month, he indicated a greater interest in starting to play sports within the psychosocial safety of unstructured settings alongside other children with whom he has an established rapport:

Nate: After the last [Sandlot Night], I started to want to play more. Before school one day, me and my friend and his little brother and his friend, we decided to play just real quick. Since we were a lot older than them, it was me and his little brother against my friend and his little brother's friend. So it was pretty even.

Researcher: So you evened it out? How did you decide that?

Nate: We picked real quick because it wasn't fair two big guys against two little guys.

Researcher: Yeah, that's definitely true. So this was before school. Were you in your school clothes?

Nate: No.

Researcher: Oh, OK. I was gonna say, your mom might not be happy about that!

Nate: And we'd just like kick off, like we'd just drop it and kick it and we'd just tackle each other. But for the little kids it's two-hand touch because they probably can't catch us. And we have to two-hand touch them so we don't hurt them.

Once Nate began to feel more comfortable in his ability to perform the skills required to adequately play the sport relative to his peers, he sought out playing with other friends and classmates of the same age in unstructured settings, as reflected in the excerpt of this interview conducted two months after the experience described in the preceding paragraph:

I've been calling up my friends to play a lot. And it is real fun because we all know each other and know what to do, so we are just like hitting people. We know when to pass to each other and throw it down field. You do better if you know someone. Because you know if you screw up or anything, they're not going to be mad at you because you're friends.

In short, informal sports provide a different type of setting wherein the boys can explore the boundaries of their bodies and their abilities in a relatively consequence-free psychosocial environment. Informal sports let them be creative and let them take risks so that they learn what they do and do not feel comfortable doing in an organized, evaluated setting. Given his lack of experience playing organized sports, this process of understanding the limits of his ability permitted Nate to hone his sense of control over his movements on the field. Following the experience of playing frequently in an unstructured setting over a period of months, Nate decided to reconsider playing the organized sports he eschewed at the beginning of the study:

Nate: I decided I'm gonna try out for seventh grade [football].

Researcher: What changed your mind?

Nate: Well, I've just been playing a lot lately with friends and I like it.

Researcher: How do you feel about trying out?

Nate: I feel ok. I know I'm not that good but they have an A, B, and C team, so I think I can make the B team.

Researcher: If [your friends] make the A team and you don't, will you be upset?

Nate: No, because I wanna get playing time and the B team doesn't have as many kids so I can play more. I need to play to get better if I wanna make the A team later.

This relationship between the development of kinesthetic competence and feelings of control over the skills required to succeed in a given sport indicates that, if either component is missing, then the likelihood of playing organized sport—and sustaining that participation—may be more tenuous; a finding that is supported within the youth sport literature on the positive impacts of developing a mastery orientation in youth athletes (e.g., Duda & Hall, 2001). In essence, as Nate's case and the existing literature on achievement goal theory demonstrate, continued participation in youth sport can hinge on the child's feeling of control over the athletic development process (cf. Chi, 2004). While there is an intuitive connection between developing skills and developing confidence in one's abilities, what is perhaps less intuitive is that this dual-development seems to be fostered more often in unstructured settings than in organized settings, particularly for children like Nate who may lack preternatural athletic ability. In organized settings, there are often too many other kids to receive the necessary repetitions to build the skill or confidence that comes with the building of the skill. In addition, the presence of adults in evaluative roles can discourage young athletes from exploring the boundaries of their kinesthetic abilities for fear of negative repercussions, ultimately undermining the development of a deeper joy of movement. In unstructured settings, however, the fluidity of play and consequence-free environment serve as excellent conductors to facilitate this process. If we removed the experiences of the unstructured setting, would Nate be trying out for football in the fall? Would he have the confidence to do that? In his own words:

Now I know that I can play good enough to not be a joke. My friends said I'm pretty good and that I should try out and they have been playing on a team for a while. I feel like I am better than I was because I have been playing a lot more in the yard.

Performing as Reward Similar to the notion that playing organized sports is an opportunity to show off how hard they have worked and how much they have practiced, some boys also view playing organized sports as a reward for doing the “right” things: keeping their grades up, being well-behaved, and being kind to their siblings. Cooper, for example, captured this sentiment during a casual conversation in between games at a baseball tournament:

Cooper: I think it's a privilege to play, 'cause you have to get good grades and be good.

