

‘WE CAN ALL MAKE OUR OWN CHOICES’: USING A FEMINIST PARTICIPATORY
ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO EXPLORE AND MOBILIZE THE EXPERIENCES
OF ATHLETES IN A GIRLS-ONLY COMMUNITY SPORT PROGRAM

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Abstract

To belong is different from being included. Belonging involves feeling like you not only have a voice, but that your voice is being heard and appreciated. This study explored this idea in the realm of youth sport through partnering with a community-based organization that provides sport programming for girls from equity-deserving groups. Utilizing a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) approach and the qualitative method of photovoice, the lived experiences of 4 athletes participating in the organization's recreational soccer program were captured. Aligning with the action component of FPAR and tenets of knowledge mobilization, their voices were amplified through various mobilization strategies to create actionable social impact and better ensure the participants felt heard by people who play a role in shaping their sporting experiences. Overall, the findings demonstrate the value of listening and learning from a diverse set of voices in the development, delivery, and evaluation of youth sport programming.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

The benefits of participating in sport for young girls are more acute than ever, but so are the barriers. According to Canadian Women & Sport's (CWS; 2022) report on girls sport participation, they found that a majority of girls were reporting benefits such as improved mental and physical health, self-confidence, social connection, and sense of belonging. However, they noted that despite these benefits, there continues to be prevalent barriers to participation and enjoyment such as the cost of participation, lack of quality programming, gender discrimination, and social belonging concerns. Unfortunately, these barriers have resulted in findings showing that 50% of girls are not participating in sport by the time they reach adolescence, and 1 in 3 girls participating in sport are unsure if they want to continue (CWS, 2022). Moreover, by examining barriers through an intersectional lens, this report found that girls of colour from lower income homes reported encountering barriers related to access, cost, racism, and bullying at a rate of 10-15% higher than girls from high-income homes. In addition, through Canadian Tire's Jumpstart State of Youth Play Report, it was revealed that girls of colour were the highest proportion of youth who reported they no longer participated in sport after the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to White girls, White boys, and boys of colour (Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities, 2024). In recent years, to address barriers to girl's sport participation, there has been a greater focus on supporting affordable and accessible community-based sport programs that target girls and equity-deserving groups. For example, the Ontario Government in March of 2024 announced their investment of \$380,000 in Canadian Women & Sport's The Next Play program which aims to arm community-based sport and recreation organizations with the tools and resources they need to design sport that works for girls from diverse backgrounds (Ontario

Tourism, Culture, and Sport, 2024). This investment reflects findings from research showing that participation in community-based sport programs can lead to enhanced psychosocial development for girls, such as improved confidence, self-efficacy, and belonging (Coalter, 2007; Danish et al., 2004).

However, it is imperative to be mindful that the act of establishing more community-based youth sport programs or improving the affordability and accessibility of these programs does not necessarily mean its participants will automatically have positive experiences in these spaces. Although sport tends to be perceived as a pure and inclusive setting where positive experiences are inherent for youth, this is not the case for all, especially not those who are traditionally and historically excluded in these spaces, such as girls, gender diverse individuals, people of colour, Indigenous peoples, and low-income families (Fusco, 2005; Lee et al., 2023). Accordingly, critics of these notions, such as Kochanek and Erickson (2019), stress the necessity to acknowledge the impacts of systemic power, privilege, and oppression that are rooted at the foundation of sport, as well as systems of exclusion such as racism, colonialism, sexism, ageism, and classism that socially construct the ideas of who is welcomed in sport and who is not. By acknowledging these systems, these spaces can then be critically examined to better understand how different bodies and identities experience them. Interestingly, as sport continues to strive towards inclusivity and away from exclusion, the concept of belonging has increasingly been included in these conversations (Aggerholm & Breivik, 2021; D'Eloia & Price, 2018; Spaaij, 2015). Similar to positive experiences being perceived as inherent in sport, the assumption that simply participating in or being allowed in sport spaces will result in a sense of belonging (Coalter, 2023). However, this is not the case, especially not for marginalized

individuals. To belong is different from being included as belonging involves feeling safe and comfortable to be one's authentic self, along with feeling like you not only have a voice, but that your voice is being heard and appreciated (Wastell & Degotardi, 2017). To feel heard can be empowering for those whose voices are traditionally silenced by systems of exclusion. The increased focus on the notion of having voice, amplifying voices, and listening to and learning from a diverse set of voices in both sport and society at large can be attributed in part to social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and School Strike for Climate, as they emphasize the need for social change and acknowledging individuals and communities that have been historically silenced (Gieseler, 2019; Hayward, 2020; Ransby, 2018). Young people's involvement in these movements is especially notable as they are increasingly viewed as "beings" rather than "becomings," whose ideas, experiences, and choices are interesting in their own right, and they, like adults, are social agents who possess the ability to make sense of their own lived experiences (Tangen, 2008).

As the concepts of belonging, empowerment, and voice continue to grow in sport, so do the conversations on how youth sport researchers and youth sport programs can create environments that foster these feelings and processes – specifically with tangible tools that can engage girls in finding, using, and amplifying their voices (Camiré et al., 2022; Duda et al., 2017). When considering the ways in which youth sport programs are designed and delivered, including community-based programs, popular models of positive youth development are typically utilized as a main source of guidance (Holt et al., 2016; Lerner et al., 2005; Qi et al., 2020). These models are primarily based on the idea that sport has the ability to foster positive development in youth, notably through the acquisition of transferable life skills that will allow

them to thrive in society (Lerner et al., 2005). While this is a commendable attempt at seeing the potential in youth, critiques have been put forth in terms of how these models fail to address systems of power, privilege, and oppression that shape the lives of youth (Camiré et al., 2022; Gonzales et al., 2020; Kochanek & Erickson, 2019). Accordingly, those who adopt a critical positive youth development stance suggest that in order to improve the experiences of youth, they must be conscious of the ways in which sport reinforces social, economic, and political inequalities, as simply ignoring them will only cause more harm to their development (Gonzales et al., 2020). Importantly, developing a critical understanding of these inequalities requires reflecting upon one's own intersecting identities in order to empower oneself and understand the power and control one has in creating social impact both in and out of sport (Camiré et al., 2022; Gonzales et al., 2020). Among equity-deserving youth, research has found that developing this critical consciousness assists in addressing feelings of powerlessness and internalized oppression by challenging dominant, stigmatizing narratives, such as the historical belief that girls are too fragile to play sports (Dowling, 2011; Watts et al., 2011). However, developing one's critical consciousness should not only be directed at marginalized youth, but rather all youth, as well as those who play a role in shaping their sporting experiences, such as coaches, program directors, parents, and youth sport researchers. Unfortunately, a popular way of achieving critical consciousness for these individuals has been reduced to short-term training sessions on cultural competence (Tascón & Gatwiri, 2020). This idea that you can master and become fully competent in any culture suggests that the all members of a certain culture experience life in the same way, which can in turn perpetuate stereotypes and trivialize the complexity of lived experience (Kirmayer, 2012; Lekas et al., 2020; Shepherd, 2019). Instead, concepts such as

cultural humility and taking a stance of not-knowing has been increasingly used when aiming to gain a better understanding of social inequalities and identities as it emphasizes the need to reflexivity listen to and learn from voices other than our own (Lekas et al., 2020; Tervalon & Murry-García, 1998). Similarly, critical positive youth development scholars suggest centering storytelling in youth spaces as it not only functions to empower youth to use their voice and reflect on their lived experiences, but also allows for their experiences to be heard by others (Gonzales et al., 2020; Wasserman & Doran, 1999). Importantly, these scholars highlight that the environment in which youth share their lived experiences must be one where the listeners are attentive to their own power, privilege, and positionality to fully engage in the process of listening. However, for example, when considering the traditional ways of conducting research with youth, the power imbalances are glaring as researchers are given the title of the “expert” and tend to focus on extracting data from participants and communities rather than listening to, learning from, and collaborating with voices other than their own (Gustafson & Brunger, 2014). On the other hand, it is important to highlight the increasing amount of research in and out of sport spaces that utilize other approaches to research that recognize these shortcomings and aim to make research an action-oriented and participatory process that directly engages and benefits the individuals and communities that the given research is being conducted on (Salsberg et al., 2017). Participatory action research (PAR) is one approach that incorporates many of the critical concepts mentioned thus far. Simply put, PAR is principally built on reciprocity and listening to the experiences of participants to co-create knowledge that is aimed to facilitate action outcomes, typically to enhance the lives of the participants and their communities (Baum et al., 2006; Cornish et al., 2023). The facilitation of action outcomes takes the idea of sharing lived

experiences a step further as it acknowledges that along with the potential empowering benefits for participants, this process of using your voice can also be impactful when disseminated to those who play a role in shaping their experiences (Cornish et al., 2023). In the youth sport context, this may be people such as coaches, program directors, parents, and youth sport researchers. In this current study, a feminist PAR (FPAR) approach will be utilized and discussed in detail later on.

Outside the realm of sport, sharing lived experiences for youth has been used to facilitate social bonding for at-risk youth (Nelson et al., 2008); in advocacy work to inform policy decisions affecting youth (Mitchell, 2017; Moyer et al., 2020; Subramanian, 2014); to share intergenerational Indigenous knowledge between youth and Elders (Hausknecht et al., 2021); and as a coping strategy for suicide prevention in youth (De Vecchi et al., 2016). While this is not an exhaustive list of the areas in which sharing stories has been used for youth, it highlights the power and versatility of using voice and being heard. In youth sport spaces in particular, sharing lived experiences has been used to better understand the role that sport plays for Indigenous youth (Massey & Whitley, 2018; McHugh et al., 2016), youth in foster care (Quarmby et al., 2020), incarcerated Black youth (Jacobs et al., 2023), youth experiencing coaching abuse (McMahon et al., 2018), immigrant male youth (Middleton et al., 2022), and girls (Angergaard, 2016). However, when it comes to girls, the research seems to be drawn towards girls in club-level, in-school, or after-school sport (Carlman & Hjalmarsson, 2019; Dagkas et al., 2011; McSharry, 2017; Van Daalen, 2005), with very few pertaining to community-based sport (Bean et al., 2015; Drummond et al., 2022), and community-based sport that specifically serves girls from equity-deserving groups (Hayhurst et al., 2015; Hills et al., 2013).

Purpose and Research Questions

Overall, cultural humility scholars, critical positive youth development scholars, and PAR scholars all offer similar propositions that speak to the power of listening to and learning from a diverse set of voices, namely those who are traditionally silenced. Yet there is a paucity of research within youth sport spaces that embody and utilize this practice. Additionally, considering the increasing interest in funding community-based sport programs that aim to serve girls from equity-deserving groups, these programs would provide a unique setting in which researchers can aim to amplify and empower these voices, but, yet again, there is lack of research in this realm. As such, to attend to the paucity of research and uniqueness of these settings, the purpose of this study is to explore and mobilize the lived experiences of athletes in a community-based sport program that serves girls from equity-deserving groups. Two questions will guide the basis of this study: (i) What are the lived experiences of athletes in a community-based sport program serving girls from equity-deserving groups; and (ii) How can these lived experiences be mobilized through an FPAR approach?

Chapter 2: Methodological Framework

Feminist Participatory Action Research

This study will be guided by the principles of FPAR. This approach integrates PAR and feminist theories of power, privilege, and intersectionality, often with the intention of building community-research partnerships to create forms of knowledge that make a social impact (Frisby et al., 2009). FPAR seeks to address power inequalities through reciprocity; amplify and empower the voices and experiences of girls and women from diverse sets of backgrounds; critically examine the sociocultural and historical contexts shaping their lives; and facilitate action outcomes (Frisby et al., 2009). However, note that this study examined the contexts shaping the participants' lives without the explicit use of intersectional theory which could have provided a more in depth understanding of their experiences. The limitations of such and the future potential of including this theory in this study will be discussed in the Conclusion. The gendered terms of girls and women used in this study should also be noted as they are used within a binary understanding of gender (Brubaker, 2021). This limiting conceptualization of gender can potentially undermine the FPAR approach and its associated theories as the identities of gender diverse groups and individuals were not fully embedded into this research process.

