exploring self-esteem in a girls' sports program

Competencies and Connections Create Change

by Ellen Markowitz

When asked what my girls' afterschool sports program does for participants, I used to say that it "builds self-esteem." While this may have been true to some degree, I was expressing a program objective, rather than a researched outcome. Only after exploring self-esteem in my doctoral program did I begin to understand how complex and difficult it is to measure self-esteem. Now I have a deeper appreciation both for the challenges facing those who research self-esteem and for the role afterschool programs can play in facilitating its development, particularly among adolescent girls.

Self-esteem has been problematic for researchers because it is complex, stable, and hard to measure (Steinberg, 1996). When assessing the self-esteem of out-of-school time (OST) program participants, some researchers may think their instruments will not detect changes, either because the program does not last long enough to make a difference or because self-esteem is multidimensional and difficult to change. Some may respond to high-stakes testing and the pressure to demonstrate program outcomes by assessing concepts or behaviors with the strongest potential to show change, regardless of how they fit with program objectives. These responses can create a chasm between practitioners and researchers. Practitioners see firsthand that participants change how they feel about themselves, but researchers either have trouble capturing this phenomenon or are substituting other attributes for self-esteem.

This article attempts to address these gaps by reviewing research about self-esteem and adolescent girls, presenting findings from a study exploring girls' experiences in a sports-based youth development program, and attempting to engage practitioners and re-

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searchers in new conversations about self-esteem and how we assess it.

Understanding Self-Esteem

Understanding how individuals feel about themselves has been a quest of researchers for many years (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Currently, the predominant view is that self-esteem is hierarchical and multidimensional, consisting of various levels of self-assessment (Marsh, 1990). At the highest level, *global self-worth* is one's overall assessment of how one feels about oneself. This level is the most stable and difficult to change (Marsh, 1990).

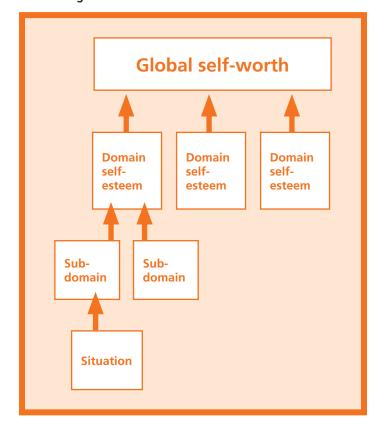**Figure 1. Hierarchical Model of Self-Esteem**

Below global self-worth is *domain-level self-esteem*, which consists of how one feels about oneself in areas of one's life such as family, athletics, academics, and friends. Below the domains are *sub-domains*. Sub-domains under the domain of athletic competence, for example, might be the specific sports one plays, such as basketball, soccer, or tennis. Below sub-domains are *situations*, such as shooting free throws or serving. In this hierarchical model (see Figure 1), the odds of increasing one's self-esteem are better at the lower levels, in sub-domains or situations. For example, improving skills in a particular sport can enhance one's perception of competence in that sub-domain, which might then "trickle up" to the domain of athletic competence.

In this hierarchical model of self-esteem, the two main influences on self-esteem are perceptions of competence and social support, as shown in Figure 2 (Harter, 1987). *Perceptions of competence* refers to how capable one feels at a skill or activity. *Social support* is how much one feels supported or encouraged by others. Though global self-esteem is considered stable (Steinberg, 1996), domain self-esteem levels can change contextually and over time. Domain-level self-esteem and its effect on overall global self-esteem are derived from the combination of how important a particular domain is and how competent we feel in it. Overall self-esteem, or global self-worth, is a composite of all of one's domain self-esteem levels, combined with the level of importance associated with each domain (Harter, 1990). For example, when I was a child I was a good athlete and felt high perceptions of competence in sports. In addition, the domain of sport was very important to me. This combination contributed to my global self-esteem. On the other hand, I was not as skilled at playing the piano. Fortunately, my low perceptions of competence in music did not affect me so much because music was not a high priority in my life. Thus, individuals can have varying levels of self-esteem depending on domains, and the domains that have more relevance will carry more weight in assessing their global self-esteem. This combination of domains

Figure 2. Antecedents of Self-Esteem

and associated values makes self-esteem complex and hard to measure.

