
Why Play Sports? How Organized Sports Participation Can Contribute to the Healthy Development of Adolescent Hispanic Girls

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Abstract: This study addressed the research question, "What is meaningful to Hispanic girls about their organized sports participation during the first year of high school?" Purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 1996) was used to select 15 9th-grade girls to participate in individual interviews about their organized sport participation. Transcripts were analyzed via inductive coding. Findings showed that organized sports offered Hispanic girls in this sample a venue for healthy youth development, including opportunities for the "5 C's" – competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). This article highlights the salience of connection, caring, and competence in adolescent Hispanic girls' organized sports experiences. Insights from girls' narratives may help coaches and other educators structure athletic programs to best meet the needs of Hispanic girls during adolescence (AAUW, 1991; Brown, & Gilligan, 1992; Erkut, Fields, Sing, & Marx, 1996; Gil, & Vazquez, 1996; Sadker, & Sadker, 1994).

Introduction

Adolescence is a time of inevitable change. Adolescents witness the physical maturation of their bodies, experience feelings of sexual desire, develop abstract ways of thinking, forge new relationships and modify old ones, struggle to assert their independence yet maintain connections, and grapple with who they are within their socio-cultural context (Elliott, & Feldman, 1990). In the context of these multiple sources of change, researchers, clinicians, and parents have traditionally viewed adolescence as a turbulent time (Elliott, & Feldman, 1990).

A body of research shows that some girls report dramatically low or lower self-confidence during the early adolescent years (American Association of University Women (AAUW), 1991; Biro, Striegel-Moore, Franko, Padgett, & Bean, 2006; Brown, & Gilligan, 1992; Eccles, Barber, Jozefowicz, Malenchuk, & Vida, 1999; Erkut, Fields, Sing, & Marx, 1996; Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2005; Sadker, & Sadker, 1994; Scales, & Leffert, 1999), particularly Hispanic girls (AAUW, 1991; Rotheram-Borus, Dopkins, Sabate, & Lightfoot, 1996). Not all girls, however, demonstrate low self-confidence during adolescence (Hattie, 1992; Offer, & Schonert-Reichl, 1992), particularly some ethnic minority adolescent girls (Eccles, et al., 1999; Greene, & Way, 2005).

What is different about the experiences of Hispanic girls who maintain healthy self-confidence during adolescence? Researchers in positive youth development argue that positive, or healthy, attributes can be promoted in a variety of youth contexts, not only limited to school and family life, but also in youth's extracurricular activities (for reviews see Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord 2005, and Scales, & Leffert, 1999). This study offers evidence that organized sports – defined as any athletic program (inside or outside of school) with regular practices/instruction, a designated coach, and athletic competitions – is one such context.

Research has supported this notion of “organized” activities, though not limited to sports (Eccles & Gootmann, 2002; Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Organized activities “are characterized by structure, adult-supervision, and an emphasis on skill-building. These activities are generally voluntary, have regular and scheduled meetings, maintain developmentally based expectations and rules for participants in the activity setting (and sometimes beyond it), involve several participants, offer supervision and guidance from adults, and are organized around developing particular skills and achieving goals” (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005, p. 4).

Theoretical Framework

Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000) have defined healthy youth development according to the “five Cs,” a model based on a consensus of researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers. The “five Cs” are:

- competence,
- connection,
- character,
- confidence, and
- caring (or compassion).

Each “C” is a collection of individual attributes that contribute to overall healthy development and ultimately, from the viewpoint of these researchers, a civil society.

Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2000) have provided more elaborate definitions of the “five Cs”:

- **competence** in academic, social, and vocational areas;
- **confidence** or a positive self identity;
- **connection** or healthy relations to community, family and peers;
- **character** or positive values, integrity, moral commitment; and
- **caring** and compassion (p. 1).

This study uses the “5 Cs” model of health youth development as the theoretical framework for interpreting what is meaningful to adolescent Hispanic girls about their organized sports participation.

