

## *Original Paper*

# Why Adolescent Girls Play Basketball in Australia and its Meaning for them

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### ***Abstract***

*The potential of organized sport to contribute to the health and wellbeing of young people justifies concern about their participation in it. While most research focuses on barriers and drop out, this article reports on a study that adopted a positive approach. Conducted in a large basketball club in Melbourne, Australia, it focused on what kept adolescent girls, aged 13-16 in one team. It identified two main factors contributing toward making basketball enjoyable for the six girls in the study and which kept them playing. They were: (1) relationships within the team and (2) having a strong sense of learning and improvement.*

### ***Keywords***

*adolescent girls, basketball, Australia, meaning, enjoyment, sport participation*

## **1. Introduction**

Sport can make a significant contribution toward the health, social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people across a range of cultures and institutional settings (see Deck et al., 2019; Lubans, Plotnikoff & Lubans, 2012). This makes drop out in the early adolescent years an issue of particular concern for coaches, teachers, parents and anyone else involved in the development of children and young people (see, Román, Pinillos, & Robles, 2018; Sarrazin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier, & Cury, 2002). Most of the research in this area identifies barriers to participation and reasons for drop out as problems to be solved. Recent research in this area has taken a more positive approach that focuses more on what attracts children and young people to sport and keeps them engaged. Such research on children's and youth participation in sport has inquired into what makes sport enjoyable and what keeps young people in it (see, Jakobsson, Lundvall, & Redelius, 2014; Light, Harvey, & Memmert, 2013;

Light & Yasaki, 2016).

This article reports on a study that adopted a positive approach to inquiry into children's and youth sport participation. It focused on what kept adolescent girls in a team that played in highly competitive junior club basketball league. Conducted in a large community-based basketball club in Melbourne, Australia, it inquired into the experiences of girls aged thirteen to sixteen years in one team with a focus on why they continued to play basketball at an age when many girls of the same age drop out or transition into sport as leisure activity (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008; Reifsteck & Brooks, 2018). The study identified two main factors contributing toward making basketball enjoyable for the six girls in the study and which kept them playing. They were: (1) relationships within the team and (2) having a strong sense of learning and improvement, which are presented in the Findings section.

## **2. Adolescent Girls' Participation in Sport**

Learning new skills, feeling competent and valued, improving self-esteem and developing social networks are factors that can make participation in sport a positive experience for teenage girls. Family and peer support also contributing to their decisions about beginning sport and staying with it (see, Flintoff & Scratton, 2003; Howie, Daniels, & Guagliano, 2018). This is of particular importance during major life transitions for children and young people. For example, changing schools can create disruption and pose a threat to their ongoing participation in sport. This can be exacerbated during adolescence when they experience increasing complexity in their lives from around age thirteen (Coakley & White, 1992; Craike et al., 2016; Olds, Dollman, & Maher, 2009).

The complexity of adolescence for girls is evident in a study conducted on female swimmers in an Australian swimming club. This study revealed the increasing complexity of their lives and the ways in which social life, other sports and academic commitments, and aspirations, competed with their time and energy for swimming (Weiland, 2016). Tensions between girls' positive experience of being physically active and their social life, and concerns about outside perceptions of their femininity all add to the stress and anxiety of adolescent girls' participation in sport (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster 2006). The resilient belief that there are health risks for women participating in sport and other myths about female participation in sport can also reduce and complicate girls' participation in sport and influences the nature of their participation (Chandler, Cronin, & Vamplew, 2007; Grappendorf, 2011).

Conducted from a psychological perspective, the bulk of research on youth sport tends to focus on individual factors at the expense of the socio-cultural environment. The influence of social and cultural context on participation is attracting more attention. This is evident in the use of ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) that identify and account for multiple influences on participation in sport and physical activity among adolescents (Eime, Payne, Casey, & Harvey, 2010). Research conducted from a socio-cultural perspective also suggests the strong influence that socio-economic and socio-cultural

conditions can have on girls' participation in sport (see, Kirk & Macphail, 2003; Light & Yasaki, 2016, Scheerder, Taks, & Lagae, 2007; Weiland, 2016).