Self-Esteem & Adolescent Girls

Several distinct patterns have emerged in research on adolescent girls' self-esteem. One well-documented finding is a decline of self-esteem in white middle-class girls (AAUW, 1992; Birndorf, Ryan, Auinger, & Aten, 2005; Quatman & Watson, 2001). However, this phenomenon is not found in African-American girls, who consistently report higher self-esteem than white girls and do not experience the same declines in self-esteem that white or Latina girls do in early adolescence (Biro, Striegel-Moore, Franko, Padgett, & Bean, 2006; Greene & Way, 2005; Kimm et al., 2002). Rather than the *loss* of voice that characterizes this period for white or Latina girls, black girls often experience an *increase* in voice. Therefore, research about one ethnic group of adolescent girls cannot be generalized to all groups. Moreover, ethnic labels can never represent all girls who share that ethnicity, because there is more variation within groups than across groups (Eccles, Barber, Jozefowicz, Malenchuk, & Vide, 1999). In addition, context makes a difference. Whether at home, at school, or in an OST program, youth feel differently about themselves, their skills, and their relationships depending on the context, who is there, and what they are doing.

Framing the Study

To support healthy development, girls need contexts and activities that foster self-esteem, and particularly its antecedents: perceptions of competence and social support. One particularly important context for positive development is OST learning, specifically sport and physical activity programs. The most popular OST activity is sports (Larson & Verma, 1999; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). Though significant gender gaps still exist, particularly in urban communities, girls who participate in sports can receive many social, psychological, and health benefits (Sabo & Veliz, 2008).

Participation in sports and physical activity can enhance the physical competence, health, and well-being of girls (Bowker, 2006; Pederson & Seidman, 2004; Richman & Shaffer, 2000). For example, girls who participate in physical activity report positive feelings about body image, increased self-confidence and motivation, and enhanced

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mood states (Wiese-Bjornstal, 1997). They also report reduced symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (Greenberg & Oglesby, 1997). Girls who participate in sports are more likely to graduate high school and go to college and are less likely to be sexually active or get pregnant than are girls who do not participate in sports (Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell, & Sabo, 2005). Finally, sports participation has been associated with lower dropout rates (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997), particularly for low-income or at-risk youth, white females in suburban and rural schools, and Latina athletes in rural schools (Fredericks & Eccles, 2006).

Little research has been conducted on girls' sports programs as developmental contexts, especially for girls of color (Tucker Center, 2007). My study centered on understanding how and why adolescent girls of color can experience increases in self-esteem by participating in a girls' sports program.

Methodology

To understand participants' perceptions of their own self-esteem, I used both qualitative and quantitative approaches, with an emphasis on qualitative. While quantitative methods provided an informative snapshot, qualitative methods allowed for in-depth exploration of the complex phenomenon of self-esteem. A mixed-methods design gave me data on both *processes* and *outcomes*, leveraging the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Bryman, 2006; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The research site was a program offered by PowerPlay NYC, a girls' sports-based youth development organization that I founded in 1998. PowerPlay offers sports and life skill programs annually for more than 400 girls, ages 7–17, in New York City. During the summer, PowerPlay runs an intensive eight-week Summer Leadership Academy for 30 high school girls. Participants are typically 13–17 years old, from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and are mostly African American. My study included 13 program participants: nine African American, two Latina, and two Asian.

I was careful to incorporate appropriate research measures to ensure validity and to check my potential biases as the founder of the organization. These measures included peer review and discussion of my findings. I also focused on participants' *experiences* rather than on the program itself.