Target Population

Adolescent Hispanic girls are a compelling population to study for multiple reasons:

1. Hispanic girls in particular have demonstrated significant losses in self-esteem during adolescence (AAUW, 1991; Rotheram-Borus, Dopkins, Sabate, & Lightfoot, 1996).
2. Hispanic girls are underrepresented in the sports literature.
3. Hispanics now represent the largest ethnic minority group in the United States (United States Department of State, 2003), and Hispanic youth are projected to represent 24% of the elementary and secondary school population by 2020 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005).

Method

Participants

At the end of students’ 9th-grade year, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 9th-grade Hispanic girls ($M=14.6$ years, $SD=0.43$ years). Girls self-identified their ancestry: Mexican (9), Mexican/Honduran (2), Honduran (2), and unspecified (2). One third of the girls in the interview sample were first generation immigrants (i.e., girl was born outside the United States), and 40% were second generation (i.e., girl was born in the United States and at least one parent was born outside the United States). These definitions of generational status are modeled on those provided in the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans-II (ARMSA-II) (Cuéllar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995).

All girls attended a public, urban high school in the southwestern United States, serving approximately 1650 students, predominately Hispanic (88%) and low-income (87%). All 9th grade students were invited to participate in the overall research project, which included both quantitative (i.e., survey) and qualitative (i.e., interview) components. This research project and related instruments were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Harvard University.

This article reports on findings garnered from the interview data. Purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 1996) was used to select an interview sample representative of a broad cross-section of organized sports participation. Using girls’ responses from questionnaires administered to all 9th-grade girls at the beginning and end of the year ($N=103$), 12 out of 29 organized sports participants were selected for interviews to ensure a range of:

- a. types of organized sports;
- b. single-sport vs. multi-sport participants;
- c. school-based sports participants and community-based sports participants; and
- d. length of involvement in organized sports.

Organized sports included any high school teams, private/club teams (e.g., U.S. swim teams), and community/town teams (e.g., YMCA teams).

Twelve of the 15 girls in the interview sample completed at least one season of organized sports participation during 9th-grade. A variety of individual- and team-oriented sports were

represented (n=12), with soccer (n=5) and volleyball (n=4) most common. Half of the girls played on two or more organized sports teams. Eleven of the 12 girls played on high school teams; two of the 12 girls played on organized teams outside of school.

Three of the 15 girls in the interview sample indicated plans at the beginning of 9th-grade to play on an organized sports team during the school year but in the end quit or did not do so. Though these girls may not have completed the sport season, the interviews provide insight under what conditions these girls were willing and able to play.

Procedure

Data Collection

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of girls' 9th-grade year. A semi-structured interview protocol incorporated questions employed in the author's previous research (Horst, 2002). The interview protocol presented girls with a series of questions about the nature and extent of their sports involvement, why they played sports, how sports involvement had influenced their 9th-grade year, and what they appreciated about their organized sports participation. Interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes; interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Thematic, inductive coding of interview transcripts served as the primary analytic technique. Inductive codes were developed using a five-step process developed by Boyatzis (1998):

1. Data reduction – Key segments of each transcript were highlighted.
2. Identify themes within each interview transcript – Preliminary "descriptive codes" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were documented by the author as well as a team of researchers.
3. Compare themes across interviews – "Descriptive codes" were compared across interviews to identify broader themes, known simply as "codes."
4. Create and record codes – Using the Boyatzis (1998) coding model, each code included:
 - A label or name;
 - A definition of the theme;
 - A description of how to know when the theme occurs;
 - A description of qualifications or exclusions to the code; and
 - Examples, both positive and negative, to eliminate possible confusion when looking for the theme (p. 31).

Codes were not mutually exclusive; that is, one segment of a transcript could be coded twice if the criteria for both codes were met.

5. Determine code reliability – The author coded all interview transcripts. Trained, independent raters also applied the codebook to selected interview transcripts. Initial inter-rater reliability was supplemented by discussion in order to strengthen the clarity of the codebook and to achieve at least 90% coding agreement (Miles, & Huberman, 1994; Ryan, & Bernard, 2000).