Declining numbers of adolescents playing organized sport is partially due to transitioning into non-organized sport or leisure activities, but this is mostly attributed to 'dropout' (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008). This research also identifies similarities and differences between boys and girls who drop out. Butcher, Lindner and Johns' (2002) research on tenth grade students identified the same top three reasons for dropping out among girls and boys. These were, (1) not enjoying the sport, (2) wanting more time for non-sport activities, and (3) competition for time and energy from other sports, but there were differences in their rating of the next three most important reasons. Girls were more likely than boys to believe that they were not good enough, to feel performance pressure, and to want more time to study. Butcher and colleagues' study and many other studies, including those we have conducted, suggest the pivotal importance of enjoyment and positive social interaction when making decisions about remaining in sport or dropping out, for boys and girls (see, Butcher, et al., 2002; Curry & Light, 2016; Light, Harvey, & Mermert, 2013; Sabo & Veliz, 2008).

Overtraining at an early age has also been identified as a factor contributing to a lack of enjoyment and meaning of sport for adolescents. For example, a study on competitive swimming identified early specialization and the greater training intensity associated with it as the main cause of drop out (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008). Low perceptions of their own competence and poor social relationships in sport settings can also discourage children from continuing in sport (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006) with research suggesting that girls value the quality of friendships and show more self-determined motivation for playing than boys do (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006).

### **3. The Culture of Sport in Australia**

From the second half of the eighteenth century, sport has played a significant part in the development of Australian culture and national identity with Cashman (1995) describing Australia as a "Sporting Paradise". There are few countries in which sport forms such a pervasive aspect of culture as it does in Australia. This is a country in which sport has played a central role in the development of a collective sense of identity, pride and a sense of self (Stoddart, 1986). This is dramatically reflected in the results of a national survey in which respondents reported that seven out of the ten most inspirational moments for them were sport related (Stewart, Nicholson, Smith, & Westerbeek, 2004). In Australia, sport is accessible for children and young people through schools and community-based clubs such as the one in this study. These are sites that are institutionally and culturally different to school settings. They are also distinctly different to the school environments in which adolescents play sport in countries like the US and Japan (see, Light & Yasaki, 2016), Community-based sport clubs similar to the one in this study are also prominent in the UK and other former British colonies such as New Zealand and Canada.

Australians have long taken a competitive approach to sport with victories in cricket over English teams from the 1873-1874 season in Australia playing an important part in the British colony's confidence in becoming an independent nation within what was seen as a threatening natural environment (Stoddart, 1986). With the exception of the more exclusive independent schools, the club system offers a more effective pathway for aspiring young athletes such as the girls in this study and a more competitive environment than school sport normally does (see, Light, 2012). This is a very different environment to say, the US, where all adolescent sport is played within the institutional setting of school sport. The girls in this study were in a very large and successful basketball club in Melbourne and had grown up playing in the competitive club system with aspirations of success for some at the highest levels formed as young girls.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study adopted grounded theory methodology to inquire into what made being in a basketball team positive enough to sustain the interest of for girls aged 13-16 in an Australian basketball club. Widely used in education research, grounded theory methodology seeks to construct theory about issues of importance in peoples' lives through a process of induction that Charmaz (2006, p. 188) describes as, "A type of reasoning that begins with a study of a range of individual cases and extrapolates from them to form a conceptual category". We approached the study with open minds and tried to avoid having strong, preconceived ideas or theories that we wanted to prove or disprove, as Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) suggest is necessary. In this study we developed theory from data in an ongoing process of data generation and analysis in which we delayed the use of formal theory and literature until we achieved theoretical saturation as the point at which we could develop no more theories. We reached this point with two strong substantive themes that we used literature and theory to elevate substantive themes grounded in the participants' experiences to conceptual themes.

##### *4.1 The Site*

The study was conducted in a large community-based basketball club in Melbourne referred to using the pseudonym, *The Melbourne Club*. Six girls in the top under 16 year's team within The Melbourne Club participated in the study which was conducted over an eight-month period that included the whole season.

##### *4.2 Participants and Selection*

Invitations to participate were sent out with a questionnaire to all girls aged 13-16 at the club. One team was then chosen at random from all the, under-16 teams in the club within which the parents of at least six girls had agreed to their daughter's participation in the study. The participants were selected at random from among those who agreed to participate and whose parent also agreed. The study had ethical clearance from an Australian university.