For the purposes of this study, empowerment can be defined as it relates to voice and FPAR. The process of empowerment can be defined as gaining power and control in your life, essentially understanding that you have the choice and the ability to express yourself, influence your own decisions, and shape your own life (Dandona, 2015). Voice refers to the ability to express your opinions, thoughts, feelings, and needs (Banati et al., 2021). Together, when empowered, girls and women are more likely to use their voice to advocate for themselves and

others, amplify the voices of others, and listen, and learn from diverse sets of lived experiences to make a social impact (Frisby et al., 2009; Van Eerdewijk et al., 2017).

The participatory nature of FPAR aligns with what has been discussed on the process of sharing lived experiences as a method to empower individuals and communities thus far as it is rooted in collaboration, as well as listening to and learning from lived experiences from a humble and reflexive disposition. Indeed, this framework advocates the need for girls and women to be involved in all stages of the research process to co-create knowledge, thus challenging the inherent unbalanced power dynamics in the traditional participant-researcher relationship where researchers are deemed the experts that are tasked with extracting data from participants (Gustafson & Brunger, 2014). However, it is important to be mindful that there are limitations to performing collaborative research and facilitating an equal power balance, such as the time and resources required by both the researcher and the participants and to what degree the participants should be involved (Oliver et al., 2019). Asking participants to give an excessive amount of their time and energy can in itself inflate the power relations an FPAR researcher is striving to deflate. As Reid and Frisby (2008) note, not all stages of PAR research can be participatory, but the researcher should intend to do so wherever they can in the interest of the participants, based on their own input.

Finally, as FPAR acknowledges the need for reflexivity as a tool for researchers to reflect on their own identities, positionalities, and biases that influence their ethical judgements, ability to listen, and ways in which they disseminate knowledge (Muhammad et al., 2014), I, the lead researcher, utilized a reflexive journal to reflect on my positionality (Meyer & Willis, 2019). This will be discussed in the following section in regard to my social identity and evolving role within the partnering organization.

Knowledge Mobilization

This research will also be guided by principles of knowledge mobilization (KMb) as it aligns with FPAR and helps shape the research process, given that one aspect of the study is to explore the process of sharing the findings as an action outcome. In academia, the knowledge transfer paradigm is traditionally utilized and essentially views researchers as the expert in any given field who produces valid, unbiased knowledge that is transferred to knowledge users, who are perceived as deficient in scientific understanding (Anderson et al., 2016; Estabrooks et al., 2008). Critics of knowledge transfer posit that it perpetuates epistemic injustice as it undermines equity-deserving groups and individuals who are systematically disempowered, and dismisses their capacity as knowers and creators of knowledge (Fricker, 2007). In contrast, processes of KMb, like FPAR, are based on “reciprocal relationships between researchers and knowledge users for the (co-)creation and use of research knowledge” (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2013). The tenets of KMb also align strongly with FPAR as it suggests that knowledge should be mobilized as a strategy to facilitate action outcomes and social impact (Anderson et al., 2016), essentially helping to bridge the research-to-action gap (Bammer et al., 2010). Indeed, KMb acknowledges that lengthy academic papers filled with discipline-specific jargon may not always be the most appropriate way to disseminate knowledge. It emphasizes the idea that knowledge should be accessible in format and language for the intended users, and can be mobilized through a variety of strategies, such as slideshow presentations, infographics, research briefs, videos, and blog posts (Anderson et al., 2016). Moreover, as an iterative process, KMb highlights an important piece to creating social impact that lies in the evaluation process. That is, understanding the perceived value and impact of the given mobilized knowledge for the intended knowledge users (Labbé et al., 2020). This study will engage with KMb as action was

and will be taken in various ways throughout the research process, all of which will be discussed in the Knowledge Mobilization Elements section. In line with the deeply embedded role of the researcher in this integrated FPAR and KMb study design, note that I, as lead author, use first-person language in my descriptions and discussion of the study.

Chapter 3: Methods

Community Partner: Girls and Women in Motion

Girls and Women in Motion (GWIM) is a community-based organization whose mission is to provide movement-based opportunities to self-identifying girls and women from equity-deserving groups, namely low-income and racialized communities that experience barriers to sport participation in the Greater Toronto Area of Ontario, Canada (GWIM, n.d). Since their establishment in 2018, GWIM has continued to break down barriers for self-identifying girls and women through educational, empowering, inclusive, and cost-free programming that welcomes all skill levels (GWIM, n.d). A volunteer from GWIM expressed interest in partnering with this study after learning about it as a co-attendee at a research conference at which I presented. Throughout this study I worked closely with GWIM's Founder and Executive Director, Gabriela Estrada, whose priority towards including evidence-based research and participant feedback in sport programming aligned seamlessly with the values of this research.

The research outlined in this paper was conducted in partnership with GWIM with a specific focus on their “Built to Play: Girls-Only Soccer Program”, hereafter referred to as BTP. This recreational program engaged 100 girls in their 2024 program, with a large majority of the athletes identifying as racialized. BTP operated for 8 weeks on Monday nights between July and September in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada, where the athletes gathered once a week to learn soccer skills from an all-women coaching staff that ranged from high schoolers to women in their 30's. BTP program participant's ages ranged from 4-12 years old and were divided into three age groups: 4–6, 7–9, and 10–12-year-olds.

Given the recreational nature of this program, each session was structured to not only teach foundational soccer skills through non-competitive drills and scrimmages, but also heavily prioritized non-soccer related movement-based activities, having fun, making friends, respecting each other by keeping our hands to ourselves, and giving the participants opportunities to share their thoughts and opinions about the sessions. The sessions were structured as follows. Each session started off with all the girls engaging in a warm-up consisting of stretching, followed by a movement-based activity such as tag, before splitting off into their age groups to engage in soccer drills and scrimmages. At the end of the session, each group would gather into what BTP calls a closing circle or sharing circle where the girls would all get a chance to answer questions posed by the coaches, which included “what was your favourite part of today?”, “what activity would you want to do next week?” and a fun fact, such as “what is your favourite ice cream flavour?” After the sharing circle, the girls would do a group cheer. As they walked off the field they would grab a snack provided by GWIM, and reunite with family members and loved ones who either just arrived to pick-them up or were watching from the ends of the field for the entirety of the session. The program concluded with a celebration tournament and fun fair that took place approximately one week after the final session.

Positionality

With respect to my positionality as the lead researcher in this FPAR study, I will begin by discussing my overall social identity, followed by my dual role as both a researcher and BTP coach, and my continued involvement with the partner organization.

Social Identity

A way in which I reflected on my positionality and engaged in the process of reflexivity is through my social identity (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). As someone who can be physically

identifiable and perceived as a young Chinese woman, I believe this played a role in how I interacted with and built a relationship with my participants. Based on both my own experiences and the literature on this topic, representation of similar, marginalized social identities in sport spaces and coach-athlete relationships can allow for increased relatability, trust, connection, and belonging as shared identities and lived experiences are recognized (Jowett, 2007; King, 2025; Washington et al., 2025). In regard to my social identity, I also recognize the privileges I possess that have allowed me to gain a higher education and conduct research, specifically as an able-bodied, cisgendered individual who can take up space in sport in ways that some cannot. With this, I engage in a continued reflection on the biases and systems I uphold and how they may affect this research and the study participants.

Dual Researcher-Coach Role

In order to build rapport with the participants of this study, I had initially planned to spend the first few sessions of the program doing just that before beginning the data collection. However, just before the program began, I was assigned a position as a coach for the 10-12 age group as the executive director felt it would be better to situate and embed the researcher within the program, rather than being in an external position, with the purpose of protecting the program participants and maintaining trust within their program's community. Although unplanned and unexpected, this last-minute change in my role, now a dual role as researcher-coach, benefitted the research process as my goal of building rapport and trust with the participants was greatly supported by this. I was able to spend time with all athletes closely throughout the sessions and build a coach-athlete relationship as we engaged in the warm-ups, drills, scrimmages, and sharing circles together. In these circles specifically, I not only learned fun facts about them, but they were able to learn fun facts about me as well. Moreover, because this is a recreational

program, I was better able to be an approachable figure whom they could easily interact with knowing this is an environment where we prioritized fun and community-building over anything else. In retrospect, I cannot imagine how I would have achieved this relationship with the participants if I only took on a singular role of a researcher. While traditional scientific inquiry and its methodologies heavily support the idea that the researcher should be as far removed from the participants as possible in order to maintain scientific rigor, credibility, and objectivity (Lanzi & Ramey, 2013), I would like to restate that FPAR is methodology that not only suggests but urges the researcher to consider and engage in building rapport and trust with participants (Frisby et al., 2009; Tickle, 2017). Especially when the participants are part of communities that have been historically subject to the extractive processes of research that bypasses any rapport building and reduces them as subjects or numbers in a set of data (Cruz & Luke, 2021; Godrie, 2025). With a relationship built with my participants as their coach, when the data collection phase of the study began, I was better able to gain their trust when restating to them that their role in this study would be based on co-creation, and thus reciprocal in nature. However, I acknowledge the potential consequences this dual researcher-coach role could have had on the research and the participants' experience with it. As such, ethical considerations in relation to FPAR were consulted, as well as safe sport considerations. For example, while it is important to build a relationship with the participants to ensure they are comfortable in sharing their authentic thoughts with me as the researcher, it is possible that because I am their coach, they could feel a level of pressure to only share thoughts that are positive, as to not hinder our relationship. My attempt to alleviate this was through the constant reminder during the photo-taking and focus group that they are allowed to share negative feedback, constructive criticism, and have differing opinions and experiences from me and the other participants. I believe the nature of this program

itself also helps alleviate these concerns as every week the participants are asked and encouraged to give their honest feedback to coaches about how they thought the sessions went and what can be improved upon for the following sessions. The focus group was also conducted after the celebration tournament which was held on a public field. The other coaches were in the surrounding area during this part of the research process and parents were also invited to be in the area and observe from a distance, but not interfere. This was an important consideration for me as safe sport recommendations, such as the Rule of Two, state that coaches should never be alone with an athlete. They should always be accompanied by more than one coach, parent, or other persons (Coaching Association of Canada, 2024).

Organizational Ties

It is also important to discuss my position within the partnering organization. After the BTP program ended, I started an internship in the programs department with a national charity, Girls Forward Foundation (GFF), where Gabriela Estrada held the position as executive director. GFF is a trustee of GWIM and, as of 2025, GWIM programs operate through this charity. Shortly after I started the internship, I was promoted to part-time staff as a program coordinator, a title I still hold at this time of writing. GFF holds the same goals and values as GWIM – that is, providing accessible and inclusive programming to empower girls through sport and physical activity, but on a national scale. With my role at GFF, the purpose and implications of this study take on a new shape. One aim of the findings from this study was to better inform BTP and the people who run the program – but now, I myself am the person who runs this program alongside Estrada. With the development of the 2025 BTP program, this study has and will continue to inform how it is designed and delivered, what changes were and can be made, and so on – which will be discussed in the Knowledge Mobilization Elements section of this paper. My ties to this

organization and how it has evolved aligns seamlessly to the FPAR approach as its tenets are based on reciprocity, partnership, and social impact (Frisby et al., 2009). The evolution of my involvement can be seen as a direct response to the community partner's needs that surround the value they place on evidence-based research, program evaluation, and striving to create a social environment both internally (within the organization) and externally (through our programs) that encourages listening and learning from a diverse set of voices.