Methods

Data sources included interview transcriptions, pre- and post-participation surveys, and observational field notes. I conducted three sets of participant interviews, one before and one immediately after the program, and another three months later. All of the interviews (n = 37) were semi-structured, recorded, and transcribed by professionals. In the first interview, prior to the academy, I asked participants about themselves, their families and friends, school and sports, and other activities. In the second interview, after the program, I asked girls about their experience in the program, what they learned, how this experience influenced them, to whom they felt close during the program, and how satisfied they were with the program. The third interview included questions about whether the girls were still using what they learned in the program and about their relationships with academy participants, their sport participation, and the impact of this experience in their lives. For all interviews, I used follow-up probes such as "why?" "how?" and "in what way?" to elicit more elaborate responses.

Pre- and post-participation surveys were used to explore participants' self-esteem (n = 13). Adolescent self-esteem has typically been measured through self-report on questionnaires. I used *The Self Perception Profile for Adolescents* (Harter, 1988), a multi-dimensional self-report instrument consisting of a 36-item scale made up of six sub-scales: five domain-specific sub-scales for scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct, along with one global scale of self-worth. Although the sample is small, this quantitative perspective complements the qualitative data.

Finally, I was a participant-observer during the academy for three weeks. During 105 hours of observations, I took extensive field notes to record social processes, actions and behaviors, and group activities, focusing on participants and their relationships with peers and staff.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of both deductive and inductive coding. I started with codes derived from research literature and then added codes that arose from the data. Initial codes included *self-perceptions, athletic competence, scholastic competence, close friendships, social acceptance, significant others,* and *skill development.* Codes that arose from the data included *coaching, challenges, future selves,* and *staff support.*

In addition, the small sample size allowed me to take a "within girl" approach, to look at girls' individual pro-files across the six domains of self-esteem and explore domain-level changes for each girl. I was then able to integrate survey responses with interview responses and observational field notes to construct a fuller portrait of each girl's perception of her self-esteem and possible changes influenced by the program.

Findings

The findings are presented in three parts: girls' perceptions of their global self-esteem and of its two components, competence and social support.

Perceptions of Self-Esteem

When asked how they defined self-esteem, participants responded, "the way you think of yourself," "how you carry yourself," "how you feel about yourself," and "how you view yourself." These responses align with the mainstream definition of self-esteem. When asked whether the academy helped to increase their self-esteem, 11 girls (85 percent) said they began with a healthy sense of self-esteem, which the program reinforced. Participants scored high on the global self-worth subscale of the survey both before and after the program. On the pre-participation survey, seven girls (64 percent) scored at least 3.8 out of 4.0 for global self-worth. This outcome is not surprising given that African-American adolescent females often have high self-esteem (Biro et al., 2006; Greene & Way, 2005; Kimm et al., 2002).

Though survey results do not show changes in self-esteem, the juxtaposition of numbers with narratives tells a different story. Using the "within girl" approach afforded by the small sample, I was able to go "between the numbers," using the interviews and observations to learn more about each girl's experience.

For example, before she came to the academy, "Zelda" (a pseudonym) was concerned that she would be the fattest participant. Her score on the pre-participation survey of 2.4 for athletic competence was one of the lowest. However, during the program, Zelda was continually surprised that she could keep up with the other girls, both in stamina and in skill level. Her perception of her athletic competence increased, and she started to like sports more. Her score for athletic competence rose to 3.0 after the program, the greatest single increase of all of the participants. When I spoke with her three months after the program, she told me that she and her dad had been exercising together and that she wanted to try out for the volleyball team next year. This change could be described as an example of increasing self-esteem by increasing one's *perceptions of competence.*

Nene's pre-program global self-worth score of 3.4 was also one of the lowest of the group. In her first interview, she said that she was lazy and needed a push. During the program, Nene became close to two girls she already knew from school, along with several participants in her PowerPlay newsletter group. Their closeness was reflected in the time they spent hanging out, laughing and joking together, and in the nicknames they gave one another. Nene was the "grandma" of the newsletter "family." After the academy, Nene scored 4.0 in global self-worth. She said that PowerPlay pushed her to try new things and stretch herself. In November, she talked about her willingness to climb the ladder in a ropes course activity on a school trip, whereas before she would not have tried. Nene's story reflects an increase in self-esteem generated by increased levels of *social support*.