Researcher: Now, are you talking about for organized sports, like your Select team?

Cooper: Yeah.

Researcher: So, you view that as like, “OK, I've worked hard, and now I get to do this because of that.”

Cooper: Yeah, it's like a reward.

This display of gratitude is enabled, at least in part, by the previously mentioned skill and control of movement developed during informal sport participation. Although it is a somewhat dated (and challenged) theoretical model, Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs offers a useful heuristic to consider the notion that once individuals are able to develop and master “esteem,” their highest order “deficiency need,” they can then move on to try to become self-actualized in achieving their most satisfying performance. Playing sports in unstructured settings provides an opportunity to better their skills so that they feel more self-assured when it comes time for them to perform on public display. In fact, like Nate's experience, a number of the boys highlighted that if they couldn't play with their friends, then their only practice would be at practice and at games, and that did not seem to be enough time in their minds. Informal play, then, makes them more confident in displaying their abilities in a social setting, and this confidence allows them to feel enough comfort to enjoy the actual games as a chance to evaluate themselves and to be evaluated. Were it not for the care-free practice time that informal sports afford, there would be considerable anxiety experienced during actual games, making them less appealing to play.

The very fact that these boys have the opportunity to participate in unstructured, consequence-free sport experiences not only allows many of them to experience public performance and evaluation as a reward, but it also influences their perceptions about their sense of duty (and that of their teammates) to honor the magnitude of the organized sport forum. In some form or another, each of the boys expressed their enjoyment over the experience of not having to try so hard in an unstructured setting, such as Steven's experience of playing lacrosse with his neighborhood friends:

What I like about playing with my friends is that I don't have to try that hard to be good. It's more about having fun than trying hard. Sometimes I shoot the ball in my own goal just for fun because nobody really cares. When I screw around, my friends jump on me and wrestle me but they can never make me run a lap or something.

Compare this experience with the frustration expressed by Steven about one of the goalies on his travel lacrosse team:

Well, our goalie...well, we have two goalies. The first one, his name's Sean, he's pretty good. But the other one, he doesn't really care that much, so he doesn't really try that hard. So when he misses one, he's like, “Aw, shucks, I missed it” and never really cares about it that much. It makes me mad.

In essence, not only is the expectation about the amount of effort required of their play different in unstructured and organized settings, but the existence of the unstructured opportunities to play the games (however the child wants) only intensifies the responsibility

to treat the organized sport opportunities with the type of reverence and respect they are perceived to merit. For this group of boys, the existence of an alternative forum through which to both gain “esteem” and to behave however they like without repercussion permits them to consider the experience of playing organized sports differently. Instead of conveying anxiety over the outcomes of their performance or frustration over a lack of control, even the less capable and confident boys see organized sport as a reward for their preparedness, and revere the forum that the organized setting affords them.

Adults as Facilitators Almost uniformly, the reverence and maturity that the ten boys display with respect to organized sports as a type of reward also carries over to their experiences with adults (coaches and parents) as constructive forces who support them and want to make them better. When asked about coaches being hard on them or yelling at them, nearly all of the boys reply that the coaches are just trying to help them become better athletes and better people. Moreover, the majority of the boys characterize parents not as success-driven or controlling, but as supportive and encouraging. Such a characterization was unexpected from a research standpoint given the popular portrayal of overbearing adults corrupting the youth sport experience, particularly in communities with a fervent, successful sporting tradition (cf. Bissinger, 1990). The personal experiences of the researcher as a former elite basketball coach also suggested that Riggins would be an environment rife with borderline abusive parents and coaches pushing children to succeed on the field at any cost. Although the behavior of many of the adults encountered during this research approached the level of irrationality, someone with experience working in youth sport might expect, the key distinction separating Riggins from other youth sport environments is the unwillingness of the majority of the boys to experience the behavior in anything but a supportive and encouraging manner. This ability to perceive adults as enablers instead of detractors in organized sport settings is a direct result of the autonomy that the boys possess during unstructured play; the control that they possess in unstructured settings allows them to embrace the lack of control in organized settings. Darren alluded to this interplay during one of his interviews:

Researcher: So say there’s a conflict...like you can’t tell if [the ball] was out or across the goal line you guys created or something. How do you figure it out?