Embedded Reflections

As previously mentioned, given that FPAR strongly urges the researcher to engage in reflexivity throughout the entirety of the research process, I utilized a reflexive journal to document the thoughts, feelings, and interpretations I had and made that shaped this study (Meyer & Willis, 2019). Though it is perhaps non-traditional, I believe that sharing these reflections throughout the final report will provide a deeper insight and understanding of this research as I play a part in shaping and presenting the meaning of the findings and how they came to be. Sharing my reflections is especially relevant as my roles within this study had evolved in unexpected ways. The role I played began solely as an external researcher, which then turned into a dual researcher-coach role, and finally, in addition to those titles, I also became a program coordinator at the partnering organization. This evolving role strongly influenced all aspects of the research process and because my positionality in each aspect changed, so did my thoughts, feelings, interpretations, ability to listen, and ways in which I disseminate knowledge. Essentially, this evolving role changed how I engaged in reflexivity (Muhammad et al., 2014). Without sharing how and why these changes occurred and how it impacted this research, this final report may not have provided enough critical depth and trust in my understanding of the reflexive process that is central to the FPAR approach and KMb. These reflections will be

included throughout this paper, namely in the Data Analysis, Findings and Interpretations, and Knowledge Mobilization Elements sections.

Participants

The study participants consisted of 4 girls, ages 9-12, participating in the 2024 BTP program. They were recruited through a digital poster I created that was sent via GWIM's email to all the registered participants one week before the program commenced. Parents/guardians of the participants were instructed to email me directly for more information and/or to express interest in participating. As approved by the Research Ethics Board at York University, consent forms were created for the parents/guardians and assent forms for the participants using age-appropriate language. All participant's names have been replaced in this final report with pseudonyms to support anonymity. In line with FPAR and in order to highlight the importance of the girls as beings and collaborators in the context of this research, I describe each of them in more detail below.

Nazia is 9 and identifies as Pakistani and Muslim. Aside from soccer, she loves to run and participated in GWIM's Built to Run program in Scarborough, Ontario. Maryam, aged 10, is also Pakistani and Muslim. Soccer is one of her favourite sports, along with swimming and ball hockey, which she plays at her mosque. Ellie, 12, has roots in the Czech Republic through her mother and Honduras through her father, though she primarily identifies as White. Aside from soccer, she also plays tennis down the road from the soccer field BTP uses, loves travelling, and chocolate and gummy candies are not on her list of favourite snacks. Alyssa is 12, identifies as Latina, and is a huge soccer fan. Like the rest of the participants, she has been coming to this program for the past couple years, and she is almost always joined by her mother and younger brother watching on the sidelines.

Data Collection

Photovoice formed the basis of data collection in this study – a prominent visual method for documenting lived experiences, commonly used for exploring equity-deserving groups, especially in the context of participatory action research (Wang & Burris, 1997). The goal of photovoice is that the cameras and photos taken by the participants facilitate “inclusivity and empowerment among participants” (Scruby et al., 2019, p. 235) and function as “recorders and potential catalysts for social action and change in their communities” (Lavallée, 2009, p. 30). This current study was particularly interested in using photovoice to empower the participants by providing them GoPro cameras to take photos as a way to document and voice their lived experiences in sport and BTP – a program that specifically serves girls from equity-deserving communities. To facilitate critical reflection through photo taking, the participants were provided the following prompts for guidance: “What does a welcoming space feel and look like to you?”, “What does it mean and feel like to be a Built to Play athlete?”, and “How does your social identity influence your experiences in sport and Built to Play?” The photo taking period occurred during the last three sessions of the programs and they had the freedom to take as many photos as they wanted. At the end of the BTP celebration tournament, a 45-minute audio-recorded focus group was conducted where each of the participants received physical copies of their photos and got the chance to share and discuss their photos with one another while I moderated the discussion based on the above prompts. I took notes during the discussions to keep track of which photos the participants were referring to as they were sharing their descriptions, thoughts, and feelings about a given photo. At the end of this discussion, in keeping with the participatory nature of this study, I engaged them in the analysis process by asking them to share any themes or common topics they noticed throughout the focus group discussion. They noted that we talked

about soccer, the sharing circles, sharing their opinions, friends, and being comfortable. Furthermore, they were asked for their thoughts and opinions on what the KMb element of sharing their photos from this study should be. This will be discussed in detail in the Knowledge Mobilization Elements section of this paper. Following the verbatim transcription of the focus group recording using an application called Descript, participants were emailed a copy of the transcript for verification and feedback (McKim, 2023).

Data Analysis

Because this study is interested in exploring the participants' lived experiences in sport and BTP through their photos and the meanings they attribute to them, reflexive thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al. 2019). Data from the focus group discussion, primed by the photovoice pictures, was the only set of data analyzed for the purposes of this study. The photos themselves were not analyzed. More specifically, the discussion was inductively analyzed by hand using reflexive thematic analysis and guided by the 6 analytic steps outlined by this method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al. 2019). This non-linear, dynamic process begins with data familiarization, followed by initial code generation, initial theme generation, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and report production. This method of analysis is also reflexive. Throughout the entirety of this study thus far, I have engaged in reflections of my positionality, and the analysis process saw the same. With the use of a reflexive journal, I kept a written record of my thoughts, feelings, biases, and decisions through this phase of the study (McGrath, 2021). By acknowledging and accounting for the influence and impact of my presence in the research process, I was able to enhance transparency, manage my biases, and thus strengthen both my understanding of the data as well as the integrity of this study as a whole (Ortlipp, 2008). Although PAR approaches urge researchers to fully immerse

participants in the analysis process, due to time and financial constraints for both the participants and I, this was not fulfilled. However, in an attempt to make this process as participatory as possible, the themes from my analysis were sent to participants via email. Any participants who are interested were asked to reaffirm the themes, though none did.

In line with step 1 of reflexive thematic analysis, I familiarized myself with the data through multiple readings of the transcript to develop a deep understanding of it and identify any initial areas of interest. During this first step, I noted some areas of interest based on some quotes from the participants that stood out to me. These included themes of “comfort in an all-girls environment,” “feeling heard,” “recreational vs competitive sport,” and “diversity.” Creating these preliminary thematic notes before fully familiarizing myself with the data was a fruitful experience that served as a point in this process that I referred back to in reflecting on how the analysis of the data evolved. After fully familiarizing myself, I went through each line of the transcript and wrote short sentences ranging between 3-10 words that best described that data in the given line (see Appendix A). Then, to create initial codes, each of the descriptive sentences were reviewed through multiple readings and were condensed into 1-3 words, or codes rather, that best captured the meaning behind the descriptive sentence (see Appendix A). To begin constructing themes, I sorted these codes by using a highlighter to categorize codes that shared similar meanings or were related to one another in some way (see Appendix A). For example, the codes of “sharing opinions”, “choices”, and “listened to” were sorted together. After sorting, I ended up with 5 themes that included 2-6 codes each (see Appendix B). These five themes were again reviewed for similarities and connections, which led to the creation of 3 final themes (see Appendix C). To better define and name these themes, I created a visual thematic map by hand for each of the themes as these diagrams can be a useful tool in exploring the relationships

between codes and themes and developing the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I then digitized these diagrams which allowed me to visualize all 3 themes and their connections together in one piece (see Appendix D). This final thematic map highlights how the 3 themes are distinct yet connected in their overall representation of the participants' lived experiences. Throughout this process, I also took into account what themes or common topics the participants noted: soccer, the sharing circles, sharing their opinions, friends, and being comfortable. All of which are represented in the themes that were created, as will be discussed in the Findings and Interpretations section.

Analytical Reflections

Throughout this analysis process, I found myself struggling when it came to creating the themes because I noticed that each theme and all the codes that can be used to describe them were all connected in some way. When imaging how I would describe these themes I wanted them to exist in their own silos for ease of understanding, perhaps to make them more one dimensional, but I found this way of thinking to be quite limiting and frustrating to carry out. So, I tried a different approach – I embraced the connections between the themes and began drawing arrows to represent how the codes within each theme connected to one another and how the findings from one theme could provide a deeper understanding to another theme. Another struggle I faced was in regard to the traditional understanding of how a theme should come to be – essentially begging the question of what is important and what is not. Often, what is seen in qualitative analysis is that themes are deemed meaningful based on prevalence, i.e., how frequently a certain topic or point arises in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Campbell et al., 2021). However, when consulting literature on reflexive thematic analysis, I was reminded that “higher prevalence does not necessarily equate to higher importance” (Campbell et al., 2021, p.

5). This way of thinking aided in my analysis as it supported and reassured my decisions as I found myself occasionally putting greater importance on points made by only a single participant – because although the prevalence is low, it does not mean it is not important. Another thing I considered is the keyness of a theme (i.e., how well the theme captures what is important considering the research purpose and questions; Campbell et al., 2021) and the way in which the participants spoke about a given topic. To the latter point, there were certain cues, verbal or nonverbal, that demonstrated the significance they placed on the topic at hand. Whether it was going on long tangents that involved bringing up multiple examples of their lived experiences, looking uninterested and simply agreeing to a probing question with a small nod, or being so eager to agree with and build off other participants' points that they start speaking over one another.

Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretations

In carrying out the analysis, I was careful to uphold the FPAR approach by maintaining the phrasing and wording used by the participants to ensure that the voices of the participants dominated the data – hence why the focus group was transcribed verbatim. Instead of the traditionally separate Results and Discussions sections, this integrated chapter will include the results from the focus group, photos that the participants took on their cameras, my interpretations of the data, personal reflections that support these interpretations, as well as the integration of relevant previous literature to further support the discussion of the study’s findings. The faces and names of all BTP participants were digitally covered up in the photos presented in this paper to support anonymity.

To restate, during the focus group, to align with the FPAR approach, participants were asked if they noticed any themes or common topics that were discussed in the 45 minutes we were together. They noted that they talked about soccer, the sharing circles, sharing their opinions, friends, and being comfortable. Based on my analysis of the focus group, three themes can be discussed that capture the lived experiences of the participants. These themes were then sent to the participants for verification, though none of them responded with feedback. The following three themes were selected: (1) ‘An easy thing and a hard thing’: feedback on the level of difficulty and competition in drills and scrimmages, (2) ‘I just think it bonds us as a community’: the power of listening and learning, (3) ‘You meet everyone here’: relationships and representation at Built to Play.

Theme #1 - ‘An easy thing and a hard thing’: feedback on the level of difficulty and competition in drills and scrimmages

The first topic of conversation during the focus group was about soccer as Alyssa showed off a picture she took of program participants engaging in drills, as seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Alyssa's photos of BTP participants engaging in soccer drills



When asked about her thoughts on the drills we teach at BTP, Alyssa said, “They’re easy. I feel like we should do something harder.” Maryam agreed, “There’re not many hard ones.” For Alyssa, Nazia, and Maryam, increasing the difficulty level of the drills is important for these reasons, as discussed in sequence:

Alyssa: I feel like it would be like pushing ourselves to learn something new.

Nazia: And like we can get better at things.

Maryam: Or you can get like more experience doing each. Like, an easy thing and a hard thing.

As their coach at the time and the program coordinator for the 2025 program, I agree. The soccer curriculum should have included weekly progressions to increase the level of difficulty for the 10-12-year-old age group. Many of the drills were suitable for the younger age groups and therefore not challenging enough, as reflected in the study participants’ comments. The program plan that BTP has been using since 2022 was developed with the help of Maple Leaf Sports and

Entertainment Launchpad, a youth centre in Toronto, Canada. This plan included drills and activities suitable for our age range of 4-12 years old, but this wide range meant that the older girls were lacking a higher task difficulty relative to what a 4 year old was tasked with. For the 10-12 age group, adding progressions and increasing task difficulty should be a focus as it would not only improve their foundational movement skills, but keep them better engaged during the sessions. More specifically, these changes could influence motivation, competence, confidence, and resilience. That is, when girls are presented with challenges that are above their current skill level, they gain a sense of motivation to learn and improve on their skills as they may experience a greater exertion of their mental and physical abilities (Gentile et al., 2020). Accomplishing more difficult tasks can enhance their desire to engage in the drills each week as they expect their capabilities to be challenged, as well as build their self-confidence and belief in their ability to succeed (Csabai et al., 2024). However, when considering optimal task difficulty, the task at hand should not be increased so much that the athlete cannot complete it and experience a sense of accomplishment, as this could lead to decreased self-confidence and self-efficacy (Sides, 2017). Moreover, when experiencing making mistakes and being given opportunities to push their limits in a supportive environment, skills such as coping and reframing one's mindset from positive to negative can help them develop resilience and approach challenges with an adaptive, positive attitude (Archard, 2012; White et al., 2015). The life skills that can be learned from increasing task difficulty can extend beyond the field as they can transfer to other areas of life as well, especially during this developmental stage when self-confidence greatly impacts their overall self-esteem and well-being (Bean et al., 2016; Doyle, 2024).