Results

In this analysis 48 codes were developed (See Table 1 for a list of all codes). These codes represented what the sample of 9th-grade Hispanic girls discussed as meaningful about their organized sports participation.

Table 1

List of Inductive Codes

1. Skill instruction/desire to learn	25. Being playful
2. Practice, practice, practice	26. Win/lose attitude
3. Sport achievement	27. Disappointment
4. Losing	28. Positive coaching
5. Recognition	29. Negative coaching
6. Assessment	30. Punishment/trouble
7. Sport competence	31. Teamwork
8. High commitment	32. Responsibility/Leadership
9. Effort	33. Peer relational connections
10. Proving oneself	34. Relational tensions
11. Challenge	35. Frustration
12. Less challenge	36. Passion
13. Goal setting	37. Part of me
14. Competitive drive	38. Release
15. Something to do	39. Focus
16. Get involved	40. Control emotions
17. Balancing act	41. Anxiety
18. Stay out of trouble	42. Family sports
19. Skill transfer	43. Family gathering
20. Sport opportunity	44. Parent support (or adult extended family member)
21. Fit	45. Sibling support
22. Details	46. Parent/family resistance
23. Seriousness	47. The body
24. Not serious	48. Sports & academics

In Table 2, the codes are presented by their frequency of occurrence across interviews (High Plus = 30 or more instances; High = 20-29 instances; Medium = 10-19 instances; Low = 9 or fewer instances).

Table 2

Frequency of Code Occurrence across Interviews (listed alphabetically)

High Plus (30+)	High (20-29)	Medium (10-19)	Low (0-9)
Assessment	Details	Anxiety	Competitive drive
Challenge	Effort	Balancing act	Control emotions
Family sports	Positive coaching	Being playful	Family gatherings
High commitment	Practice, practice, practice	Disappointment	Focus
Parent support	Recognition	Fit	Get involved
Peer relational connections	Relational tensions	Frustration	Goal setting
Sibling support	Something to do	Losing	Less challenge
Skill instruction/ desire to learn		Negative coaching	Not serious
Sport achievement		Part of Me	Parent resistance
Sport competence		Passion	Proving oneself
Teamwork		Punishment/trouble	Release
		Sport opportunity	Responsibility/ Leadership
		The body	Seriousness
			Skill transfer
			Sports & Academics
			Stay out of trouble
			Win/lose attitude

After developing and applying the codebook, the Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000) model of the “5 C’s” of healthy youth development – competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring – was useful in clustering the codes. This analysis demonstrated that organized sports are a setting in which healthy developmental can be promoted.

In Table 3, 33 of the 48 codes from the current study are mapped onto the Lerner et al. (2000) “5 C’s” framework of healthy development (Note that ten codes in Table 3 fell under more than one “C” category – Sport competence, Recognition, Proving oneself, Balancing act, Punishment/trouble, Losing, Teamwork, Peer relational connections, Parent support, and Sibling support). The codes that did not align with this framework were not indicative of unhealthy development, but rather suggestive of additional important overarching characteristics of healthy development.

Table 3

Inductive Codes Classified by Lerner, Fisher & Weinberg (2000)
Model of Healthy Youth Development

Competence	Confidence	Connection	Character	Caring
Sport competence	Something to do	Teamwork	Win/lose attitude	Teamwork
Sport achievement	Sport competence	Peer relational connections	Teamwork	Peer relational connections
Recognition	Passion	Being playful	Losing	Parent support
Skill instruction/ Desire to learn	Part of me	Positive coaching	Responsibility/ leadership	Sibling support
Practice, practice, practice	Stay out of trouble	Family sports	High commitment	
Sports & Academics	Recognition	Family gatherings	Punishment/ trouble	
Proving oneself	Anxiety	Parent support	Seriousness	
Assessment	Fit	Sibling support	Not serious	
	The body	Get involved	Control emotions	
		Balancing act		

In Table 4, the contents of Tables 2 and 3 are combined to create a matrix of the frequency of code occurrence by "C" cluster. This table highlights that the over 50% of the codes in each of the "C" clusters of competence, connection, and caring were "High" or "High Plus" in frequency. In the following section frequently occurring codes within each of these three clusters are described. Quotes from interviews are included where appropriate and as space permits.