Darren: If there’s two bad calls, we’ll be like, “You guys got that...You guys got the advantage on that, so we’ll get this.”

Researcher: Well, how is that different than like when you’re playing in Select?

Darren: Select, it’s like the umpire’s call. They can call anything.

Researcher: What do you think about that?

Darren: I don’t mind. That’s part of the game. I may not like it, but in a Select game, that’s how it is. We can do whatever we want when it’s just us. It doesn’t work that way in a Select game.

Not only do most of the boys convey willingness to accept the restrictions and parameters of organized sport, but they also experience the exhortations and criticism of adults as empowering rather than threatening. When reflecting on the experience of dropping an important pass during an organized football game, Christian recalls that his parents were “relaxed” and “didn’t care” and told him “It’s ok. Just keep trying.” The researcher’s field notes taken while in close proximity of Christian’s parents on the sidelines during the incident paint it in a slightly different light:

Christian just let a would-be touchdown slip through his outstretched fingers on a crucial third-and-long. He remained on the ground a few beats longer than normal. Thought he might be hurt but seems it was just the disappointment that kept him down. The collective groan from the sideline is broken only by the voice of [his father], clearly agitated but attempting to restrain himself, bellowing “Alright, Chris. Get your ass up and get back to the huddle. You’ll catch the next one.” I guess that is one form of encouragement. (Field Notes, 11 November)

While Christian’s father was assuredly not relaxed or apathetic, he was encouraging—only not in quite as innocuous a manner as Christian remembers. Time and again, however, all but one or two of boys displayed moments where they either shirked off adult misbehavior as a form of caring or they went so far as to assert that the adults were not being hard enough on them. As Patrick notes:

I kinda like it when the coaches yell at me, because then I’ll know what I did wrong. And then I try to fix it, because I have to have everything perfect. I want everything but I get, like, mad if I mess up. Like, I will chew myself out...And I know the coaches are like, “Just play to have fun,” but I like to play to win.

The significance of this dynamic is not to assert that this group of boys is complicit in its own abuse, but rather to highlight the empowerment that the interplay between the unstructured and organized settings affords many of them. Like their ability to view the experience of playing organized sports as a reward for hard work and doing the “right” things instead of a forum for embarrassment or misery, playing sports in unstructured settings also enables the majority of the boys to view adults as facilitators to help them achieve success. Working hard in organized practices and games becomes meaningful and significant because the boys have opportunities to offset or balance the hard work required of the organized setting with the playfulness of the unstructured setting:

Researcher: If you had to say what you get out of playing sports, what would it be?

David: Having fun.

Researcher: Having fun? So you don't necessarily care if you go to college on a scholarship or anything like that?

David: Well, I guess it'd sort of be fun to play in college. It'd save my parents money. I know it is a lot of hard work to make it, but if I have fun when I am playing with my friends [in the neighborhood], I don't mind working hard for it the other times.

Researcher: Do your parents or your coaches ever talk about that kind of stuff?

David: Um...Not really my parents, but my coaches do.

Researcher: What do your coaches say about it?

David: Just that some people on our team could maybe make like Division II or Division III. And if we work hard, maybe like a not very good school in Division I.

Researcher: What do you think when you hear that?

David: It makes me care more.

Hard work is a virtue instilled by the adults in Riggins. It is a virtue, however, that is sustainable because of the juxtaposition of organized settings with unstructured settings. Burnout is not an issue at this stage for any of the boys in this study, despite demanding organized sport calendars. As David alludes, the fact that he makes time to play enables him to view the experience of putting in hard work as an opportunity instead of a burden. Consequently, the adult expectations of the organized sport experience are met with excitement instead of dread.