As I consider my current role as the 2025 BTP program coordinator, I reflect on the direct influence I have on the soccer curriculum. Based on my own values, I would not limit myself to

solely consulting coaching resources and literature on this topic of how to achieve optimal task difficulty for this age group. Alongside this information, I would also ask all BTP participants for their feedback. Do they want to be challenged with progressions every week? Every other week? Do they want multiple progressions during one session and only focus on one skill each week, or multiple skills? What do they consider to be an “easy thing” and a “hard thing?”

Alyssa later added to her comment on her desire to “learn something new” by stating that encouragement from friends contributes to her motivation to “do stuff you haven’t yet.”

Similarly, Nazia added to her comment on improving on her skills by stating that support from her parents is important for her as “they can cheer you on, and then you can get better and better at things to make you feel more proud of yourself and happy.” Studies surrounding positive youth development have highlighted the importance of social relationships, including those with peers and parents, in influencing a girl’s self-confidence, self-esteem, enjoyment, and motivation (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2012, 2018). Alyssa’s comment aligns with a consistent finding that girls are motivated to initiate, continue, and maintain sport participation when surrounded by peers (Weiss et al., 2013). More specifically, being surrounded by supportive peers can create a sense of belonging and enjoyment of sport that often makes girls feel more comfortable and inclined to try new things (Woods, 2019). Though she did not explicitly state how this encouragement made her feel, I can interpret this as a positive experience as she previously stated her desire to and joy in trying new things and being challenged with drills. For Nazia, her feelings of being “proud,” “happy,” and wanting to “get better and better” when her parents “cheer her on” are in line with research suggesting that girls in sport who report greater parental involvement, encouragement, and social support experience a higher level of perceived physical competence, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation (Weiss et al., 2012).

As for the scrimmages at BTP, we keep the nature of them recreational where coaches rarely keep score, ensure all participants get a chance to play by encouraging them to pass the ball, and cheer on both teams throughout the game. When I asked the study participants for their thoughts on the scrimmages, all participants expressed that they enjoy the recreational nature but also like when there is a bit of competition involved – just not to the point where players are yelling and bickering. As Maryam said,

I like when it's a little competitive, but like, I don't like when people are like getting mad over it, or like pushing. I don't like when it gets too rough. I like a little competitive and I also like it when it's fun. But I don't like it when like, for example, someone gets mad at you like 'why did you miss that?!'

Alyssa followed up by saying that she would prefer if the scrimmages, her “favourite part” of the sessions, were “super competitive,” as she finds competition to be fun and would help to “push [herself] into new things” – the same comment she made when talking about increasing the difficulty level of the drills. However, she still agreed that she draws the line at players yelling negative comments. Nazia also agreed, adding: “Sometimes at the end [of the scrimmage], they're always yelling at each other and saying ‘That's not fair! They did this or did that to cheat!’” It is clear that for the participants, there should be a balance. For them, scrimmages should prioritize fun but there should still be some level of competition where they get to practice their skills and enjoy the thrill of scoring a goal over the other team. This aligns with research on youth sport that suggest that competitive contingencies and the social environment of a sport program should be carefully managed and balanced, especially in the case of programs that strive to foster a sense of community and belonging, like BTP, as overly competitive environments can undermine these feelings and negatively impact participation (Chalip & Scott,

2005; Lin et al., 2016). Interestingly, Ellie was the only one who did not state that she enjoys competition as she “just kind of like, want to make friends and enjoy the sport.” As I reflect on this discussion as a coach and program coordinator, I hold onto the sentiment that it is nearly impossible to please all participants, but my mind immediately starts thinking about changes we could implement to the scrimmages. Perhaps coaches should start keeping score or start giving them game strategies to execute – but why would I recommend that the coaches start doing this without direct feedback from the program participants on what they want to do? This is something I could have asked during the focus group as a follow-up question. One thing I can say with certainty based on the study participants’ opinions on the scrimmages is that we at BTP need to work on better addressing the issue of peer-to-peer conflict on the field to better avoid negative outcomes such as frustration and anger (Partridge & Knapp, 2016) – which will be discussed later on as one of the recommendations regarding BTP’s program delivery.

Along with the discussion on scrimmages and not enjoying when it gets too competitive, the participants specifically compared their experiences in this all-girls program with playing sports with boys, as they can be “too rough,” as Maryam described it. Whether it was playing sports with boys in co-ed programs or in gym class at school, it was clear that none of the participants particularly enjoyed it and found greater comfort in all-girls spaces. Their experiences of gender and stereotypes in sport will be discussed further in the third theme.

Theme #2 - ‘I just think it bonds us as a community’: the power of listening and learning

As previously mentioned, at the end of a BTP session, each group, as separated by their ages, would gather into what we call a closing or sharing circle where the girls would all get a chance to answer questions posed by the coaches. These questions typically included: “what was your favourite part of today?”, “what activity would you want to do next week?” and fun facts

such as “what is your favourite ice cream flavour?” During the focus group, Maryam shared pictures she took of “when we sat in a circle and then we were just showing how, like, showing our opinion – what we did best, maybe what’s something we could work on, and then everyone’s just having a turn and sharing their opinion” (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Maryam’s photos of the sharing circle



When I asked Maryam how she felt about the sharing circles, she said that she liked when the coaches would ask them what activity they wanted to do next week because it meant that the coaches might choose it as an option, or choose to do it more often now that they know what everyone likes. Alyssa and Nazia agreed, with Alyssa using the word “comfortable” to describe how she felt about sharing her opinions and being listened to. Nazia said the sharing circle makes her feel “like, that we could tell anybody, like, how we feel about a sport.” For Nazia, I wish I would have followed up and asked her to elaborate more on this comment – specifically, if she meant if the sharing circle played a role in making her feel more inclined to express her thoughts and feelings in this program, outside of this program, or both. It would have also been interesting to know if perhaps this program, with the emphasis it puts on empowerment and using your voice, had influenced her use of voice in other settings. In other words, whether this program has

taught her transferable skills related to healthy communication. It would have also been interesting to know the reasons why she feels more comfortable using her voice. Does it have anything to do with a sense of belonging? Perhaps seeing her peers share their opinions makes her want to as well? Or is it through the encouragement from the coaches? Or all of the above?

Along with the sharing circles, discussions on participant feedback were also referenced in regard to BTP's post-program survey that asks about their overall satisfaction of the program, as well as this research study, both of which elicited similar sentiments as the sharing circles. Maryam stated: "It makes me feel like you care of my choices. It's nice, yeah, you guys are listening to it." Nazia followed that comment by acknowledging that the coaches make everybody feel like they "matter, and like, everybody cares about each other." Moreover, the sharing circle and understanding that the coaches are there to listen to them and their feedback resulted in a coach-athlete relationship where the strong rapport built resulted in Nazia stating that she does not "feel nervous to ask [the coaches] questions." Specifically, the sharing circle contributed to this rapport as coaches also shared their answers to the sharing circle questions. Simply getting to know the coaches favourite ice cream flavour played a significant part in fostering a caring environment in her eyes.

For Ellie, the sharing circle provided another benefit – it contributed to her sense of community (see Figure 3 below). As each participant took a turn answering fun fact questions in the circle, Ellie saw this as an opportunity to listen and learn about her fellow soccer players, stating:

I like hearing about other people to get to know them better. And I like hearing about different things that they like, like, let's say [their favourite] foods [...] I just think it

bonds us as a community. [Community to me is] like an inner circle, together, like friends, and supporting each other.

Figure 3

Ellie's photos of the post-sharing circle cheer



Ellie's comments on the sharing circle reminds me that the purpose of it is not just to gain feedback to improve the program and make the girls feel heard as soccer players, but also feel heard as people and beings. It reminds me that sharing a fun fact about yourself should not be seen as a trivial act but rather something that can create bonds through the power of listening and learning, which in itself, I believe, is creating social impact within a community – a strong tenet of FPAR that is echoed throughout this study (Frisby et al., 2009).

Ellie's comment on the sharing circles and her sense of community involving friendship and a supportive environment is similar to something else Alyssa said during the focus group. At one point in the discussion, Maryam and Nazia were talking about their experiences of being Muslim in sport and the diversity they see at BTP, which will be discussed further in the next theme, and at the end of this conversation Alyssa chimed in about the sharing circles (see Figure 4 below) and said:

Um, so like, back to the, uh, whole [sharing] circle thing. It's like, everyone, it's like a safe place for like everyone to be comfortable. That's all I wanted to say. I just wanted to say safe place. [A safe place to me is] everyone like supporting you, everyone's like making you feel comfortable, making friends, and people encouraging you.

With this comment, I wish I had asked Alyssa what made her interject with this, given that the current topic of conversation was not about the sharing circle anymore. Perhaps it was because Maryam and Nazia were speaking about their lived experiences and the welcoming environment at BTP that made her think of the words safe place. At this point I had also noticed that most of the participants gravitated towards using the words comfort or comfortable to describe their experiences in BTP, especially Alyssa. I wish I had asked them to elaborate more on this, too.

How I interpret their use of the word comfort is an umbrella term that encapsulates their thoughts and feelings about BTP. Comfort is brought on by listening, learning, feeling heard, supporting one another, building community and friendships, feeling cared for, and mattering – all of which are common terms that are included in definitions of what a safe place in sport is (Darnell, 2024; Johnston et al., 2019).

Figure 4

Alyssa's photos of a safe place, i.e., the sharing circle



Theme #3 - ‘You meet everyone here’: relationships and representation at Built to Play

Athlete-Athlete Relationships

The topic of friendship was prominent throughout the focus group discussion and appeared in the previous two themes – which is unsurprising to me as BTP places a strong focus on creating an environment that encourages the athletes to make new friends and invite their existing friends to join the program. During the photovoice activity, Ellie took a number of pictures of herself and a friend from school who she successfully convinced to join BTP (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Ellie and her friend smiling for a selfie



According to Ellie, her friend “doesn’t have a very strong personality, so she’s very quiet,” but Ellie’s mother told her that sport can be “empowering” and “help [girls] be more confident in themselves, like they can do something.” Moreover, because her friend is still working on her soccer skills, Ellie thinks that “it’s helpful when people support her because she usually doesn’t want to [play soccer] because she thinks she’s not good, but when people support her it really helps her and her confidence.” Again, aligning with consistent findings on the links between peer

support and improving self-confidence in sport for girls (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2012, 2013, 2018). Interestingly, whereas Ellie plays the role of a supportive friend, Nazia, on the other hand, spoke of her experiences being on the other end as the friend who is being supported, stating that when “your friends are around you that you know, and like they encourage you to play,” it makes her feel motivated to engage in the activities with confidence. Nazia’s experience falls in line with what was previously stated on the motivational influences of peer-to-peer relationships in sport – that is, girls are motivated and encouraged to initiate, continue, and maintain sport participation when surrounded by peers in a supportive environment (Weiss et al., 2013).

For Alyssa, as previously mentioned, friendship is a key aspect of how she described what a safe place is to her, and her experience of friendship manifested in a variety of ways at BTP as she stated:

I took a picture of my friends because like it was fun with my friends and I made some new friends too and I got to like know people more and I also took a picture of, um, my other friend too and like showing, uh, how my friends play soccer with me and they like something I like as well and I invited them.