Table 4

Frequency of Code Occurrence by Attribute of Positive Youth Development

	Frequency of Occurrence				% Codes "High Plus" or "High"
	High Plus	High	Medium	Low	
COMPETENCE					6/8 = 75%
Sport competence	X				
Sport achievement	X				
Recognition		X			
Assessment	X				
Skill instruction	X				
Practice, practice, practice		X			
Proving oneself				X	
Sports & Academics				X	
CONFIDENCE					3/9 = 33%
Something to do		X			
Sport competence	X				
Passion			X		
Part of me			X		
Stay out of trouble				X	
Recognition		X			
Anxiety			X		
Fit			X		
The body			X		
CONNECTION					6/10 = 60%
Teamwork	X				
Peer relational connections	X				
Being playful			X		
Positive coaching		X			
Family sports	X				
Family gatherings				X	
Parent support	X				
Sibling support	X				
Get involved				X	
Balancing act			X		
CHARACTER					2/9 = 22%
Win/lose attitude				X	
Teamwork	X				
High commitment	X				
Responsibility/leadership				X	
Control emotions				X	
Punishment/trouble			X		
Seriousness				X	
Not serious				X	
Losing			X		
CARING					4/4 = 100%
Teamwork	X				
Peer relational connections	X				
Parent support	X				
Sibling support	X				

Competence

Competence in organized sports was one of the most common threads across the interviews with adolescent Hispanic girls who participated in organized sports. Girls repeatedly mentioned that it was important for them to be competent in sports or to work towards attaining competence. Frequently occurring Competence codes included:

- **Skill instruction/Desire to learn.** For girls who were playing on an organized sports team for the first time or for girls who had played organized sports before but were now learning a new sport, the opportunity to receive skill instruction and to become proficient in the sport was of great importance.
- **Sport competence.** Some girls were not satisfied with simply knowing how to play; they wanted to achieve a level of proficiency or competency that indicated they were particularly “good” at the sport. For example, Daniela explained how she went from knowing how to play volleyball recreationally to being one of the more skilled players on the team:

I really like volleyball, but I never really knew how to play. We use to just play like, like when we had little family parties. Like we use to play, but I didn't really know how. You know so I wanted to get good at it too. And like my first year (in middle school), I was pretty good. Like, I knew like how to play before I had played in middle school, but it was way different because everything you do like bump, set, spike. And like I didn't know how to do that and I didn't really know what it meant either (laughs). So you know I had to learn that and I learned pretty quick, so I got good at it. And, um I ended up being, like being like one of the good ones, 'cause you know I had like a lot of serves.

- **Sport achievement.** Perhaps not surprisingly, some of girls' favorite memories from the season were examples of crowing sport achievements – placing in competitions, performing well, or the ultimate experience of sports competence – winning.
- **Recognition.** Some girls appreciated when they were recognized by others for their sports competence. Laura told about one of her shining moments on the volleyball team:

I was having a good day so I would serve a lot. And I would like serve almost the whole game to 15... Then the audience was like yelling and stuff. You know, like "Laura!" They're like, "Little one!" 'Cause I'm like little. And it was just fun, and then the coach would be like, "Yeah!" And everybody would be cheering and stuff. You know, it doesn't happen a lot, um, cheering at the games.

Recognition also came after the competition. Sports scores and individual achievements were noted on the morning announcements at school, leading to congratulatory remarks from peers throughout the day. Another form of recognition which was particularly meaningful to Ana, a newcomer to organized sports, was earning her varsity letter jacket, which she wore proudly to school.