Organized Settings Influence the Lived Experience of Playing Unstructured Sports

For all of these boys, the setting in which their participation occurs has a direct impact on both the kinesthetic character of their play and in the meanings they ascribe to the experience. During the months of close observation of their sports participation in both organized and unstructured settings, the boys played in typically one of two locations: the baseball fields of the athletics complex owned by the RYA or the playground and basketball courts of the elementary school that all but two of the boys formerly attended. In addition to being available for unstructured play, the sports complex also served as the primary location for the practices and games of the competitive travel teams that nine of the ten boys played on; the elementary school playground, on the other hand, was the physical space where recess took place for five

or six of the previous six or seven years of most of their lives. This distinction is critical in explaining two significant discrepancies witnessed both across and within the two physical environments. First, changing the setting in which play is experienced changes the nature of the behaviors expressed in the boys' play. Second, changing settings also alters the meanings attributed to their play.

Changing Settings Changes Behaviors When playing sandlot or pickup baseball at the athletics fields—the same fields where the boys play their organized, competitive games—the character of the boys' play constrains itself to fit more in line with the type of play that is expected of them during their organized sport experiences. The routines and processes associated with a typical practice or game environment emerge as the predominant set of behaviors, even when no adults or spectators are present:

Rather than jumping right into a game, the boys begin their play by engaging in 'long toss' and hitting grounders to warm up the fielders. There is little explicit discussion about these pre-play exercises. In fact, the behaviors seem almost automated. Somewhat taken aback, I glance toward the surrounding bleachers and dugouts, expecting to see a coach or parent secretly directing this warm-up extravaganza. Nobody there. Could this be for my benefit? By now [almost seven weeks] they know me well enough to understand that I am not a scout or a spy—plus, they have played in my presence a number of times. This is the first time that we are playing baseball at the baseball fields, though. Perhaps they are just on autopilot because of how many hours they have spent here for practices and games. (Field Notes, 7 November)

While the excerpt from these initial field notes captures the first moment when this phenomenon occurred, it did not mark the last time when playing sandlot baseball at the baseball fields represented this simulacrum of organized sport in an unstructured setting. Over the period of observation, this behavioral pattern continued to varying degrees whenever the boys played this sport in this particular environment. Aside from the occasional digression to an extended game of 'pickle' when one of the boys attempts to steal a base, the organized form of the game is preserved in near-entirety: the rules remain the same, the boys play the positions coaches normally assign to them, even the on-deck and pressing routines model the behaviors witnessed during their organized games. For as striking as it appears to an observer, this pattern goes virtually unnoticed by the boys themselves:

Researcher: So, talk to me about what you guys did out there today.

Wyatt: We just went out and played—had fun.

Researcher: I noticed you didn't jump right into playing, but you first warmed up a bit.

Wyatt: Well, I just wanted to be loose so I don't hurt my arm.

Researcher: That makes sense. What about when we play over at [the elementary school]? Like, before we play basketball or something? I never see you guys get in lay-up lines or anything, but when we've come over to the fields, it seems like you guys are warming up for like a real game.

Wyatt: I don't know. I guess we are just goofing off over there, so it doesn't matter.

Researcher: Aren't we just goofing off here too?

Wyatt: [laughs] I guess so. I guess I don't know why.

When the boys play at the elementary school playground, on the other hand, their behavior displays very little resemblance to the movements and interactions experienced in organized sports. In every session but one, playing pickup basketball at the elementary school courts lasted less than 20 min before their play transformed from dribbling, passing, and shooting to tackling and punting the ball. After this shift, the entire group of boys would typically spend the next 60–90 min screaming and chasing each other around the playground and surrounding fields. This play often produces many scraped knees and tearful arguments, but what it does not produce is an unsupervised simulation of an organized practice or game.

The disparity between the patterns of play in the two physical environments demonstrates that some psychosocial cues are indicating to the boys the type of behavior that is expected of them in the different environments. The baseball fields are the place where the majority of them primarily experience playing organized sports in front of adults who expect them to perform with a level of competence and maturity that will enable desired outcomes such as winning and individual success; in other words, to act like an adult. The elementary school playground is a place where the associated expectations are much different: to run, play, act wild and crazy; in other words, to act like a child. In this particular case, the established behavioral expectations of each setting influence the nature of the children's play, whether the activity is organized or not.

There is also evidence that shifting the physical environment for the child's play influences the temporal experience associated with his play as well. Not only was the elementary school the place that most of the boys associate with playing as opposed to working, but it was the place where many of them played before they even had an awareness that play could be organized to the degree that it is in organized settings. Certainly play at any age can be governed by varying degrees of organization, but the playgrounds of the elementary school are where eight of these boys played when their only concerns were the experiences of exploring the abilities of their bodies for autotelic purposes. Now, with the increasing demands associated with playing organized sport, the experience

of playing at the elementary school allows them to re-experience what it was like to play for the sake of play.