Not only did she have existing friends in the program, but she also made new friends and invited more friends to join. Alyssa’s meaning of friendship in this context also involves sharing a common interest in soccer in saying “they like something I like.” Indeed, sport provides youth with a shared interest and a common ground where social connections can flourish (Badger, 2024; MacPherson et al., 2016). Notably, Alyssa spent a lot of time at each session with one of her closest friends in the 10-12 age group. So much so that Ellie was able to capture two photos of them together (Figure 6).

Figure 6*Ellie's photos of Alyssa and her friend*

Gender Stereotypes. The athlete-athlete relationships developed and fostered at BTP can also be explored through gender as it is an all-girls program. Maryam says she is “more comfortable [in an all-girls program] ‘cause like, sometimes if you’re playing with boys, like, sometimes they’re a bit rough and stuff,” especially in the context of soccer scrimmages and balancing the level of competitiveness, as previously mentioned. Maryam’s experience of boys behaving too physically rough and uninviting to girls is not surprising considering the historical context of sport – namely the perpetuation of masculine ideals and its exclusion of girls and women (Kidd, 2013). Ellie agreed with Maryam, and shared her thoughts and experiences on this topic, stating:

For boys, I find it harder to play with them a) because they’re like, stronger, and I would say, and more like, violent and rough, and b) because I feel like I have to step up my game whenever I’m with boys.

Although Maryam and Ellie share a similar sentiment on boys being rougher in sports, Ellie’s comment of boys being “stronger” is something I find interesting and I should have asked her to elaborate. My initial interpretation of this surrounds the language she used – does she think boys

are stronger than girls? In what ways are they stronger? Physically, mentally, biologically, socially? Based on the context, it is likely that she means physically stronger as they can be “violent” and “rough” when playing sports. However, is it possible that this language she uses is potentially reinforcing stereotypes of gender in sport – that girls are weaker because boys are stronger? At BTP we already try to send the message that girls in sport are empowered and strong – should we be trying harder or doing it differently? As I reflected on this with my position as the program coordinator, it was also important to remind myself that the participants do seem to have an understanding of such gender stereotypes through their lived experiences. Ellie said she “can’t really be myself [when playing sports with boys] because like, there’s this always sort of thing like boys are better at sports than girls,” and Nazia stated that “at school and stuff, like, like the boys always take over everything and they don’t let the girls play because they think they’re weaker.” Notably, the experience of sexism and gender stereotypes in sport can lead to a decreased sense of belonging, self-confidence, self-esteem, and perceived physical competence (Ayres & Leaper, 2013; Cowley et al., 2021).

The study participants’ preference for all-girls sport programs is supported by literature that speaks to the positive developmental benefits of these spaces that range from increased confidence and levels of physical activity participation (Bean et al., 2014; Petitpas et al., 2005). In their study, Bean and colleagues (2015), found that girls in an all-girls sport program noted that the environment created a sense of safety and trust that allowed them to be more comfortable being their authentic self, build community with peers and coaches – specifically through diverse social connections, and being treated like their opinions mattered. This current study’s participants have expressed similar notions. Ellie said, “I think that girls are easier to play with [...] we’re more understanding of each other.” Alyssa agreed, stating: “We can all have turns [in

the drills, scrimmages, and sharing circle]. Like, we can all make our own choices and like be more comfortable to talk to each other.”

Coach-Athlete Relationship

Along with athlete-athlete relationships, the participants also spoke of the coach-athlete relationships at BTP. Nazia shared the pictures of the coaches she took in the focus group (Figure 7), stating that she is “glad that all the staff here make me feel welcome and supported and they like play games with me [during the sessions].”

Figure 7

Nazia's photos of four (4) BTP coaches



This feeling of being welcomed and supported was previously mentioned in their discussion of

how the sharing circles facilitated by the coaches made them feel. Similar terms of caring and mattering were used when they spoke of the coaches and were related to how the coaches would show this through encouraging the athletes to take water breaks and providing them snacks at the end of the sessions. At BTP, one of our key features is positioning our coaches as role models for the girls in the program based on the acronym REAL, which stands for Relatable, Empowered, Active Leaders. This acronym takes form in the people who are hired as coaches. All the coaches at BTP identify as women, have a background in soccer, an interest in supporting girls and women in sport, and a large majority of them are women of colour. As previously mentioned, seeing people with shared identities and lived experiences in leadership positions, such as a sports coach, can result in greater sense of relatability, trust, connection, and belonging for girls (Jowett, 2007; King 2025; Washington et al., 2025). In Maryam's words, "you can just look up to them [the coaches]" as role models.

Going into this focus group, I naturally had a few thoughts about what the participants would discuss – one being the significance of having an all-women coaching roster. However, none of the participants has many opinions on this, with Alyssa saying it makes her "comfortable" that the coaches are women because they feel safe to talk to them – which aligns with how they spoke about feeling listened to by the coaches in the sharing circles. With Alyssa's comment, the others agreed, but they did not elaborate on it further. At the time, I found it surprising that they did not have much more to say, and it made me think that perhaps having all-women coaches is not as significant as I thought or as the literature on this topic discusses. As I reflected on it more, I had another thought that could reframe this, that is, perhaps the all-women roster not being a significant part of the focus group discussion is not a negative thing. Perhaps these girls who have been participating in BTP year after year no longer see an

all-women staff as something so incredibly radical that it warrants a lengthy conversation.

Perhaps this program has normalized it for them – because it should be normal and common for women to be in leadership positions and be part of an all-women leadership team.

Diverse Backgrounds at Built to Play

At one of the earlier BTP sessions in 2024, Nazia's mother, along with Nazia, approached me and shared her appreciation for the opportunity to join this program because in the past she had issues with finding sport or soccer programs that put such an emphasis on welcoming girls from a wide range of backgrounds – specifically bringing up how welcomed they feel as a family who identifies as Pakistani and Muslim. When I asked Nazia about her thoughts on this interaction during the focus group, she said:

I feel like that other people sometimes really don't respect other people's culture. But like at this soccer program, it made me feel like that everybody, like, is all welcome in different backgrounds and different cultures. So, it made me feel happy.

What Nazia spoke of here is an unfortunately common experience in sport as it historically and traditionally perpetuates notions of Whiteness that marginalizes racialized peoples (Fletcher & Hylton, 2016). Possessing one or more marginalized identities in sport can have vast negative impacts on a girl's well-being that ranges from decreased sense of belonging, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth, along with high levels of stress, and higher rates of drop-out (Lee et al., 2019; Kimiecik et al., 2021). Especially through an intersectional lens, girls of colour are more likely to experience higher rates and levels of these negative effects (CWS, 2022; Lee et al., 2019).

When building off of what Nazia said about the welcoming environment at BTP, Alyssa stated:

You meet everyone here. You might find people, like, in your background, too, and you feel more comfortable playing soccer because you know there's people like you who are girls who like to play soccer in your culture.

Alyssa is one of a small handful of Latinx girls in the program. She had previously mentioned earlier in the focus group that she finds comfort in playing in all-girls spaces, making friends, and finding motivation through encouragement from friends. With the above excerpt, we also see that playing with girls within her own cultural background also brings her comfort at BTP.

Similarly, Maryam, who identifies as Pakistani and Muslim, said, "You meet more people from your background and then like it's really interesting just talking [to them]." With the majority of the participants at BTP being South Asian, we have girls here who wear hijabs, as well as coaches, which are represented in multiple photos included throughout this section.

For Ellie, who identifies as White with roots in Honduras through her father, she noted that "it's nice to see the different cultures, like, um, like the different people." Her thoughts on the expression of religion and culture through clothing was also of note during the focus group as she stated, "I think that it's nice that the girls feel, like, welcome to like, do like, like support their cultures and they can wear everything they need to and feel comfortable with it." Ellie also saw meeting and interacting with people from different backgrounds as a learning opportunity, similar to how she saw the sharing circle's questions on fun facts to be an opportunity to connect with and learn more about the other athletes. Namely, during the focus group she asked me what the various headwear she took pictures of were called, noting hijabs and bonnets, and appreciated learning the "names for different stuff" (Figure 8). Once again displaying this study's strong value of listening and learning from a diverse set of voices, which is supported by being in a diverse environment like BTP.

Figure 8

Ellie's photo of a fellow BTP participant wearing a bonnet



Chapter 5: Knowledge Mobilization Elements

Along with collecting and analyzing data from the photo taking and focus group, I also wanted to intentionally incorporate the action component of FPAR into this study using the tenets of KMb. To briefly restate, KMb values the creation of knowledge through reciprocity and the dissemination of knowledge through accessible and digestible means in order to create social impact (Anderson et al., 2016; Fricker, 2007). In conjunction with FPAR, mobilizing the lived experiences of the study participants is also meant to amplify their voice to audiences that play a role in shaping their sporting experiences. In this section I outline and reflect on the process and outcomes of mobilizing the photovoice findings through social media, the action items that have been embedded within the current 2025 BTP program based on these findings, additional action items to consider for future BTP programming, and the limitations of this study.

Sharing the Participants' Photos on Social Media

During the focus group discussion, the participants were re-informed of what the next steps of this study would entail. After explaining what KMb is and why it is an important aspect of this study (i.e., to facilitate their voices being heard), I asked them for their ideas on how we could showcase their photos. After some discussion, one option stood out to them; an art show. Due to various restrictions and limitations, an in-person art show was not feasible, however, a virtual one was of interest, where their photos would be posted on social media through the GWIM and GFF Instagram accounts. The participants were given the option to create a physical photo collage with their printed photos, poster board, markers, and other craft materials that were provided to them. Nazia and Maryam made a physical collage, and Ellie and Alyssa did not. For Ellie and Alyssa, I created a digital photo collage, using some of the photos they discussed in the

focus group, and these collages were sent to them via email for co-creation, though neither of them directly contributed.

Social Media Post Details

The social media post included an opening slide with the title “Built to Play: Girls-Only Soccer Program: Through the Athlete’s Camera Lens,” followed by concise details about the program, what this study entails, and finally, a question directed towards the audience, which will be discussed in full later on. Next up were the photo collages. Maryam’s physical collage (see Figure 9 below) included 7 photos she took, along with various drawings: “GWIM” written at the top, a soccer ball with flames, a GWIM t-shirt, and a tree. Each photo also included a caption. For a picture of soccer balls, she wrote, “What is Girls and Women in Motion/GWIM? Girls and Women in Motion is a program where girls get to learn and play soccer in a space that they’re comfortable playing in.” For the two pictures she took of the sharing circles, she captioned, “In GWIM, girls get to share their opinions and feelings, while being themselves. It helps the girls feel more comfortable so they feel like they fit in” and “I like that at the end of each session we all sit in a circle and share our favourite thing about that day and what we learned. It also gives us an opportunity to work on our social skills.” Along with a picture she took of coaches handing out snacks, she wrote,

At the end of each session, we also get snacks for us to enjoy by our kind coaches. Our coaches are always nice to us and try to help us with whatever we need. I love our coaches because they always have nice drills for us and activities.

The other three photos show the drills and scrimmages, saying that we “do lots of games that teach us soccer while we have fun at the same time,” “learn things that are key to playing soccer,” and how the scrimmages are “usually [her] favourite part.” For the social media post, I

and appreciating the cultural diversity at BTP, and feeling cared for by and mattering to everyone in the program.

Figure 10

Nazia's photo collage



Ellie's digital collage (Figure 11 below) contained 7 photos of participants engaging in warm-up activities, sharing circles, selfies with her friends, an artistic photo of a soccer ball with the sun setting in the background that took her a couple attempts to capture, and a photo of herself striking a power pose. I added 2 of Ellie's quotes from the focus group – one about building community in the sharing circles through learning about the other athletes, and one about her support of cultural and religious expressions through clothing. Alyssa's digital collage contained 5 photos of her posing with a soccer ball, sharing circles, engaging in a drill with her closest friend in the program, and participants lining up to grab a post-session snack from the coaches. I included 3 of Alyssa's quotes that represent her experiences with developing and

fostering friendships at BTP, her feedback on drill difficulty, and how she sees the sharing circles as a safe place (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Ellie's photo collage (left) and Alyssa's photo collage (right)



Audience Responses to the Social Media Post

As for the question that was posed to the audience for feedback, I asked, "Think about the role(s) you play in sport (e.g., coach, athlete, parent, researcher). After seeing this post, what's something you could start, stop, and continue doing to better ensure girls in sport are empowered for life?" Here, I would like to note that "girls in sport are empowered for life" is GFF's slogan, which I incorporated in hopes that it would help gain more traction.