### *4.3 The Grounded Theory Process*

Data generation for the study began with a 15 item questionnaire distributed to all girls in the club aged 13 to 16 that was used to provide information on the context of the club and to develop questions for the first of three rounds of semi-structured interviews. We began with initial coding then moved to focussed coding through line-by-line reading to identify incidents and ideas as empirical data from which we generated codes that fitted with our line of inquiry. These were then developed into categories through the ongoing use of memoing and the constant comparison of data. To move from descriptive level codes to conceptual level codes we continued to use memoing and constant comparison as well as theoretical sampling. This guided the development of emerging theory by seeing if data supported emerging categories. We used constant comparison in the three ways suggested by Holt (2007) to compare: (1) incidents/ideas to other incidents/ideas, (2) emerging concepts to more incidents/ideas and (3) emergent concepts to each other as well as comparing the concepts and theories we had developed at both sites.

Our theoretical sampling involved deciding what data to generate next and how to generate it in a way that would facilitate continuing the development of emerging theory which meant that data generation was guided by emerging theory. Core concepts emerged through repetitive coding that produced the properties of each category but we ceased when we had reached theoretical saturation. This is the point at which we could not develop any more properties or dimensions within the relevant concept and which provides the conceptual density to lift descriptive theory to abstract theory. To do this we drew on Seligman's PERMA model, Antonovsky's salutogenic model and the relevant literature to further develop and refine the theories we had developed and to reach theoretical integration.

The challenges that we faced in completing the grounded theory process were (1) maintaining an open minded approach and letting the data speak, (2) raising the level of coding from descriptive to a conceptual level and trusting our intuitive senses throughout the process. All interviews were conducted by the first author but with the second author present at most of them.

## **5. Findings**

### *5.1 Relationships*

Supporting much of the literature, relationships with teammates emerged as the most rewarding and positive aspect of being in the team for the participants (see, Milheiro Pimenta, 2018) who valued relationships with their teammates, caring for others and feeling cared for. They enjoyed a very strong sense of belonging in the team and relatedness while prioritizing the team over their individual needs and desires, which aligns with the literature on adolescent girls' participation in sport (see, Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Ulrich-French & Smith, 2006; Yildirim & Caz, 2018). Four of the girls joined the club because of the quality of coaching it offered and its record of success in competition. Five of them had clear long-term goals in basketball with four aspiring to use basketball to gain entry into

university through the American college sports system (NCAA-National College Athletics Association). The coach, who has been an assistant coach for the Australian national women's team (the Opals) at the Olympics, told us that he thought one of the girls was likely to play for the Opals in the future. Four of these five girls were academically successful and focused on succeeding in both basketball and school. In Australia, the community-based club sports system provides open access to most sports and provides pathways to the highest levels of achievement in sport (see, Stewart, 2004). While many former British colonies such as New Zealand, the UK and Canada have similar systems, it is very different to sport based in schools and universities such as in the US and Japan (see, Light & Yasaki, 2016; Stewart, 2004).

The girls in this study felt strong identity with the team and stronger relationship in it than anywhere, else. They enjoyed being under pressure in competition games and in practice games, not only because of how it developed them as individual players, but also because of how it intensified relationships between the players and bonded them as a collective. The intimate relationships between the players as part of the team formed the most powerful theme in analysis of what made basketball so enjoyable and meaningful for them:

We have the bonds like sisters do. We just connect so well. So many people say we are the best team they've ever seen but they don't see what's off the court, they just see what's on the court. On the court we're great, even off the court we're just so together (Interview, Beth).

There was a very powerful sense of belonging among the girls and of connections between them that some research on sport refers to as 'relatedness' (see, Sarrazin et al., 2002). All the girls talked about friends, belonging in the team and the place of the team in their social life but this relatedness and sense of belonging was located within the larger community of the club:

...our younger sisters play together in the same club. We all stick together. We all think the same way and help each other out. If somebody is down some one will pull them up—in a game or at practice or anywhere and I think that is a pretty good thing (Interview, Bree).

### *5.2 Learning, Improving and Achievement*

Having a sense of constant improvement on a week-by-week basis, over the season and over their years of involvement in basketball made a strong contribution toward the girls' enjoyment of basketball and the meaning it had for them. This gave them direction, a strong sense of purpose and of achievement. This occurred at both an individual level and at a collective level in terms of how the team was improving and how their individual improvement contributed to it. Even in competition games when the team lost, the coach had them reflect on the loss and on how they could improve, which sustained their sense of improvement as a team over the season and which relates to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990)

notion of flow as applied to sport by Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi (1999). They suggest that a state of flow in which optimal learning occurs most commonly happens when the balance between challenge and the ability to meet this challenge is met for athletes. They also suggest that for athletes to achieve flow they and their coaches should always strive to be the best they can instead of focusing on winning. At an individual level, there were many opportunities for the six girls to achieve explicit success within a single competition game, over the season and over the decade that some of the girls had been playing basketball for. All six of them were very competitive with five having clear long-term basketball goals. They all outlined their achievements in basketball as markers of constant improvement in their quest to meet the long-term goals they had set with one was more focused on becoming a lawyer. These goals included being selected in and/or captaining the state team or being in a team that won the national championships as was the case for some of the girls in this study who played for Victoria in the national championships. During interviews three of the girls said that they saw these achievements as “pay off” for consistent effort (Lee, Carter, & Xiang, 1995). This we suggest, can be seen as markers of achievement.

Five girls articulated clear long-term goals in basketball that involved playing at high levels but the way in which basketball figured in their plans for the future did not seem to provide particular motivation or meaning for them. Instead, it seemed to provide direction and a framework for achieving more immediate improvement and making learning more relevant for them. The girls in this team were highly experienced and talented basketballers but were committed to academic success. Laura was, however, prepared to compromise her academic results to realize her long-term basketball goals, which included playing College basketball in the US but Tayla did not see basketball figuring in her future. Her focus was in becoming a lawyer. Regardless of their views on where basketball would figure in their futures, they were all well aware of where they were in basketball at fourteen and fifteen years of age, what they had invested to get where they wanted to be, and what it was going to take to get there:

I haven't made a big team yet and I want to go and play for Victoria in the championship whether it is under-20 or whatever, I want to go and play for Australia and if I give up now I wouldn't achieve what I want to get from basketball (Interview, Britt).

Although they spoke about their own development and achievement it was usually related to the team. In these discussions they emphasized the satisfaction gained from improvement earned through hard work, commitment, sacrifice and being put under pressure as a team over the season or in specific games that had been particularly tight. All of them nominated intensity as the most important factor required to make training and playing meaningful as Karen explains: “I like the intensity in training because it keeps you on the edge and keeps you focused on being your best and is never boring because you have to focus and do your best all the time” (Interview, Karen). Their love of intensity in practice

and playing competition games was tied into the social aspect of being in the team and club with commitment to the team and maximum effort at training and on Friday nights a strong common theme:

What I like (about this team) is when everyone comes to training; they are prepared to go hard out there. If someone doesn't do it, it should be like, you are not improving for the team and you never want to leave anything out there because the team is training out there and it's training hard and you are part of that team even if the girls are injured (Interview, Beth).

Winning was very important to these girls and was nominated by many of them as one of the most enjoyable aspects of being in the team but not just because they won. It was more because of how the collective effort intensified them as a single entity. They enjoyed how the pressure on them promoted more unity of purpose in the team because this was seen by them to be the only way to be their best "as a team". This is suggested in Britt's recollection of a tough game the week before the interview that also suggests how the girls experience being lost in the flow during intense games: "...sometimes when we are under a lot of pressure it like forces us to connect and the communication between us just happens and sometimes you can think, 'how did that happen?'" Winning games was important for them, but it was the tight games that produced a unified team effort that they valued most:

I like winning but when you win by a lot it is not interesting. When you are really pushed to win, and you all put in to get a win it is really satisfying. Winning a close game because we all worked hard as a team is the best (Interview, Karen).

It was the nature of these victories as a collective response to pressure in tight games that made it so satisfying and meaningful for them. When asked, what had been the most enjoyable aspect of playing basketball from when she first started, Bree said it was: "Seeing yourself improve, I think it is definitely. Or the hard work that you've put in it coming out" (Interview, Bree).

## **6. Discussion**

The importance of peer relationships and having a sense of learning, improving and achieving identified in this study supports much of the literature on youth sport participation and what makes playing sport enjoyable for your adolescents. It also aligns with work in Positive Psychology on happiness and wellbeing and with the work of medical sociologist, Anton Antonovsky, on the social conditions that facilitate wellbeing in life. For example, within Positive Psychology Seligman's (2012) PERMA (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement) model for wellbeing explains why and how the two main themes worked to provide positive experiences and suggests the contribution they made to psychological wellbeing. While this work does not focus on sport it has been appropriated and applied to sport pedagogy in the Positive Pedagogy for sport coaching framework (Light & Harvey, 2019).

Relationships with teammates and other people in the club contributed most to the girls' enjoyment of being in the team and making it meaningful for them, which is something that research suggests is valued by adolescent girls in sport more broadly (see, Weiss & Smith, 2002). It is also one of the elements of the PERMA model that makes a contribution to happiness. In sports clubs and other physical activity contexts, positive peer relationships have been linked to establishing a sense of physical competence and positive affective outcomes for boys and girls (Muenks, Wigfield, & Eccles, 2018). Positive perceptions of peer relationships have also been shown to have a positive effect upon young people's motivation and enjoyment that the literature suggests is more marked with girls and women (Bruner et al., 2018; Flintoff & Scratton, 2003; Heemsoth & Retelsdorf, 2018; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Weiss & Smith, 2002) than with boys and men.

The girls emphasized the strength of their relationships forged in the heat of battle on the basketball court and under pressure at practice sessions but were focused on winning as a team and developing individual careers after leaving school. Their enjoyment of peer relationships was strongly driven by individual and collective competitive urges shaped by the culture of Australian sport and by the basketball club their team was in. It was the strong bonds between them all as a team, that enabled them to flourish under pressure in games and it was this pressure that sustained and strengthened their relationships. This deep engagement in competition and practice sessions was much like deep immersion in their team and is another element in the PERMA model that helps explain their enjoyment of being in the team.

The importance of young people feeling that they are learning and improving for enjoyment of sport is a common theme in the literature (see, Jakobsson, Lundvall, & Redelius, 2014) as is a feeling of competence in the sport (Šilić, Sesar, & Crnjac, 2018). The girls had clearly articulated long-term individual goals in basketball and short-term collective goals as a team in terms of week by week competition goals and season-long goals. Their team won the Victorian state championships and some of them were in the Victorian state team that won the national championships in the year of the study. Setting short term goals provided them with the positive experiences of meeting and dealing with individual and collective challenges on a weekly basis that also contributed toward them feeling they were on track to achieve their long-term goals such as playing college basketball in the US and playing for the Opals. According to the PERMA model, this sense of achievement makes an important contribution to happiness and psychological wellbeing in life and has been used to make learning positive with the Positive Pedagogy for sport coaching framework (Light & Harvey, 2019).

We have identified two main themes from the study that best explain the girl's enjoyment of being in the team as the main reasons why they continued to play and committing so much to basketball. However, we suggest that these are so significant because of the contribution they made to the meaning basketball had for them. Meaningfulness is not only an element in the PERMA model but also features

in Antonovsky's Salutogenesis and Sense of Coherence model (see, 1996) that focuses on the social conditions that facilitate wellbeing and good health. For Antonovsky, meaningfulness is the extent to which and individual's life makes sense to them and its challenges merit their commitment. Light and Harvey (2019) argue that, when applied to sport coaching, practice that engages athletes physically, emotionally and intellectually it is likely to be meaningful for them. Antonvosky's concepts of comprehensibility (understanding what is going on) and manageability also offer explanations for the meaning of basketball for the girls. In particular, their enjoyment of very intense competition games and practice that push them to their limits with pressure they are able to manage, and this is tied to the meaningfulness basketball had for the m.

For the six girls in this study, basketball held great meaning but, less so for one of them. It was not just an activity but instead, was central to their lives, future aspirations, their social lives and daily routines. One girl was prepared to sacrifice her academic achievement to reach her long-term goals in basketball, four also had lofty long-term goals in basketball but were equally committed to academic success, and one saw no future in basketball beyond secondary school because of her commitment to becoming a lawyer.

## **7. Conclusion**

This article lends support to the literature suggesting the importance of peer relationships and having a sense of learning and improving for adolescent girls' enjoyment of playing competitive sport (Clare, 2018; Cope, Bailey, Parnell, & Kirk, 2018; Timken, McNamee, & Coste, 2019). The close-focus nature of the study also provides useful insight into, and knowledge about, the personal, individual experiences of adolescent girls in sport. Focused on six girls in the one team, it identified variation and diversity in individual experience and the meaning of basketball in their lives between them but also commonality in experience. It suggests how this was influenced by the context of club sport in Australia and the particular basketball club the girls were in. The study contributes to knowledge about the complexity of adolescent girls' involvement in sport and the range of factors and experience shaping where sport sits in their lives. It identifies what meaning basketball has for the six girls in this study and how participation in it was shaped by being at school, social life, family, aspirations for the future and sporting culture. It highlights the pivotal importance of the social dimensions of sport for attracting young people to sport and keeping them in it while also reminding us about the positive ways in which competition can make sport fun, and how coaches and other involved can deal with the negative impact of a win at all costs approach on young people in sport.

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