Changing Settings Changes Meanings Not only are the manifestations of the boys' play influenced by the environmental setting in which the play occurs, but the meanings of the experiences can vary depending on whether the experience occurs in an organized sport setting or an unstructured, play-like setting. On the whole, each of the boys generally feels that his coaches and parents are very supportive and encouraging. As described in an earlier section, the maturity that these particular boys display with regard to appreciating the discipline that adults work to instill in them is remarkable. Nevertheless, many of their negative experiences center around a mistake they made in an organized sport setting. Their best memories, however, are often self-deprecating accounts of times when they "did something stupid" or made a mistake playing informally with friends and everyone laughed about it. This implies that the setting impacts the emotions experienced during or after what could be kinesthetically equivalent acts. Consider the following descriptions drawn from Kurt's stories about some of his favorite and least favorite moments playing sports:

One of the funnest [sic] times was when I had slept over and me and David and Nate were playing [football] in the yard before church. I caught the ball and was running and then I tripped over my pants and fell. I messed up my pants really bad and the ball flew out of my hands and David snatched it out of the air and ran it back for a touchdown. We couldn't stop laughing. It was awesome.

My least favorite memory was when I was playing lacrosse and we were at a tournament and I had the ball and was running with it and I was going for toward [sic] the goal and I tripped on my stick when I went to shoot. It was really bad because I had like an open goal to shoot on and everybody was yelling at me and the other team was laughing at me.

In both cases, Kurt had the ball, was in the process of running toward a goal, and tripped, causing him to lose the ball and not reach his goal. In the organized setting, this experience was traumatic and reflected on as one of his most salient, unpleasant memories. In the unstructured setting, Kurt identified what was virtually the same corporeal experience (although with a different sport) as one of his fondest memories. I later asked him about why he felt such different emotions about such similar experiences: "I don't know. I guess because with your friends you know that if you screw up they're not going to be too mad at you." In other words, when the kids are the ones in control of the setting and the evaluation process, they often experience little discomfort as a result of mistakes. When kids are not in control of the evaluation, they feel significantly greater discomfort about relatively equivalent experiences.

Discussion

This study clearly shows how the experiences of playing sports in unstructured and organized settings actually inform one another in the creation of meanings for the boys in this community. In so doing, the analysis reveals that informal sports actually change the way participants think about their experiences playing organized sports, and vice versa. For many of the boys in this study, the experience of playing on the organized sports stage demands that when the proverbial curtain lifts, they must assume the roles and personas that their parents/coaches/selves expect them to assume. Conversely, the experience of playing informal sports offers the antithesis to playing organized sports in a public forum. In fact, informal sports serve as a parallel narrative space analogous to a personal diary: a place that is psychosocially safe, private, and inviting, where they can truly be themselves. In essence, informal sports offer an opportunity to rehearse and practice sports in a salubrious, pressure-free environment that allows these boys to play, try, fail, and create without the negative repercussions that might occur in an organized, adult-evaluated setting. Although the fundamental differences in experiences engendered in the organized and unstructured settings are themselves significant, taxonomically separating them (i.e., organized *versus* unstructured) creates a false dichotomy that does not account for the important meanings to emerge from the synthesis of the two. The findings of this study offer an integrated paradigm for considering the manner in which playing informal sports actually allows these children to reinterpret, tolerate, and justify the demands of playing organized sports, and vice versa. The overall meaning of playing sports shifts as the boys negotiate the opposing tensions of the two settings. Following this process of negotiation, each of the boys (in one form or another) emerges displaying precocious levels of maturity and long-term perspective about the meaning of sport participation as not simply a path to fame and glory but a path to connect on deeper levels with the people and community that support him.

