Why children join and stay in sports clubs: Case studies in Australian, French and German swimming clubs

Richard L Light[a], Steve Harvey[b], & Daniel Memmert[c]

a. *The University of Ballarat, Australia: b. The University of Bedford, UK; German Sport University, Germany*

Professor Richard L Light

r.light@ballarat.edu.au

Dr Steve Harvey,

Stephen.Harvey@beds.ac.uk

Professor Daniel Memmert

memmert@dshs-koein.de

This article builds upon research on youth sport clubs conducted from a socio-cultural perspective by reporting on a study that inquired into the reasons why children aged nine to twelve joined swimming clubs in France, Germany and Australia. Comprising three case studies it employed a mixed method approach with results considered within the framework of Côté and colleagues' Development Model of Sport Participation (DMSP). It identifies the importance of parents, the social dimensions of experience in the clubs and of appropriate competition in attracting the children to the clubs and keeping them there.

Keywords: Youth sport; Swimming clubs; Sport participation; Competition, Social context

Introduction

In recognition of the importance of encouraging children and young people to participate in sport, primarily driven by its perceived capacity to combat lifestyle diseases such as obesity (for example see, Goran, Reynolds & Lindquist, 1999; Hills, King & Armstrong, 2007), increasing participation in sport forms a core objective across a range of government policies in most developed countries. For example, in the UK, a key objective of the national body, Sport England, is to 'retain more people in sport' (cited, MacPhail & Kirk, 2006). While there is a significant body of research confirming the benefits of regular and sustained participation in sport for health and the development of children and young people (see for example, Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2005), far less has looked at how to achieve this and make it part of their lives. From both a participation and performance perspective, understanding what attracts children to sport, and keeps them involved in it forms an area in need of more research attention (Light, 2010).

Although there is a significant body of literature on participation in sport that focuses on children's and young people's motivations for participating in, or dropping out, of it, it is largely conducted from a psychological perspective (Côté, 1999; Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008; Ommundsen, Roberts, Lemyre, & Miller, 2006; Strachan, Côté & Deakin, 2009; Wall & Côté, 2007; Weiss & Williams, 2004) with far less attention paid to the meaning sport holds for children and young people and the socio-cultural contexts within which it takes place. For research conducted within youth sport clubs, as essentially social settings, the social and cultural context assumes pivotal importance as a factor influencing all aspects of participation in youth sport including the development of personal identity and a sense of belonging (see for example, Light, 2006), social learning (Light 2010a) and a sense of competency (MacPhail, Gorely & Kirk, 2003).

This paper redresses this imbalance in research on participation in youth sport by reporting on a study that inquired into the reasons why children aged nine to twelve join swimming clubs and stay in them with a focus on the social nature of membership in the

respective clubs. Comprising three case studies conducted in swimming clubs in Australia, Germany and France, it employed a mixed method approach, considering the results within the framework of Côté and colleagues' Development Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) with the results suggesting the need for some more nuanced readings of the model.

Youth Sport Participation

Research conducted on youth sport participation identifies the pivotal influence that parents, personal perceptions of physical competence, social acceptance, and enjoyment play in influencing children's and young people's decisions to participate in organized sport (see for example, Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté, 1999; McCarthy & Jones, 2007; Ommundsen et al., 2006; Strachan et al., 2009; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). It identifies conflict with other interests outside sport in terms of time and energy, a lack of fun ('boring'), poor relationships with coaches and a reduction in free-playing time as common reasons for withdrawal from sport (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Wall & Côté, 2007; Weiss & Williams, 2004). This is particularly marked in the early teenage years when young people move into what Côté and colleagues refer to in their Development Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) as a *specialising* phase that involves more commitment to one sport than in the previous '*sampling*' phase (see for example, Côté & Hay, 2002; Olds, Dollman, & Maher, 2009).

The research on youth sport identifies how the decisions young people make about participating in sport is shaped by the interaction of psychological and physical factors such as those between training patterns and levels of maturation. From a more social perspective it also identifies the influence of coaches, friends, parents and other significant people in their lives has on their decisions to drop out (Fraser-Thomas, et al., 2008)**.** In many countries such as the UK, Australia, Germany and Canada club sport forms a very significant aspect of young people's participation in, and experiences of, sport. Even in

individual sports such as swimming and athletics, clubs form social settings that have a significant influence upon attitudes toward, and experiences of, sport as well as upon the social and personal growth of young people (see for example, Light, 2010b MacPhail & Kirk, 2006; MacPhail, Gorely & Kirk, 2003). When used in research on youth sport clubs Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice highlights the social nature of membership in a sports club and the extent to which the communities that form around particular sports can contribute toward keeping children and young people involved in sport by making it meaningful and enjoyable (see for example, Light, 2006)

Development models for youth sport

Balyi's (see, Balyi & Hamilton, 2004) Long term Athlete Development (LTAD) model first developed for cross country skiing and later adapted across a wide range of sports has come to form the dominant model for the development of policy aimed at encouraging participation and developing talent around the world (Lang & Light, 2010). It is, however, based upon knowledge and research in physiology with little reference to the socio-cultural dimensions of sport and is reliant upon physical training, physiology and motor development. Despite a lack of critical research conducted on it, has been criticized as being too linear, prescriptive and inflexible (see for example, Holt, 2010; Kirk & MacPhail, 2003; Lang & Light, 2010; MacPhail & Kirk, 2006).