- **Assessment.** Throughout interviews, girls frequently assessed their or their team's ability in comparison to that of their teammates or competition. Girls who excelled in their sport had a clear understanding of the extent of their skills and recognized the pivotal roles that they played on their respective teams.

- **Practice, practice, practice.** Girls, especially the veteran sports participants, understood the importance of practice in order to achieve sports competence. Veteran sports participants often selected athletics as their elective class in order to have extra practice time and also stayed after school for off-season “open gym” practice. Additionally, some coaches found opportunities for their players to hone their skills at formal sports camps during the summer.

Connection

Healthy development includes forming positive relationships with family, peers, and community (Lerner, et al., 2000; Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Hispanic girls in this sample repeatedly detailed how sports provided them opportunities to connect with friends and family. The following codes illustrate how organized sports can provide Hispanic girls a forum for Connection:

- **Peer relational connections.** Peer relationships on and off the field were repeatedly cited as a key feature of their sports participation. Organized sports appeared to facilitate these Hispanic girls’ transition into the 9th-grade by providing them with a social network of same-grade and upper-grade friends. For Sandra, who had not attended the middle school that feeds into the high school, this was true:

At first it was kind of easy (making friends)... I got along with the volleyball team 'cause volleyball's kind of right when you enter school, like. And then Laura, she was real like easy-going, you know. And so we just, I don't know we just started always being together. And we do stuff on the weekends and stuff.

Mentoring-type relationships were sometimes formed between upper-grade varsity players and 9th-grade girls in the same sport. These varsity players provided instruction and guidance to the girls in addition to that of the head coach. Although Daniela was a veteran to organized sports, she nonetheless appreciated the attention of senior team members:

It's not like upper class (10th, 11th, or 12th grade) girls like, you know, think they're better or whatever. It's not like that. They're real supportive. Like they try to help you, like in whatever you need... And I think that was one of the things that made me like get a little bit better 'cause a lot of the upper class girls like, they were like, "Oh no, you have to do it like this." You know, they wouldn't say it in a bad way. They would like, "Just try your best."

- **Teamwork.** On the playing field girls established and nurtured a special type of relational connection – Teamwork. Girls in this sample talked at length about the sports-related support and encouragement they received from their teammates on a daily basis. Teammate support was particularly important to girls who were new to sports and might need additional, external motivation to keep with a sport. Unfortunately, on a couple of the school sports teams, several girls quit early or mid-season leaving their teams scrambling to fill the void. Such events had a significant impact on the sports experience of the remaining players. As described by Sandra, remaining players were keenly aware of the importance of being a dependable teammate as well as a good friend:

Our first baseman left. ...'cause our coach is real hard on us. But I don't think it's right for them to leave the team. 'Cause you know like, the girls on your team are your friends, you know.... And when she left it was like, "Okay, now we don't got no first baseman." You know? Our pitcher, the one pitcher we did have, she left too because of him (the coach).... You depend on that person to always be there. And then, they just leave. You know? I don't think it's right... Stick together.

- **Positive coaching.** Some coaches served as positive adult figures in these girls' lives. Girls particularly praised the coach of the 9th grade volleyball team who prioritized having fun, skill instruction, and positive reinforcement among a team comprised of many girls who had limited or no volleyball experience. This coach was also a 9th-grade teacher at the school and understood when girls needed to miss practice for tutoring.
- **Family sports, Parent support, Sibling support.** Girls' narratives about their sports involvement were almost always set in the context of family sports. Family sports participation often functioned as girls' entry point into sports as well as a source of connection for girls with their families, particularly male nuclear and extended family members. Within the context of these relationships, girls received conversation, instruction, training partners, and support. Daniela poignantly described how through sports she connected with her father who had moved to the United States five years prior to the rest of the family:

I guess I kind of grew distant from my dad 'cause I wasn't use to him. ...Like, I started getting real close to him because like I started seeing that him and my mom were having problems, you know, so I was like, "I want to get to know my dad." ...So I started getting along with him, you know, and talking about sports mainly. So I was like, "How do you do this? You know, how do you play this?"