The Need to Move Beyond Organized Sport *Versus* Informal Sport Conceptions

As the experiences of this group of boys in Riggins attest, an organized sport setting alone can be inadequate for realizing the mission of organized sport at each phase of the sport development process. It is inadequate at the recruitment phase because it alone does not allow enough time and opportunity for children to develop all of the skills required to feel competent enough to enjoy playing in organized games. Many of the boys highlighted that informal sport gave them what organized sport could often not: adequate time to practice and to come to understand the limits of their physical abilities. As a result of the opportunity to play in unstructured settings, the confidence that each of the boys developed in their ability to execute the skills and movements necessary to be successful in a sport enabled him to experience

organized sport differently (e.g., Nate's experiences). Specifically, practicing in unstructured settings enabled them—particularly the six or seven higher-level athletes in this group—to experience the performative aspects of organized sport (along with the role of adults in the process) as opportunities to succeed instead of opportunities to fail.

The organized setting alone is also inadequate at the retention phase because the physical and emotional demands of playing only organized sport can lead to participant burnout and drop-out, particularly in high pressure environments like the one in Riggins. Organized sport is a work-like setting that could become overwhelming for many of the boys in this study, were its demands not balanced by playing informal sport in a play-like setting. The burnout, drop-out, and general dissatisfaction associated with playing organized sport for a number of children can potentially be mitigated by allowing them more time to play in an unstructured setting (cf. Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Helsen et al., 1998).

Finally, an organized setting alone does not intrinsically instill a drive to advance to the highest levels of competition for all of the boys in this study. Their desires to play for the local high school football team stem from a sense of community that is instantiated as much in unstructured sport settings as organized settings. In essence, developing the mass and elite athletes that sport development systems need for sustenance requires a balance of participation in organized and unstructured settings. For a sport development system to incorporate one without the other is akin to it operating with one hand tied behind its back.

Through conceptualizing organized and unstructured settings as two parts to the whole sport participation experience for children, sport managers can immediately alter how they deliver sport. In fact, the interactivity of the sport experiences occurring in organized and unstructured settings indicates that conceptualizations (empirical or practical) which do not account for sport experiences in non-organized settings may be inherently limited, if not myopic. In Riggins, the boys' experiences outside of playing organized sport fundamentally redefined their experiences in the organized setting. Therefore, any efforts to interpret their organized sport experiences without also considering how these experiences both influence, and are influenced by informal sport risks, operate within a flawed explanatory framework.

The Need to Move Beyond Developmental Outcomes to Consider Experiences

Giving expression to the meanings of the experience of participating in youth sports for these children expands the understanding of sport participation as more than just the outcomes it produces (cf. Chalip et al., 1984). In fact, the experiences of playing sports in both organized and unstructured settings influence one another to such an extent that, for the boys in Riggins, the experience in one cannot be understood without an understanding of the experience in the other. As the results of this study

demonstrated, the manner in which playing the same sport or making the same mistake differs depending on the setting in which it occurs. Although the experiences contribute to an overall meaning of sport participation, an examination that sought to measure only outcomes would be inherently ill-equipped to uncover these differences in experiences, and how these differences interact to inform this overall meaning of sport participation.

In considering the empirical explanations offered through the lens of experiences instead of outcomes, there are significant sport development implications, particularly within the realm of sport-for-development, which seeks to understand how sport can benefit the lives of its participants (cf. Green, 2008). The overall finding that the meaning of sport participation for these boys was grounded in a search for their place within the community has the potential to reorient current sport development models, which often operate under the implicit assumption that participation is driven primarily by the seeking of extrinsic outcomes such as college scholarships. By grounding youth sport participation in the experiences of the participants, the emphasis of both practitioners and researchers shifts from the outcomes of participation to the process, which represents a critical reversal from the historical movement toward extrinsic, outcome-oriented evaluation models prominent in the past half-century (cf. Bowers & Hunt, 2011). This shift, in turn, can help to situate the personal development of participants as an ongoing process that merits attention from sport providers. It also permits an understanding about what happens during the process of sport participation, as opposed to what happens as a result of it. This type of worldview can encourage sport providers and participants to actively engage in taking more control over various aspects of the process through framing experiences as an important—and controllable—part of the sport delivery equation.