Over two weeks, the post on Instagram received 3309 views, which is three times the amount of views GFF's posts typically see on average. 72.5% of these views are from accounts who follow GFF, with the other 27.5% being non-followers. Moreover, the post received 71

likes, 13 shares, 5 saves, and 24 comments. The comments were written by BTP coaches, GFF staff, GFF Youth Advisory Council members, GFF community members, and one of the study participants' parents in response to the question posed to the audience, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

The role of the respondent and their response to the audience feedback question

Role	Response
Gabriela Estrada, GFF/GWIM Executive Director	START: incorporating more opportunities to hear the girl's perspective and experiences in more creative ways!! STOP: assuming easy and simple is better. Provide more opportunities for challenges and risk!! CONTINUE: all the relationship building!
GFF Staff Member	START: gently challenging/discussing stereotypes about girls and sport with other parents and coaches. And discuss safety more openly (I'm pretty open about it already, but I love sharing the message with others). STOP: believing we've "arrived" when it comes to girls and women's sport equity. There's still a long way to go! And lots more work to do. So we must stay energized and focused to keep pushing for more opportunities for girls and women in sport. CONTINUE: being excited about girls' and women's sports, being a number 1 fan for my daughters and their teams, working hard to ensure our mission is heard and supported, being a better parent and coach - open to feedback and learning always.
GFF Staff Member	START: making more of an effort to see & celebrate differing cultures and how they show up to play sport STOP: assuming every girl is the same, personalize their experience especially as it relates to skill level and making sure they feel challenged CONTINUE: offering environments and activities where girls feel comfortable sharing about their lives/experiences in/out of sport
GFF Staff Member	START: 2 different variations for drills, introduce the variations in a way though where it shows both are okay, there's no a superior one to the other, gauge the group's buy in to the different variations STOP: Enabling school environments where the boys take over to play, instead allow for dedicated spaces and opportunities for girls to participate in sports during recess CONTINUE: The closing circle reflection moments at the end of the sessions
GFF Staff Member	START: talking about sport as a tool for community-building & civic impact.

	STOP: buying into or allowing limiting beliefs about what girls & gender-diverse people can do in sport. CONTINUE: creating inclusive spaces where all girls & gender-diverse athletes feel empowered to lead, play, and thrive.
Member of GFF's Youth Advisory Council	START: Emphasizing the importance of creating culturally inclusive spaces for sport! STOP: Repeating old drills! The girls prove that shaking it up and finding something new can be fun, challenging, and rewarding. CONTINUE: Providing opportunities for girls to connect and make friends through sport!
BTP Coach and member of GFF's Youth Advisory Council	START: creating conversations that celebrate all body types and what they can do STOP: comparing athletes unfairly to one another CONTINUE: creating spaces where everyone feels comfortable, included, and supported
BTP Coach	START : listening more actively and implementing their suggestions and wants asap so they see that speaking up makes a difference and they get in the habit of speaking up and sharing as much as possible. STOP: assuming and repeating that what works and is easy is good. They are getting stronger, smarter and want to be challenged so add more variations to old activities and get more creative with activities so they keep growing and see how far they've come. CONTINUE: showing up and being a part of their support system to build a safe space for them to express themselves and know that they can ask for more in this space.
BTP Coach	START: being more intentional about keeping up with women's pro sports teams throughout the year while supporting local girls and women's teams/leagues/programs. CONTINUE: unapologetically taking up space in the realm of sports and challenging oppressive biases, stereotypes, and narratives about women in sports.
GFF REAL Role Model	START: helping girls reflect and dig deeper into the “why” connected to why they are participating in sport. And that there is no wrong answer! STOP: putting pressure on the end result, the journey is the important part CONTINUE: encouraging girls to stand their ground and take up space in any activity they choose
GFF Community Member	START: recognizing more female sport success STOP: enforcing uniforms and dress codes!!!! CONTINUE: community based supports
GFF Community Member	As coaches, athletes, and parents, we need to encourage girls to see sport as something they can carry with them forever. Being in sport means you get to do something you love, grow from it, and keep growing at every age. It builds confidence, resilience, and connections. And as adults, it gives us community, joy, and a reason to keep showing up for ourselves and each other. Let's help girls stay in the game, because it's not just about how far you go, more

	importantly I think it's about how long you stay. As an adult who still plays hockey, sport continues to enhance my life constantly and I'm so happy I was encouraged to keep playing from childhood into adulthood.
Study participant's parent	START: As a parent, teach them sports at a young age and continue to do so as they grow. Play catch or kick a ball around. Make it the norm. STOP: Assuming they wouldn't be interested in joining sports . How can they know if they will like it or not if they don't try? CONTINUE: To encourage your girls to try new things and teach them about the benefits of playing sports.

Based on seeing the quotes on the photo collages, many of the respondents shared similar sentiments that the participants shared and that I have been making throughout this paper thus far. Namely, the need to listen to girl's lived experiences, asking for and encouraging feedback, acknowledging different levels and needs in sport skill development, fostering inclusive spaces for girls, and empowering girls to try new things. What this shows me is that the respondents were able to digest and understand the contents of this post and the experiences that were shared. However, it is also important to note that some respondents discussed topics that were not explicitly brought up by the participants or I. For example, some of the respondents commented on the need to recognize the success stories of women in sport. This is a very timely topic as the professionalization of women's sport has skyrocketed in the past few years, which not only brings attention to women's sport, but allows for girls to see more representation in the media and provide more opportunities for them if they hope to become a professional athlete. One commenter noted the topic of enforcement of uniforms and dress codes in sport. The only time clothing was mentioned in the focus group was when Ellie spoke about her experience in seeing and learning about different expressions of religion and culture through hijabs and bonnets worn at BTP. Another key detail about BTP that I mention now as I reflect on this, is that at BTP, the only item we have on our dress code is for participants to wear close-toed shoes. We do not

require them to wear any traditional soccer attire such as cleats, shin pads, long socks, and shorts. We do provide them with a shirt to wear with our branding on it, and as of 2025, we now offer long sleeves to be more inclusive – whether the covering of the arms is for religious reasons or because it is simply more comfortable for the individual. The reason why we never enforce a dress code is for accessibility, such as financial limitations, and inclusion, because we believe that not owning a certain type of clothing item should not restrict you from participating in sport. This comment on the post about dress codes was something I personally appreciated as I had not yet critically thought about this aspect of our programming and why it is important to continue upholding it. Along with these responses depicted in Table 1, this post received six other comments of general praise such as “Love this!” by a community member, and “So lovely to see this work come together,” written by the GWIM volunteer who introduced me to this organization.

Importantly, the purpose of posing this question was not necessarily to qualitatively analyze the responses as another set of data, as the Findings and Interpretations of this study were solely based on the participants’ focus group discussion, but rather as a strategy to collect feedback by people who play a direct and/or indirect role in shaping the experiences of girls in sport. What the answers to this question can provide is multifaceted. For one, to restate, my role in this organization unexpectedly evolved from an external researcher to a program coordinator, a role that involves action responsibilities related to how current and future programs operate. The feedback I take from this post will be used in GFF programming to inform and improve the way we design and deliver programs to be as accessible and inclusive as we can. Another benefit of this post is that because it is public and GFF has a large following, I hope that it better solidifies GFF as an organization that values research-based evidence, participant feedback, and

partnership, and encourages other sport organizations to do the same. Especially as this aligns with tenets of FPAR and KMb that both strongly urge creators and disseminators of knowledge to consider and engage in reciprocity and the process of listening to, learning from, and amplifying diverse sets of voices (Frisby et al., 2009). Posing this question is also another way to explore the impact of this research as an FPAR and KMb study, because, in a sense, the people who commented on the post are sharing the action they will be taking within the world of sport as a result of learning about the participants' lived experience. Importantly, this post as a form of KMb to create actionable social impact extends beyond the study participants and partnering organization, essentially contributing to bridging the research-to-action gap by reaching other stakeholders that shape the experiences of girls in sport (Bammer et al., 2010).

Action Taken at Built to Play

This study's data was collected with the 2024 BTP program between July and September, and this final report was completed in August of 2025. Due to this timeline, the development and delivery of the 2025 BTP was influenced by some of the findings from the study. In this section, I discuss aspects of the BTP program that have already been influenced by the findings – the implemented recommendations, as well as recommendations that will be considered in the program development and delivery of the 2026 BTP program – the future recommendations. These action items are a strong reflection of how well this study aligns with the FPAR approach given that they directly answer to and reflect the needs voiced by the study participants, as well as the needs of the community partner (Frisby et al., 2009).

Implemented Recommendations at Built to Play

When considering the action component of the FPAR approach, the recommendations implemented at BTP are another way the research findings have brought action in a very tangible

and pragmatic sense. Based on the study's findings, the implemented recommendations surround coaching duties and the development of BTP's educational curriculum.

Coaching: Engaging in activities, prioritizing fun, and seeking participant feedback.

Before the 2025 BTP program commenced, coaches were required to attend an in-person training session in June led by me and Estrada. Although my paper at this time had not yet been completed, I found that the findings from my study greatly influenced this training session. For one, as Estrada was demonstrating one of the warm-up activities with the coaches acting as program participants, I recalled that one of my study participants, Nazia, made the point of how she enjoyed when the coaches would “play games with me.” With this in mind, after this activity demonstration, I discussed with the coaches the importance of engaging in warm-up activities and drills with the participants whenever possible as it helps build connection and create the welcoming and fun environment we strive for.

On the note of a welcoming and fun environment, another recommendation discussed with coaches during this training session was based on the importance of understanding that BTP is a recreational program that prioritizes having fun, making friends, and respecting each other by keeping our hands to ourselves. In past years, BTP has experienced issues with physical altercations such as pushing and shoving when the participants get overly competitive to the point where they begin breaking rules, cheating, and bickering. As one preventative measure, coaches were instructed to state and continuously restate our program priorities to the participants and parents whenever they get the chance. For example, because a common rule in soccer is to not use your hands, the instructions for a given soccer drill should always include this rule, and to better ensure participants' comprehension, coaches can restate this rule as a question. The coach could say “what should we be doing with our hands?” and the participants

could say, “keep them to ourselves!” in unison. This recommendation speaks to the balance between recreation and competition that the participants spoke about in the focus group, sharing their preference for a space where they can make friends, have fun, learn soccer skills, and be competitive to push themselves to learn, but in the absence of yelling negative comments.

This training session also saw Estrada keeping the coaches engaged and thinking about how to adapt and include skill progressions by asking them for feedback during the demonstration activities. After one bout of the activity, she would ask “what went well?” and “what can be improved upon for the next bout?” This sparked another recommendation I wanted to share with the coaches as I asked myself why coaches are not asking the participants for this feedback during the program sessions. Typically, and even in my own experience as a coach, coaches would decide when to move on from the warm-up activity, to the soccer drill, and lastly to the scrimmage. Any progressions made to the activities were also decisions made by the coaches. Although the coaches should be following some structure for logistical reasons, such as managing time, asking for feedback from the participants should also be included when it comes to decision-making processes. As such, coaches were instructed to do so and practiced this during the training session. They were also informed of why this is an important aspect to add to their coaching priorities. That is, in connection to the study’s findings, the participants expressed that the coaches asking for their feedback – whether it was through the sharing circle, post-program survey, or this study – made them feel a sense of comfort and mattering as it was a way of showing them that the coaches cared about their opinions.