Caring

Connection and Caring are intimately related in organized sports participation in this sample of adolescent Hispanic girls. In fact, each of the Caring codes in this analysis also falls under the Connection cluster. Although care and compassion may not come to mind as attributes engendered by sports participation, Hispanic girls in this sample provided rich narratives that demonstrated how organized sports can function as a venue in which a girl can develop and display concern for others, as well as be the recipient of care. Frequently occurring Caring codes included:

- **Teamwork, Peer relational connections.** Girls demonstrated concern for their teammates through verbal encouragement and support. Teammates cheered for each other during races and gave each other "props" for points well played. It can be easy to display care when things are going well, but it is quite another capacity to act compassionately in team settings when players can become frustrated with poor performances or teammate errors. Several girls candidly shared that they had learned how to better support teammates through their sports participation, as Daniela, a veteran to organized sports, explained:

You know, it's not like, "Why did you do that? You're not suppose to do that" (in a huffy tone). Like I have a better attitude towards things like that. Like, "Oh, it's okay. You'll get it next time." Stuff like that, you know. But like before I was like, "Why did

you do that?!" And now it's like, "It's okay. You'll get it next time." You know, I have like I guess more patience since like you can't win every single game. Since you can't be perfect when you just start a sport. You know I guess sports taught me that – to like, to be patient, you know, and how to get along with other girls.

As girls forged friendships with teammates, their commitment to the sport became intertwined with their commitment to their friends. Girls deeply cared about the impact of their actions on teammates and the team's ability to function. For many girls quitting ultimately was not an option; their concern for the team's and teammates' well-being trumped any personal reasons for quitting.

- **Parent support, Sibling support.** Girls described their parents and siblings as supportive of their organized sports participation via a wide range of activities. Parents and siblings expressed care for girls' sports involvement by attending games, offering words of encouragement, practicing together, purchasing sports equipment, helping set up for competitions, and participating in the team booster club.

Discussion

Organized sports participation afforded adolescent Hispanic girls in this sample a wealth of opportunities to acquire and nurture positive developmental outcomes and skills. Using the Lerner, Fisher, and Weinberg (2000) "5 C's" model of healthy development as a theoretical framework for interpretation, this article provides preliminary evidence for how organized sports can serve as a positive factor in Hispanic girls' adolescent development. Girls' interviews and the corresponding inductive codebook highlight that organized sports provide these adolescent Hispanic girls with opportunities to develop **competence**, to feel self **confident**, to **connect** meaningfully with others, to practice positive **character** values, and to express **care** and compassion.

Salient Themes

Girls in this sample spoke most frequently and extensively about organized sports as a place for competence, connection, and caring, representing three of the "5 Cs" of healthy youth development (Lerner, et al., 2000). The prevalence of these themes is not surprising given the sports and broader extracurricular participation literature to date. Such research has long and consistently shown that

- (a) perceived competence or skill development, and
- (b) friendship or affiliation are leading motivations or incentives in girls' (and boys') decisions to become and remain involved in sports (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Erkut, Fields, Sing, & Marx, 1996; Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1983; Gould, Feltz, & Weiss, 1985; San Antonio, 2004; Wankel, & Kreisel, 1985).

Though not labeled as such, research has also demonstrated the importance of care in girls' (and boys') sports experiences. The following factors have shown to be positively related to girls' (and boys') participation in or enjoyment of organized sports:

- Parent support (e.g., low pressure) (Brustad, 1988; Leff, & Hoyle, 1997, Leff, & Hoyle, 1995);
- Coaching style (e.g., skill instruction, encouragement) (Smoll & Smith, 2002);

- Peer affiliation (e.g., Gould, Feltz, & Weiss, 1985; San Antonio, 2004); and
- Teamwork (e.g., Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1983).