In Riggins, for example, the overall driving force behind why these boys played sports was about the search for community, not whether they eventually earn a college scholarship. Each of these boys played sports in the hope of carving out a place for themselves within the broader community. Whether it was Nate searching for a peer-group through sport participation or Christian, Patrick, and David forging an identity with the adults in their lives, each of the boys sought to find their place in Riggins. This overall meaning driving sport participation derived from the experiences of playing sports in both organized and unstructured settings. In fact, although the organized sport experiences were higher in profile, at least half of the boys attributed much of their desire to become contributing members of the community to the opportunities for both mentoring and being mentored informally in unstructured settings; the times when high school players played informally with these boys proved to be one of the most salient factors in them wanting to become members of the community through sport. In this sense, sport experiences can have a tremendous impact on the personal development of a child beyond simply measuring this development in terms of outcomes.

The Need to Consider Contextual Influences on Sport Participation

Finally, an unexpected but compelling finding to emerge from this study was the dramatic influence of the physical environment on the behavior (and the meanings of that behavior) of the boys. When they played in different environmental contexts, the nature of their behavior often took on the character of the dominant type of play that most often occurs in a particular setting. Regardless of whether the boys were playing at an organized practice or playing a sandlot game with no adults present, their play at the RYA baseball fields often reflected the type of behavior that occurs in an organized setting. Conversely, when they played at the elementary school playground, where many of them spent years frolicking during recess, the boys nearly always ended up diverging from sport to run and play like one would imagine they did when they were younger. This phenomenon speaks directly to the power of setting on shaping children's sport experiences and extends some of the theoretical points raised by Devereux (1976) and Ogden (2002) into the empirical realm.

Although admittedly speculation at this stage, the different experiences in different settings may relate to the triggering of schemata within the boys' brains that signal to them the type of behavior that is predominantly associated with their experience in a certain setting. This may also be driving the interpretative differences associated with similar (or equivalent) actions occurring in different settings. For example, Kurt's description of his favorite and least favorite moments playing sports wherein virtually the same experience of tripping while running was perceived in virtually opposite terms. The poignancy of these differences again reaffirms the power of setting to influence the experiences of youth sport participants (cf. Sarason, 1972). The sport development implications from this understanding suggest that not only can the use of multiple settings foster a broader range of experiences, but that what participants experience can change depending on the setting. This knowledge could potentially assist in helping those charged with sport development to consider the manipulation of settings as a tool to assist in athlete training, a tactic that current models of system-level sport development have yet to take into account (cf. Green, 2005).

As the results of this study attest, the present literature examining youth sport participation is limited in its explanatory potential through its adoption of a view of youth sport that does not extend beyond the organized setting. The limitations of a nonintegrated paradigm not only preclude a complete understanding of the meanings of the experiences of youth sport participation, but also perpetuate a model of youth sport as a monolith with uniform outcomes based more on mythology than reality. The findings from this study demonstrate the importance of moving beyond monolithic conceptualizations of youth sport to consider the integrated lived experiences of participation within both organized and unstructured settings. Instead of isolating the context-specific experiences

or viewing unstructured sport as a substitute or threat to organized sport (or vice versa), this study illustrates the synthesis that emerges from considering sport participation in different settings as parts of a whole. The results also expand the present literature by situating the meanings of experiences engendered by youth sport participation as equally important to the developmental outcomes that participation may instantiate.

Conclusion

This study extends the current body of research exploring the impact of community-based youth sport participation by contributing to the empirical examination in two significant areas of the literature that have been limited to this point. First, it challenges the value of the current interpretation that situates organized and unstructured settings as dichotomous. Youth sport researchers have almost exclusively considered the outcomes of sport participation for children as those outcomes derived only from *organized* sport participation, but this study explicates the impact of a child's participation in less structured or less formal sport settings as well. Second, it also challenges the current epistemology that youth sport participation is significant because of the outcomes it engenders. Youth sport participation is often framed in terms of its purported developmental outcomes without mention of the meaningful experiences that also result from participation. In this study, however, the experiences of sport participation are the central focus of the research; the examination of these experiences yields an understanding of the meaning of sport participation that transcends simply its outcomes, and reveals aspects of the relationship between youth sport experiences and the development of community.