Educational Curriculum. At Girls Forward Foundation, one aspect that we include in our programming is educational curriculum. Our current library of curriculum offerings includes topics such as body image, gender-based violence, building confidence and leadership skills,

healthy communication, and so on. Up until the 2025 program, BTP had yet to include an educational curriculum, and I had been tasked with developing one specifically for the BTP program. The educational workbooks I created included a weekly activity, either movement-based or worksheet-based, and a weekly reflection that involves ranking how they felt about today and questions asking them to write down what they learned today, their favourite part of today, and something they were proud of today (see Appendix E). The activities included topics such as positive self-talk and affirmations, foundations of healthy relationships, practicing mindfulness, and goal setting. Many of the activities are based on existing GFF curriculum that had been developed through evidence-based research through our partnerships with, for example, Canadian universities and Women and Gender Equality Canada.

Although the participants in this study did not discuss educational curriculum during the focus group, I still made direct connections between the creation of the workbooks and what was mentioned by participants in terms of their desire to learn and share their opinions. Their desire to learn was mentioned in relation to learning soccer skills and learning about the coaches and fellow program participants to build community and connection. Importantly, playing soccer not only involves physical abilities, but life skills as well, such as confidence, positivity, mindfulness, communication, and goal setting (Camiré et al., 2022; Lau et al., 2023). As such, the workbooks can contribute to the development of these life skills as they connect to developing soccer skills. Moreover, coaches were instructed to provide examples based on their own lived experiences when explaining each of the workbook activities when applicable – with the goal of building rapport and relatedness with the participants. In regard to the study participants enjoying the process of sharing their opinions through the sharing circle, the purpose of including a weekly reflection page in the workbook was to support this process. That is,

writing down their reflections before sharing them in the circle could allow for them to better form their thoughts and feelings before saying them aloud. Furthermore, in previous years, information shared at the sharing circles were never written down in any capacity, which typically resulted in coaches forgetting what the participants had shared. With the workbooks, coaches will be able to refer to their reflections as workbooks will be collected and reviewed after each session. Participants will also be informed that coaches will be reviewing them with the purpose of better understanding their feedback of the session and program, which hopefully contributes to what the study participants noted about their feelings of comfort and mattering that arose knowing that the coaches cared about their opinions.

Future Recommendations for Built to Play

As the program coordinator, I will consider this study's findings in the development and delivery of the next BTP program in 2026. One main focus will be developing the soccer curriculum to better suit the three age groups (4-6, 7-9, and 10-12-year-olds) by creating three separate curriculums. This action item will directly address the feedback from the study participants on their desire for progressions, learning new skills, and challenging themselves. In keeping with the value Girls Forward places on participant feedback in their program evaluation, I will also brainstorm a way to ask all BTP participants, not just the study participants, for their feedback on the current soccer curriculum. Ideally, the post-program survey they fill out at the end of the 2025 program, which I have a direct influence on, will include a question on this matter. Moreover, a question asking for feedback on the educational workbooks is of interest as this is the first year where BTP had one. Along with general feedback on the workbooks would be a question asking if there are any specific topics they want to learn about in next year's workbooks. Overall, as seen through the photovoice, focus group, and audience responses to the

social media post, continuing to listen and learn from the program participants and community members for a more participatory and inclusive approach to program development, delivery, and evaluation should always be at the forefront of an organization who believes that girls in sport are empowered for life.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study captured the lived experiences of participants in a community-based, recreational soccer program that aims to serve girls from equity-deserving groups. Through the use of photovoice in an integrated FPAR and KMb approach, the participants were not only empowered to use their voice in sharing their experiences, but the action and KMb components of the research process functioned to also amplify their voices to better ensure they felt heard, especially by people who play a role in shaping their sporting experiences. The process and findings of this study provides support for the idea posited by research in the fields of cultural humility, critical positive youth development, and (F)PAR that speak to the power of listening to and learning from a diverse set of voices, namely those who are traditionally silenced. Moreover, this study involving a partnering organization also highlights the need to engage in more community-research partnerships, especially as research on community-based and recreational programs is scarce, with programs for girls from equity-deserving groups being even more scarce. In particular, when considering that community-based and recreational sport programs typically experience a lack of resources for conducting research, the various privileges that researchers hold could be used to create mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships that strive to create actionable social impact within these communities. The participatory aspect of this study also sheds light on the process of designing, delivering, and evaluating youth sport programs and how direct and ongoing feedback from the participants in these programs should play a critical role. As shown through this study's research process and findings, empowering youth through using and amplifying voice in sport programming can create an environment where they not only feel included, but more importantly, where they feel like they belong and

feel heard by those around them who are open, willing, and humble enough to listen to their lived experiences.

Limitations

The present study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size of 4 participants warrants caution in interpreting the findings as this sample may not be representative of the larger group of girls who participate in the Built to Play soccer program or other community-based sport programs that serve girls from equity-deserving groups. Further, a variety of demographic and social identities markers were not explored in this study and may not be representative of the diversity within Built to Play and similar programs. In relation to identity, another limitation can be acknowledged as the feminist theories that form the basis FPAR approach were not used to inform the intersecting identities of the participants in this study. Therefore, the data from the focus group discussion that was analyzed may not have been examined as deeply as it could have been if intersectional theory was utilized. I also recognize there is a possibility of social desirability bias with the photovoice activity and focus group as the participants could have been responding to the activity and questions based on what they thought I wanted to hear as I took on a dual researcher-coach role. Finally, as reiterated throughout the paper, this study was not participatory in all stages of the research process due to limitations in time and resources for both me and the participants. As such, the question as to whether this study was a product of co-creation through a balanced power dynamic may be in question, despite my efforts to include them when possible.

Recommendations for Future Research

In regard to this current study, several recommendations for future iterations could be considered. Firstly, as an exploratory study, the research question of “what are the lived

experiences of athletes in a community-based sport program serving girls from equity-deserving groups” was quite broad. As a result, a variety of demographic and social identity markers were not discussed throughout the photovoice and focus group activity. More refined questions based on eliciting certain lived experiences could provide a broader spectrum of discussion rather than leaving it completely open-ended. This could be especially fruitful as the FPAR approach and the feminist theories that guide it value intersectionality and how lived experiences differ based on each individual’s intersecting identity. Another consideration for future iterations lies in the participatory aspect of the study. Ideally, their involvement should begin as early on as possible, even as far back as the creation of the research purpose and questions. The number of participants in this study is another aspect that should be revisited as a higher number would be more representative of the Built to Play program and the lived experiences of its participants.

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Appendix A

Generating Initial Codes

A: Okay, so I took this picture because this is when we were like playing the game and like I think it was like when we were doing some skills and some sports skills so that's why I took the picture because everyone was like doing the same thing and we were all like seeing how we were good at and stuff.

I: Yeah, and with the drills, like how do you guys feel with the drills? Like, when they're like easy, how does it make you feel? When they're harder, how does it make you feel? Like

A: No, they're easy. I feel like we should do something harder. *soccer too easy*

M: But there's not many hard ones. *not hard enough*

I: Yeah okay. Why is it good to like do hard things sometimes in, not just in sport, but like in life and like in sports? Yeah. Go ahead. Go ahead. Anyone can talk.

A: Because I feel like it would be like we're pushing ourself to learn something new. *learning new things*

I: Learning something new. Yeah. Like pushing yourselves. Right. If we keep doing like easy stuff, then like we're not gonna learn anything or we're not gonna. You know, grow as people.

N: And like we can get better at things. *getting better, more competent*

M: Or you can get like more experience. Doing each like a easy thing or hard thing. *more experience w/ diff skills*

I: Yeah, exactly. More experience. You can learn and get better. Right? Um, that was a great example, Alexis. Did you want to Does anyone want to go next? Sure. Sure.

M: For like Wait. I lost metal. For these two, it's like when we sat in a circle and then we were just showing how, like, showing our opinion, what did we like best: ~~this one~~, maybe what something we could work on, and then everyone's just having a turn and sharing their opinion. *sharing circle, opinions*

I: Yeah, and do you like when we do things like that at the end of the sessions? Like when we get together and do that?

M: Yeah.

I: Yeah? Why? It's interesting.

M: Cause like when you show, when you say your answer, they might do that like more, *being listened to* Like you know when you say like, I like this, and sometimes they do more of that/And then when they ask, like, um, what some game you want to play next time, you can give your opinion, and then they might do that as an option. *knowing what they enjoy, knowing what games to play next time*

I: Cause it's important, like why we do that, is to know what you guys like and don't like. Because this, all of this soccer session's going on here is for you guys, right? And so, when we ask you guys what we want to do, how does that make you feel?

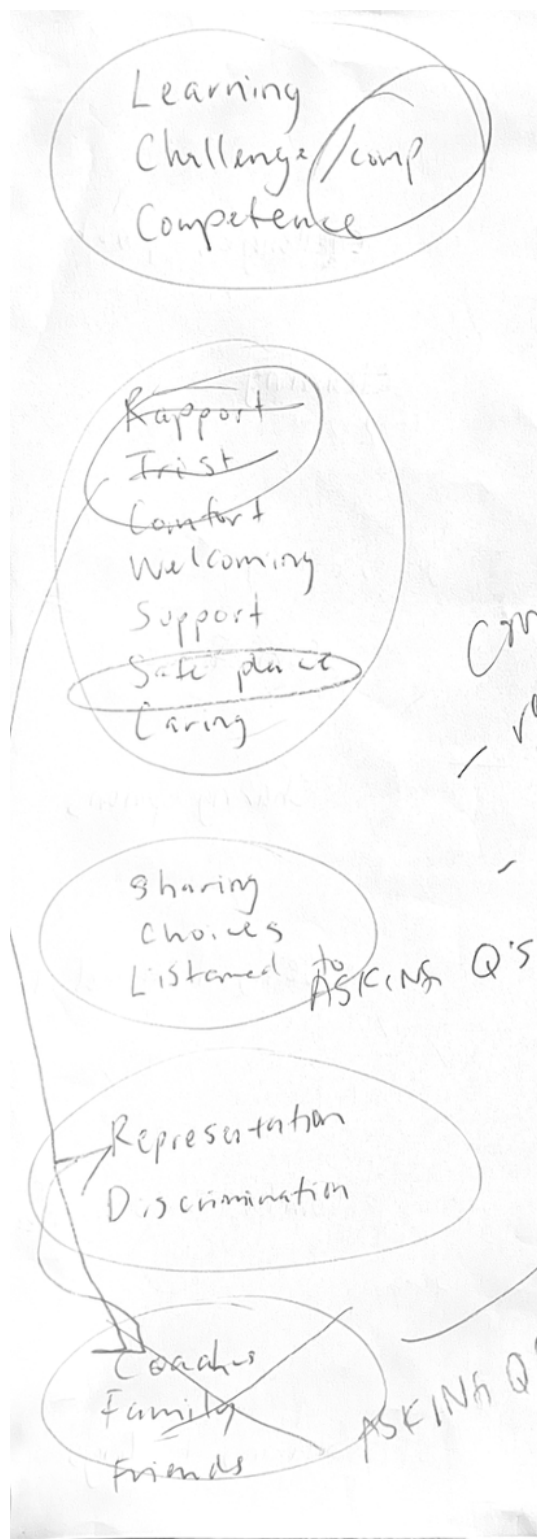
A: Better. Like, more, like, comfortable?

I: Comfortable, comfortable.