These two examples illustrate the nuanced processes of self-esteem development through increased perceptions of competence or social support. They also illustrate the value of the mixed-methods approach.

Perceptions of Competence

Because perceived competence is one of the key drivers of self-esteem, I was interested in the skills girls learned in the program and how they thought these skills helped them. Participants talked about improving their skills particularly in two areas: athletic competence and career development, particularly networking skills.

Athletic Competence

In interviews, 11 of the 13 girls (85 percent) reported that the program helped them to improve their sport skills, such as stamina or flexibility, as well as their attitudes. However, the group mean for athletic competence stayed virtually the same on surveys (3.0 before and 2.93 after), so that it could look as if no change had occurred. Of the seven girls whose mean scores were below 3.0 before the program, four—including Zelda—reported post-program increases. Selena said, "I would say I improved, like, my body-wise. I remember running, for example, I wouldn't finish laps. I remember last year I got to four and I got tired." Janet also noticed improvement

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in her stamina, saying, "I felt that really helped me this year when I took the Pacer test [a physical activity assessment] in school. Last year, I ran 56. This year, I ran 90."

Other girls mentioned improving skills in particular sports. Nene and Venus were both excited that they learned how to swim for the first time. Nakeeba, a member of her high school basketball team, was happy that she learned some new moves from coach Maya, a former collegiate All-American player. Here again, qualitative methods revealed the nuances of how the program positively affected girls' sense of athletic competence.

Career Development

The second major area in which participants discussed building their skills and feeling more competent was career and workplace development, specifically networking and communication skills. When asked how she got better at networking, Aliann said, "I just listened to what you guys said when you taught us about networking, and I just tried it and it worked." Even Iris, one of the shyest girls in the program, said that she was better able to talk to adults:

I think it made me more confident. Back then if I had to speak to a grown-up, I'd get really, really quiet, and then my heart would beat fast or whatever. But now my heart doesn't beat fast, but I'm still quiet.

In the program, girls learned networking skills, practical office skills, such as how to copy, send faxes, and write résumés, and more intangible skills such as developing a professional identity. Selena said, "I learned how to keep your professional and personal life separate. For instance, e-mails—you should have a professional e-mail." Zelda thought that the program helped lessen her fears about the workplace; she said she learned "how to put myself out there for people and not be afraid. Like if I go on an interview, or if it's an internship, not be afraid, and show them what I have to offer."

The academy focused on using sports to teach life skills and enabling girls to practice these skills in a safe, supportive environment. Developing competencies helps individuals to feel better about themselves. Typically, skill improvement leads to increases in levels of enjoyment or

in motivation and persistence in the activity, especially in important domains (Gould & Weiss, 1987; Weiss, 1987).

Social Support

In the Summer Leadership Academy, the staff played a major role both in building girls' skills and in providing social support. Most of the girls acknowledged that the staff positively influenced the way they thought about themselves both by encouraging them and by connecting with them at their level, as if they were friends or family.

Many of the girls talked about how the staff encouraged them or gave them a push when they needed it. For example, Iris, one of the shyest girls in the program, set a goal in the academy to talk more. When Delila, a co-director, learned about this goal, she asked Iris to speak first at the next weekly "Girl Talk" session. Iris would not have chosen to speak first without this extra push. Other girls also said that the counselors encouraged them when they faced challenges. When asked to describe the staff, Janet said:

> I would say "encouraging," because if someone would say, "I can't do it," they'd say, "Yes, you can." Then they'd encourage you to do whatever you had to do that day, and not just let you sit back and say, "Okay, that's fine."

LaToya, a second-year attendee, admitted that Maya, a co-director, was a big influence on her:

> I think that since last year, she kind of helped me grow. Last year, I was a bit stubborn. This year, I wasn't as stubborn. She was kind of showing me. She told me that I've changed a little.