The results of the study are equally relevant to sport development practitioners. The meaning of the lived experience of playing sports is more than the sum of a child's experiences playing unstructured sports and organized sports. Despite the natural tendency to dichotomize experiences in different settings, the boys in this study consistently experienced the crossover influence of playing in both settings as a determining factor in how they viewed the overall meaning of the experience of playing youth sports. This perspective is enabled through the placement of the body as the channel through which youth sports are experienced and interpreted. The interactivity across settings that emerges from this perspective has significant implications for encouraging a sport development paradigm in which sport participation in multiple settings is conceptualized as complementary instead of counterproductive, and the experiences of participants serve to ground understandings about the process of sport participation. As much as coaches, trainers, and sport scientists may want sport training to occur in a vacuum, the results of this study demonstrate that diverse sport experiences occurring in multiple settings are essential to the construction of the overall meaning of playing sports. Unstructured play, in this sense, is not inefficient

or unproductive; it is the glue that can bind individual athletes to their teams and communities in meaningful ways.

Ultimately, the findings from the analysis extend the youth sport development literature by demonstrating the importance of conceptualizing sport participation as the synthesis of participation in multiples settings, and asserting the value of understanding the experiences of playing sports in multiple settings and how they impact the overall meaning underlying sport participation. Although van Manen (1990) warns that phenomenology is not intended to provide generalizations to be applied across contexts outside of the one being investigated by the researcher, he clarifies that "one can strengthen the intimacy of the relation between knowledge and action by re-instating lived experience itself as a valid basis for practical action" (p. 155). This step relies on understanding how variations in sport experiences within different settings can contribute to an overall meaning of sport participation for children, and encourages researchers and practitioners to take a more "intimate" approach to youth sport development.

A major hindrance to effective community-based youth sport programs stems from the practice of asking sport to accomplish too much with too little manipulation or variation in the experience for participants. At least part of this quagmire arises from the fact that the mythology of sport participation unquestionably predated the management of it. As Sarason (1972) reminds, however, "the fact that things develop in a certain way is not synonymous with the statement that things *must* develop in a certain way, as if nothing can stop or alter the process" (p. 69). Yet, in spite of the clear evidence that unstructured settings can positively impact the meaning of the overall sport experience for children, sport managers will still face tremendous challenges in any efforts to incorporate them into sport development models. The fundamental challenge is to manage and integrate unstructured settings without imposing the type of structure or organization that would undermine the very characteristics that make unstructured settings beneficial in the first place. At present, sport managers are reasonably adept at managing organized sport contexts, but it remains to be seen whether the management of informal sport is something that could—or *should*—be undertaken, and how these efforts might ultimately impact the informal sport experience.

For sport managers interested in better understanding this interplay between organized and unstructured settings, one place to begin could be through conducting program evaluations to assess the efficacy of youth sport organizations that employ hybrid/modified models of sport participation (cf. Green, 1997), or that incorporate unstructured play periods into organized practices. The insights gleaned from first evaluating existing program-level successes and challenges may help to inform the development and successful implementation of new programmatic and policy efforts to create, for example, complementary "Sandlot Nights" for community sport organizations seeking to foster more unstructured play, or to undertake grassroots programs to reinvigorate

neighborhood-based informal sport participation. If we build an empirical—and practical—understanding of what happens to unstructured, informal sport experiences when integrated into an organized context, we can at least begin to take a more nuanced approach aimed at fostering long-term positive developmental environments that benefit both the system and the individual. While it remains unclear whether the counterintuitive notion of managing informal sport, however delicately undertaken, is even possible without corrupting the experience, the potentially transformative implications presented in this article suggest that there may be much to gain for sport managers (and the youth athletes they serve) by taking steps to better understand the unstructured sport setting.

This research inverts the assumption that the outcomes of sport participation are universal, and demonstrates that the experience of participating across multiple sport settings can coalesce to shape a more holistic meaning of sport participation. By gaining a more “intimate” understanding of how the experiences of participating in different settings contribute to an overall meaning of youth sport participation, sport managers are in a position to leverage this knowledge to design and implement programs that incorporate a broader array of experiences for a more meaningful youth sport experience. Although this study only offers an initial step toward understanding youth sport participation in different settings, it represents an ontological shift which implores sport managers to reconsider the legitimacy of sport experiences that fall outside the realm of organized sport as not a threat, but rather a complement, to a child’s overall community sport experience.

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