What is not highlighted within this literature is the salient finding from this study that organized sports can serve as a source of connection and care among Hispanic families. Although organized sports participation could theoretically take time away from the family due to sports practices and competitions, the girls in this study most often described organized (and recreational) sports as a way to spend time together with family through conversation, competition attendance, and extra training or instruction. Of particular note, girls' detailed how through sports they were able to maintain or forge connections with their fathers, brothers, and/or other male family members.

Implications

Understanding why adolescent Hispanic girls participate in organized sports holds important implications for educators, coaches, parents, and girls. As we broaden and deepen our understanding about what is meaningful to adolescent Hispanic girls about their sports participation, it may be possible to document further how sports can serve as a protective factor during adolescence and to design sports programs that best support girls' needs from a development perspective as well as a cultural perspective.

Given the defining role coaches can play in girls' sporting experiences, and by extension school experiences, keen attention needs to be given to the formal training of coaches. In direct practice, coaches must be able to draw on a range of motivational and instructional strategies in order to work with a variety of players who have different skill levels, experience, and goals.

Beyond sports mechanics, coaches should be required to take coursework in human development so as to be able to recognize the developmental tasks and challenges of their players. For example, given the importance of peer relations during adolescence, coaches should be sure to make time for team bonding both on and off the court.

As demonstrated in this study, organized sports can promote positive attributes and learning experiences, such as competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. All youth should have access to such opportunities. Yet only 29% of girls in the 9th-grade at the study site participated in organized sports inside or outside of school – a rate 40% less than Hispanic girls nationally (49%) (Grunbaum, et al., 2004). This finding may reflect a shortage of club or community-based teams, a lack of interest, differences due to immigration status or ethnicity, or other barriers to access.

Given that sports can foster positive youth development, we should advocate for increasing the number, range, and use of organized sports opportunities in the community, such as through the local park department and youth organizations such as the YMCA. One example would be to create a soccer league that invites youth and adults to participate together so that entire families and communities can share in a sports experience. Another example would be to offer school- or community-based multi-age summer sports camps, perhaps in conjunction with academic enrichment or fine arts programs, to provide youth with structured summer activities and eliminate caretaking responsibilities as a barrier.

This study underscores that the sporting revolution for girls living in the United States has not been universal in reach. In an era of sports “powerhouses” and elite traveling teams, it has become increasingly vital for a player to be able to demonstrate excellence or talent in sports at an early age. Opportunities to participate on prestigious varsity and club teams are limited, often handled by “cutting” those less able.

In striking contrast, girls in this sample – Hispanic girls of recent immigrant status from a low-income community in the southwestern United States – could join an organized sports team during 9th-grade with no experience, a tremendous and rare opportunity. Among these girls, there was a greater focus on skill development and opportunity to play than in my previous research with White, middle-to-upper class girls who concentrated heavily on sports achievement and goal attainment (Horst, 2002). Given the increasingly competitive youth sports market, it was quite refreshing to hear one talented, veteran, multi-sport Hispanic girl say that she played basketball simply “for the love of the game.”

Limitations and Future Research

A qualitative study such as this offers distinct advantages in terms of in-depth, rich narratives from girls themselves, but also limits generalizability. As researchers have pointed out, there are distinct historical and cultural differences among Hispanic subpopulations (e.g., Erkut, & Tracy, 2002; Marín, & Marín, 1991). The majority of girls in this sample were of Mexican ancestry; research with other Hispanic populations should be pursued.

Second, this study focused on participation in any organized sports. This inquiry neither targeted specific sports, nor was it representative of all sports. Additionally, girls in this sample primarily played high school sports. Few girls played on club or community-based teams. Based on my analysis of this sample, there also may be important differences between newcomers to organized sports and veteran players that need to be further investigated. Despite these limitations, this study offers rich information regarding what is meaningful to adolescent Hispanic girls about their organized sports participation beyond what is provided by the sports research to date as well as relates these findings to the positive youth development literature.

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