N: Like, that we could tell anybody, like, how we feel about a sport?

comfort from us asking what they like / don't like

knowing they can tell us their feelings about sport
Sharing feelings

Appendix B**Generating Initial Themes**

Appendix C

Figure C1

Visual Thematic Map of Theme #1

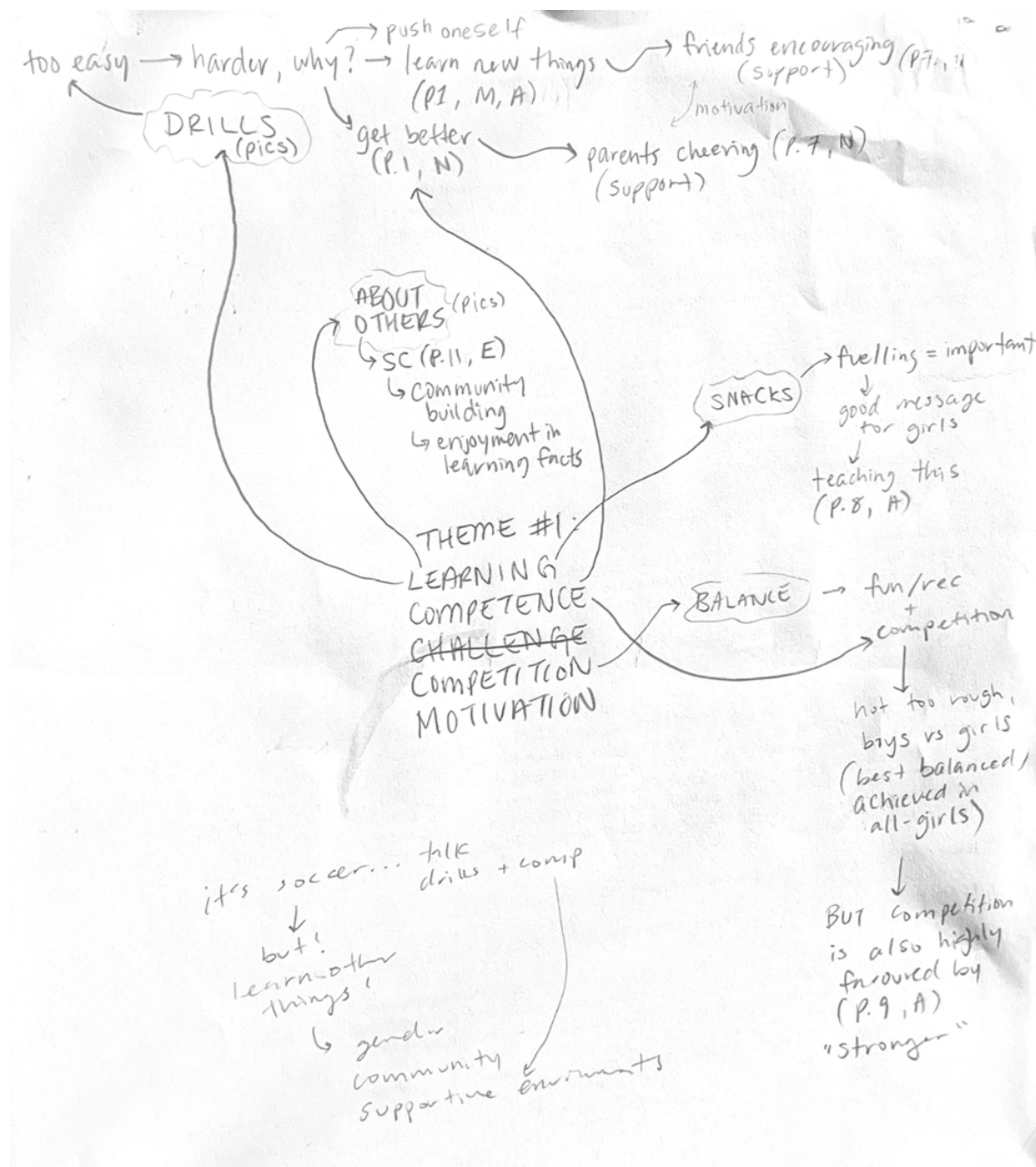


Figure C2

Visual Thematic Map of Theme 2

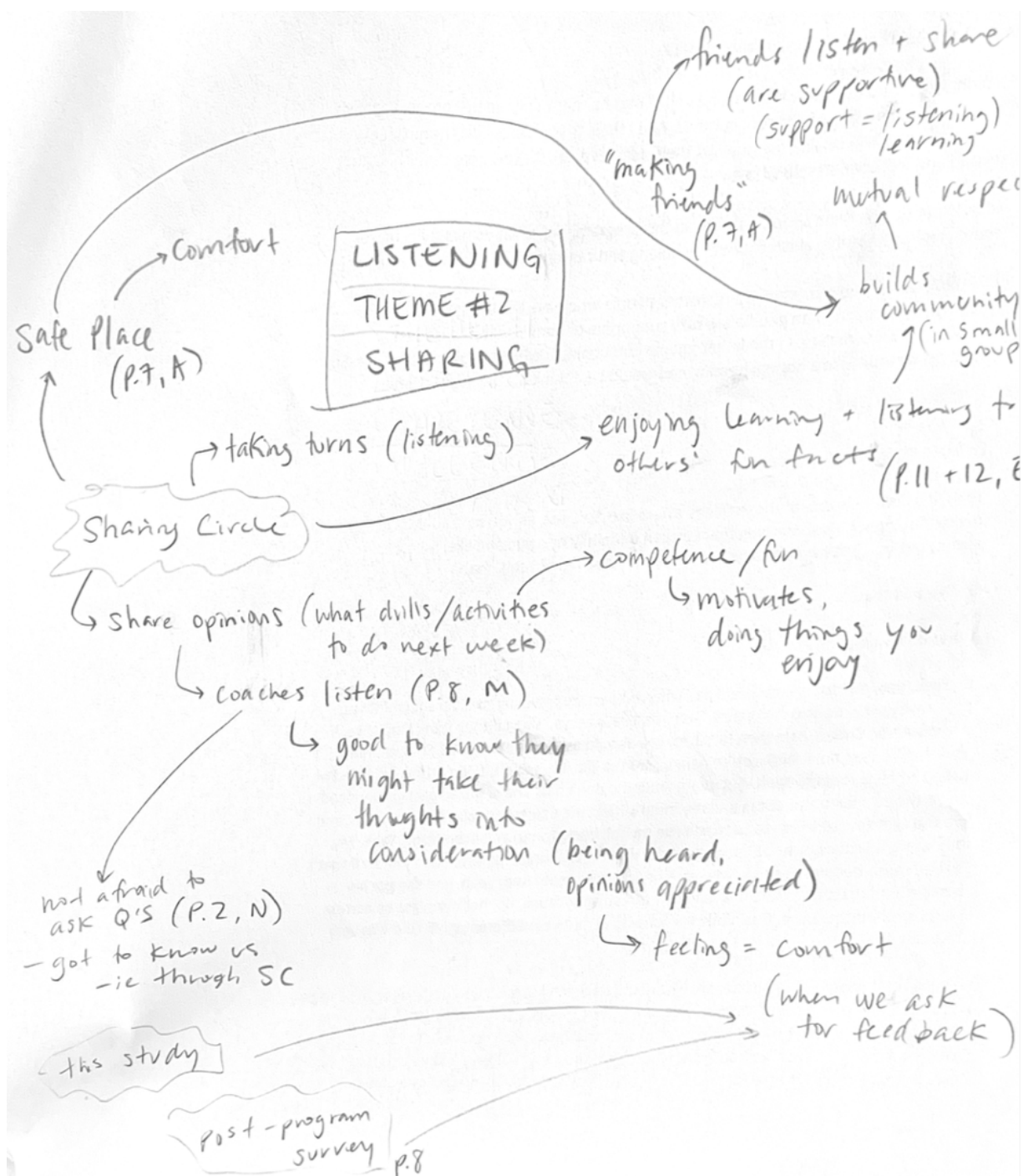


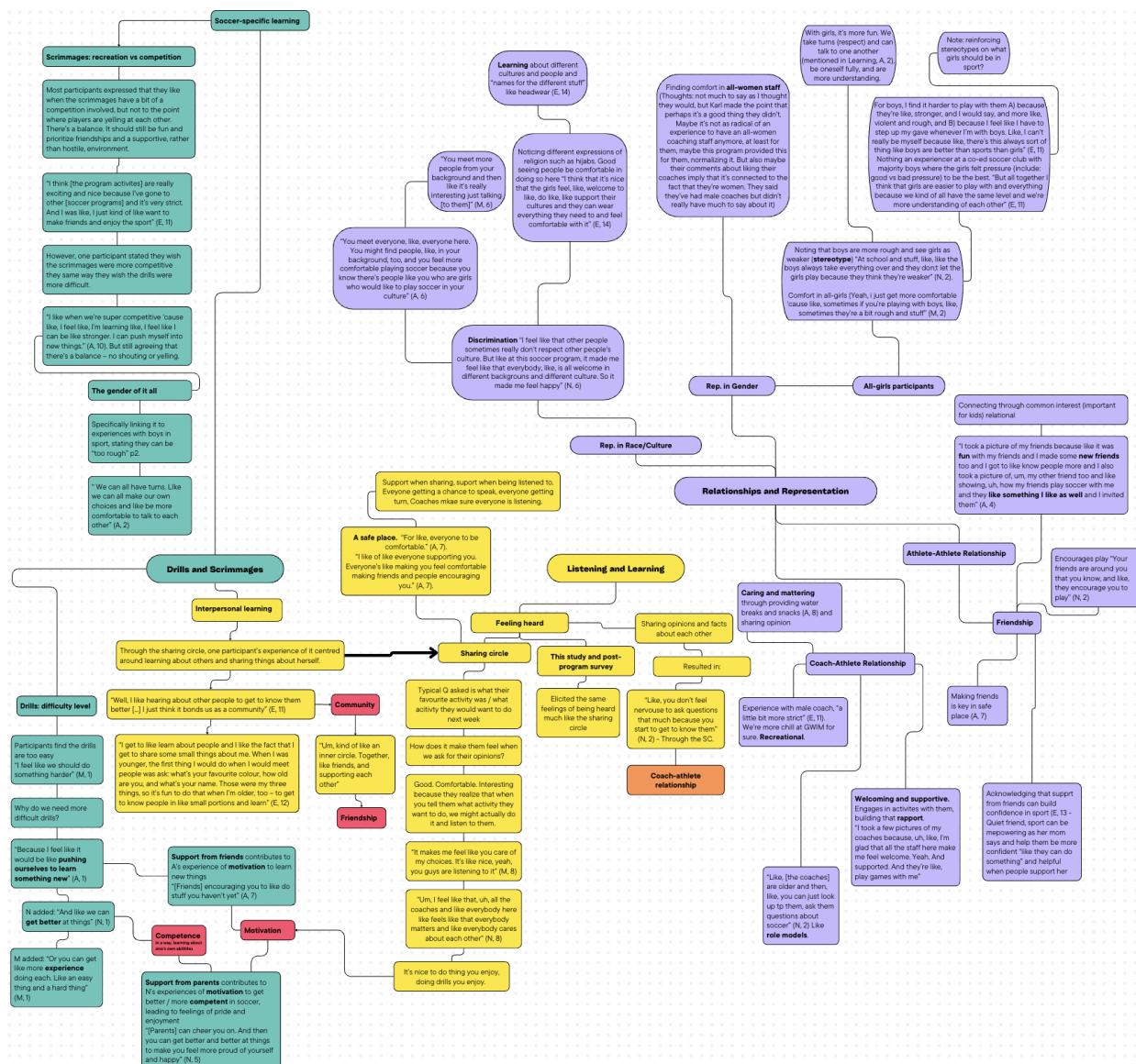
Figure C3

Visual Thematic Map of Theme 3



Appendix D

Digitized Visual Thematic Map of All Three Themes



Appendix E

Built to Play Workbook Example

REFRAMING MINDSETS

When you make mistakes or you're feeling down, it can be easy to say mean things to yourself instead of things that can be helpful and push you to keep trying your best.



For this activity, we are going to work on reframing our mindset from negative to positive! What needs to be changed in the unhelpful sentence to make it helpful?

Unhelpful self-talk	Helpful self-talk
	→
	→
	→
	→

WEEKLY REFLECTION #3

Today's Theme:

Being kind to yourself!

How I felt about today:



I'm proud of:

Favourite part of today:

Something I learned today:
