

May 2019

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### Recommended Citation

Susnara, Daniela; Morgan, Holly; and Curtner-Smith, Matthew (2019) "Perceptions of a Sport-Based Youth Development Program: Swim to the Top," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol11/iss1/10>

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# Perceptions of a Sport-Based Youth Development Program: Swim to the Top

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As a child, I learned to swim before I was a successful walker. Despite stumbling around the house on my tippy toes, my parents described me as a fish from the time that I could toddle to the pool. Swimming pools, oceans, and lakes...water, has always been a huge part of my life. Moving to a region where in-ground pools were uncommon and the closest beach was almost four hours away was a shock to me. Despite this change, I never stopped to think about what implications this lack of available resources might have on the surrounding community. While memories of grade school swim lessons with classmates extend to compulsory swimming lessons with classmates in high school, I was completely taken aback to consider the lack of swim experience and opportunities for children. Teaching swimming to elementary students in the community through an undergraduate field experience was the first overwhelming moment when I began to realize that some children may lack the exposure I was fortunate enough to experience.

After my first opportunity to teach swimming I was astonished by the improvements students made in only four or five lessons. I was hopeful other students could see this same success just through exposure, regardless of their incoming swimming abilities. Many participants, despite their age, entered the program at a very low swim level with very little confidence in or around the water. Watching a child's face when they overcame an obstacle or a fear in the water became one of the most rewarding parts of the program to me. Students always had the same expression when this happened. First, a look of shock; it looked as if the student almost forgot what they were working to accomplish. Next, the student was overcome with the biggest smile; you could almost see the weight of anxiety and fear being lifted off their shoulders. And last, they would look to their teacher or to their peers. This last experience is where a positive and safe swim culture was created, and hopefully what students bring with them back into the community. Students received a tremendous amount of

support and encouragement from this created summer camp community. Often, this new feeling of comfort and ease is an uncommon feeling in the pool setting for these participants.

When most children think about summer, ideas that come to mind are vacation, sun, ice cream, swimming...maybe even the beach. Unfortunately, for children in at-risk communities these daydreams might never become realities. When the weather warms up and the school year ends, children in at-risk communities are often left with limited resources once after-school programs go on hiatus. Youth development programs (YDPs) that run during the school year, but more importantly during the summer, were created to eliminate some of the increased risk occurring between the months of May through August. Petitpas, VanRaalte and France (2017) highlight the positive outcome of YDPs. Youth development programs can play a role in the acquisition of skills, attitudes, and values that enable youth who are particularly at-risk to cope with the negative factors in their communities. Swim to the Top appealed to me because it reached children who are likely to have the least exposure to swimming and water safety. Similar to our summer program, Swim to the Top, some YDPs are centered around sport and physical activity; these are known as sport-based youth development programs (SBYDPs). Most SBYDPs are focused on and have been shown to have some success in promoting life skills, attitudes, and values, and encouraging athletic competence and improved self-esteem in the sporting environment (Anderson-Butcher, Iachini, Riley, Wade-Mdivanian, Davis & Amorose, 2013). During the Swim to the Top SBYDP, the three authors had the opportunity to work with at-risk children and youth throughout the summer. As the lead author, I served as the graduate assistant of the program, worked with the children and instructors, and collected data, while the co-authors served in programmatic and advisory roles.

Learning how to swim not only can save a life but can also provide knowledge of water safety

principles, enhanced fitness, and increased social, emotional, and psychological wellness. In addition, swim instruction provides potential for children and youth to gain a sense of accomplishment and with increased opportunities in which to socialize (Berukoff & Hill, 2010). Swimming instruction may also, of course, decrease the number of deaths that occur due to drowning (Storm, Williams, Shetter, Kamin-sky, Lowery, Caldas, & Winch, 2017). Unfortunately, swim instruction is not as available in some parts of the United States as in others, thus leaving many children without the benefits explained previously. In order to improve this state of affairs, some SBYDPs have focused on swimming. The research reported in this paper was part of a larger study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of our SBYDP focused on swimming, which also included a number of enrichment and physical education components. The purpose of this research was to examine the effectiveness of the SBYDP from the participants' perspectives.

The program consisted of 116 participants who were children and youth aged 4 to 14 years who attended our SBYDP titled "Swim to the Top." Ninety-nine percent of the children and youth were African American and came from predominantly low socio-economic backgrounds. As mentioned previously, upon entering the program, the majority of the children were classified as weak or non-swimmers. Prior to participating in the study all the participants and their parents signed consent and assent forms in congruence with the university's requirements for conducting research with human subjects. To protect their anonymity, the children and youth were assigned fictitious names.

The SBYDP in which the children and youth participated was the result of a community-based partnership between The University of Alabama and various local agencies including the YMCA, Parks and Recreation Authority, and two school systems. It took place over the course of one summer month in a local community center and adjacent swimming pool on Monday through Thursday from 8:00 a.m. until 12:00 p.m. The central component of the SBYDP was swimming instruction provided daily during 70-minute lessons by 10 well-qualified undergraduate and graduate physical education students from the university. Swimming instruction class sizes were small and between four and six students. In addition, children and youth participated in daily 70-minute sessions devoted to physical education in which the goals were to promote motor skill acquisition, leisure education, personal and social development, cognitive development, and health-related fitness, and

academic enrichment in which the goals were to enhance leadership, science and reading skills, and knowledge of nutrition. The physical education component was taught by two more physical education students and the enrichment component by two local teachers. Children and youth were grouped by age (i.e., 4–6 years, 7–9 years, and 10–14 years) and rotated through the three components of the program each day.

Through the use of non-participant observations, informal interviews, and a series of focus group interviews, data was collected to determine children and youth perceptions of the program. After analysis of the data, it was concluded children and youth perceived the SBYD program positively. Further, as a result of the program, participants gained improved water confidence and swimming skills, an enjoyment for academic enrichment and physical education was observed, and the opportunity to learn was provided throughout the program. Results, specifically those related to swimming, were personally the most meaningful to witness. My upbringing and appreciation for water sports has led me to heavily value water safety and skills. I found the improvement in water confidence and swimming skill most insightful and rewarding because I saw many students who entered the program with fear or a false sense of skill and only four weeks later overcame barriers of panic and acquired improved swim skills. I count it a defining experience to observe these improvements.

When teaching a child to swim, there are many approaches teachers can take. First, they might try to teach the child to kick, or to float. Sometimes a teacher will go straight to putting a child's face in the water, teaching the new swimmer how to blow bubbles or hold their breath. A teacher might even go straight to a stroke like breaststroke, introducing a "frog kick" which is easier for some children. As a current graduate student involved in multiple forms of research, I believe that learning how to swim has many parallels to the world of the researcher. Much like the beginning phases of swimming instruction there are many ways you can conduct research, and while there is rarely a "wrong" way, there will always be ways people prefer. This early learning curve was something I felt I would only learn to overcome through experience, much like swimming. Working through Swim to the Top, a community-based partnership, I was given the opportunity to gain the experience of working with many different people. While working with others I was very fortunate to be included in many aspects of the research planning—from helping decide managerial aspects, such as

gaining consent, to conducting focus group and formal interviews. I became very familiar with parts of qualitative research and was given the opportunity to learn some of the “pros and cons” of doing tasks one way instead of another, much like learning the “frog kick” before the “flutter kick.” Through this experience it was encouraging to observe many different people, from community members to researchers, working toward one goal in their own way, everyone participating with the same goal, to provide the best summer experience for all children and youth in attendance.

While some might argue one way of learning to swim or research is better than others, I believe any introduction or experience is better than none. Working through a community-based partnership provides research experience to all parties involved from the community to the researchers. Without experience, one is unable to form his or her own realistic ideas or expectations on a subject, much like the children who entered the program with a false sense of their swim ability. Seeking out and becoming involved in new experiences might be easier for graduate students in comparison to the participants in this study. There are many ways to conduct research and include the community throughout the process. Discovering how to make these connections is ultimately up to the research team. But like jumping into the deep end, learning how to make these connections is often a risk worth taking. Research opportunities with community involvement should not be overlooked. These experiences should be encouraged and celebrated.

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At the time of this writing, Daniela Susnara was a graduate student at The University of Alabama. Dr. Holly Morgan is the director of Community Education at The University of Alabama’s Center for Community-Based Partnerships, and Dr. Matthew Curtner-Smith is a department head and professor of kinesiology at The University of Alabama.