When asked to describe the staff, the participants repeatedly said that the counselors were on their level or seemed more like friends than teachers. Janet said, "You look at them as your friends. You're not a student-teacher relationship." Venus thought the counselors were different from other adults in her life because "you get so used to them that you forget they're adults; you forget they're older than you…. They're like your own friends." Iris said staff members were more open than other adults in her life. Selena said she liked that "you could relate to them. They kind of related to you. They shared their experiences." Anastasia thought the counselors "showed their personalities, which were great. That made it more fun and more enjoyable." Esme said, "For you to understand us, you have to get down to our level. You cannot think always like an adult."
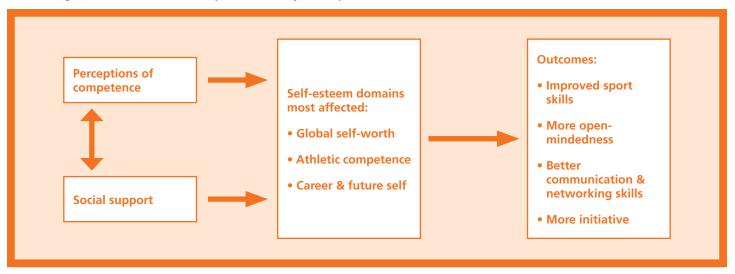
Another interesting phenomenon related to social support was that girls often described staff as being like members of their family. Specifically, four girls (31 percent) referred to a counselor as "my big sister." Aliann said of one counselor:

> She gave me a lot of great advice on staying focused with athletics and my studies. And she kind of encouraged me to be better in what I do than I am. And, yeah, she was kind of like a big sister.

The counselors also reminded girls of other family members. Anastasia said that Maya was like her father because she pushed the girls.

> She was in charge of the video group and noticed how we … were giving up. So we were, like, "Oh, we don't want to do this anymore." And so then she

Figure 3. Self-Esteem Development in Study Participants

would say, "No, we have to finish this thing." She was, like, the optimistic one.

Delila reminded Aliann of her dad because "she's smart like my dad. My dad's an English teacher too, so they're all about English." When asked how they were like other adults in their lives, four girls (31 percent) responded with a comparison between a counselor and a member of their family. Jaz said, "Jen is like my Auntie Shell. She took me in…. Any time I needed to talk, she [was] there." Zelda said that Maya was like her Aunt Tess and that Delila was like a mixture of her aunts, because some of them were sarcastic and funny like Delila. In total, six girls (46 percent) identified staff as being like sisters or family members.

Participants appreciated how the counselors interacted with them. The counselors successfully balanced being on the participants' level while remaining in a position of authority. In the OST field, this kind of relationship has been called "peer-like"; staff are perceived to be more like peers than like adults, although they are obviously not participants (Hirsch, 2005). This perception is a high compliment, conveying that staff members can be both friends and authority figures, shifting between the two roles as needed.

Revisiting the Model

Using Harter's framework, the process of self-esteem development for these girls is illustrated in Figure 3.

Through interviews and surveys, participants expressed that they gained competence in the domains of global self-worth, athletic competence, and career and future self. They perceived that they enhanced their skills in sports and in networking and communication and that they developed their professional identities. The girls also felt strong encouragement from and connection with the staff. For some girls, it seemed as if either increasing perceptions of competence or receiving social support was more important for triggering self-esteem changes, while for many girls, it seemed that both of these antecedents worked in synergy to increase self-esteem levels in particular domains. The two antecedents may be related; I saw girls' perceptions of both their competence and their connections with others change because of the support of others. PowerPlay's combination of opportunities for participants to practice skills and to receive positive reinforcement from adults was a powerful recipe for growth in self-esteem.

TIPS FOR FACILITATING YOUTHS' SELF-ESTEEM

INCREASING PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE

• Facilitate and design practices that include a skill component or a time to practice or learn basic skills. Optimal sports practices have four parts: introduction and warm up; skills practice; game playing; and cool down, wrap up, and review.

• Break the skills down into parts, so that there is a progression of learning. Start with the easier parts and work up to the harder ones, or start with smaller movements before putting all the movements together.

• Demonstrate the skills, using all appropriate modalities, including kinesthetic, auditory, and visual. Involve youth in peer teaching.

• Encourage youth to try new things. We never know if we have talent or ability until we try.

• Adopt the attitude that failure is feedback. When youth make a mistake or feel challenged, they have learned what they need to work on.

INCREASING PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

• Provide specific, positive feedback. Try to tailor your feedback to each person and to "capture the good." Be sure to mix it up; don't just say "good job" over and over again. Be creative in finding what kids do well.

• Use "feedback sandwiches" to build trust. A feedback sandwich has a positive comment as the top of the bun, constructive or helpful comments as the meat or cheese of the sandwich, and a positive comment for the other bun.

• Help youth to work in pairs or small groups. If seating is involved, ask youth to sit in different seats daily or weekly and to mix it up so they meet new people.

• Initiate rituals such as "buddy for a day." Set up mini-mentorships in which someone who is very skilled helps to teach a peer who is not as good at that activity.

• In team sports, modify the activity to include a certain number of passes before a team can try to score. This way, everyone gets involved.

Implications for Practitioners

For practitioners, one of the key takeaways of this study is that two main ingredients can help youth increase their self-esteem. One is structured activities that are focused on skill-building. The other is a supportive environment, particularly with staff who can shift between being peer-like and being adult leaders.

Building skills can help build self-esteem, because when youth increase their perceptions of competence, they may begin to feel better about themselves, especially in the areas of their lives they value most. Skills must be taught intentionally; they do not increase simply because an adult or coach is present. The myth surrounding youth sports is that, if a child is participating and being coached, then that child must be learning life skills. Life skills must be taught just like any other skills, and counselors need to be coached both on what life skills are and on how to teach them effectively. Thus, programs and practitioners should clarify for themselves the specific skills they want to foster and how best to assess the teaching and learning of those skills. Staff also need to be taught how to be both friends and adult mentors and to shift between those roles as needed.

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Implications for Researchers

This study illuminated two gaps that may arise with how self-esteem is traditionally considered and measured. The first gap is how different groups view self-esteem. In mainstream, non-academic circles, self-esteem is viewed as how one *feels* about oneself. By contrast, self-esteem researchers measure how one feels about what she can *do* or how *supported* she feels by others.

The second gap is methodological. Many powerful stories of change can be lost between data points, but they could be mined using qualitative methods. In my study, the girls' stories revealed the competencies and skills the girls learned in the academy. The outcomes are related to things they believed they could now *do*, rather than simply to how they *felt* about themselves. As a result of these newfound competencies, girls often felt better about themselves. These changes would not have been revealed by the quantitative survey results alone.

Synchronized Efforts to Support Self-Esteem Development

When individuals feel enhanced perceptions of competence in domains they value, strong support from others, or both concurrently, their self-esteem is likely to increase, whether in one domain or globally. Though there is no single set of agreed-upon best practices for promoting self-esteem, this study reinforces the importance of skill building and of positive relationships with adults (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Rhodes, 2004; Roffman, Pagano, & Hirsch, 2001), two of the eight features of a quality OST program (National Research Council, 2002). I refer to these as the "2 Ss" of *skills* and *support*, or the "2 Cs" of *competence* and *connections*, where *skills* and *competence* are synonymous, as are *support* and *connections*.

Practitioners see firsthand the powerful impact of afterschool programs on youth. Researchers have come a long way in identifying the elements of OST settings that promote positive youth development (National Research Council, 2002). Now, by shifting the focus from how youth *feel* to *skills* and *support*, or *competence* and *connections*, practitioners and researchers can better synchronize their efforts to support positive youth development. Practitioners can focus on skills and competencies, thinking about which skills to teach and how, while simultaneously promoting support and connection by training staff to be both peer-like and adult. Meanwhile, researchers can use multiple approaches to understand youth experiences more fully. Working together, practitioners and researchers can translate self-esteem effects in strong, meaningful ways to present the compelling changes that happen every day in OST programs.

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