   The DMSP was developed by Côté and colleagues on the basis of published, peer-reviewed studies of athlete development (Holt, 2010) and provides a framework for understanding and explaining children's and young people's socialisation into sport (Holt, 2010; MacPhail & Kirk, 2006). It proposes three distinct phases that children and young people pass through in a process of socialisation into sport. The first stage is the 'sampling' phase during which they sample a range of different sports with an emphasis on fun and deliberate (structured) play rather than formal training. They can drop out of organised

sport, shift into recreational sport and/or leisure activities during this phase or move on into a specializing phase from the age of around 13. In this stage they move from deliberate play to deliberate (structured) practice aimed at improving performance, play fewer sports and engage in serious practice but while still maintains fun and enjoyment as a central element of participation. Critical incidents such as good experiences with a coach, early success and enjoyment can lead children to choose a particular sport at this stage (Côté & Hay, 2002).

From the specializing phase young people then move into an 'investment' phase that involves an increasing focus on one sport with a commitment to intensive training and competitive success at around the age of 16. In this phase young people 'invest' in a single sport. This progression seems to be relatively linear as long as young people stay involved in organised, competitive sport. However, during all three phases in the DMSP children and young people can move sideways into recreational sport where participation is more fun and informal or by drop out of sport completely.

MacPhail and Kirk (2006) argue that the DMSP offers an alternative to the linear and prescriptive nature of the LTAD. While we concur with them we do suggest that it also suffers a little from the same problems. The progress of young athletes is unlikely to be so linear as it suggests and there is a need for ongoing development of it to account for more variety across sports than it currently does. The model also needs to be open to more nuanced readings of it as has been suggested in other writing on swimming (Light, 2010a) and is suggested by our results.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods approach similar to that used by Taylor and Doherty (2005). In a first phase we used questionnaire data to collect background data and

data on the reasons why the participants joined and stayed in their respective swimming

clubs in the three different countries (France, Germany and Australia). In a second phase

we used the questionnaire data as a platform for interviews within which the rationale for

joining and staying in the swimming club could be explored in more depth with the

participants. Before we explain more about the data generation for these methods we first

provide a brief overview of the sites and the participants.

The sites and the participants

Participants in this study ($N =129$; $M_{age} = 10.39$ years; $SD = \pm1.07$; see Table 1) were

drawn from swimming clubs in, France ($N =76$), Germany ($N =20$) and Australia ($N =33$)

with data generated by the first author at the French and Australian sites and by the third

author at the German site. The sites were purposefully selected due to access the

researchers had to them and are referred to in this article as the Sydney Swimming Club

(SSC) the French Swimming Club (FSC) and the German Swimming Club (GSC). The

SSC has a membership of approximately 190 including 43 children aged between 9 and 12

years of age. The FSC is based at a pool in the capital city of a rural province with a broad

membership of 800 including 115 children aged 9-12 years swimming in competitive

squads. The GSC is based at a pool in a small city in Germany with a membership of

approximately 300 including 50 children aged 9-12 years swimming in competitive squads.

Participants all came from a reasonably homogenous socio-economic background within

each site and across all three sites.

   The study focused on children from nine years to twelve years of age, children within

Côté and Hay's (2002) 'sampling' years. This is group was chosen as this is a critical

period for competitive swimmers during which they are first introduced to serious

competition and training with nine being the age from which serious competition and

squad training is first available for children in Australia, France and Germany. It is also

the age range identified by Kirk (2009) as being critical for developing positive

perceptions of ability and attitudes toward sport as children typically enter organized sport

to assist in promoting life long physical activity. This age group also precedes significant drop out in sport from the age of 13 years (Côté & Hay, 2002; Olds, et al., 2009).

Table 1: *Table showing responses to background information questions from children in three different countries regarding swim club membership*

	France (N=76)		Germany (N=20)		Australia (N=33)		Total (N=129)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Background Information								
^Age (years)	10.18	±1.05	10.55	±0.89	10.76	±1.12	10.39	±1.07
Time in the club	47.04[a]	±30.27	87.50[a] / [c]	±17.21	46.21[c]	±35.97	53.10*	±33.51
^†School in the local area with a swimming pool	1.80[ab]	±0.40	1.35[a]	±0.49	1.39[b]	±0.50	1.63*	±0.49
Training Frequency	56.91[ab]	±26.96	75.00[a]	±14.05	78.03[b]	±18.50	65.12*	±25.28
This club is important in my life	75.33	±22.91	80.00	±15.39	75.00	±19.76	75.97	±21.06
I enjoy this club	85.53	±15.42	80.00	±15.39	84.85	±19.70	84.50	±16.59
I enjoy competing	73.68	±27.05	87.50	±19.02	84.85	±17.61	78.68	±24.43

Notes: ^Scores NOT linearly 'transformed' using percent of maximum possible score (POMP)

†School in area coded: 1='Yes', 2='No'. Thus, the higher the score the more children responded 'No'

*significant main effect ($p < .01$)

[a]significant difference in mean scores in post-hoc tests between France and Germany ($p < .01$)

[b]significant difference in mean scores in post-hoc tests between France and Australia ($p < .01$)

[c]significant difference in mean scores in post-hoc tests between Germany and Australia ($p < .01$)

All names of the people, clubs and the squads used in this study are pseudonyms used to protect their anonymity and informed consent was received from all participants using standardized procedures.

Data generation

The data used in this article were generated using a mixed methods approach that involved

the use of, a) questionnaires and, b) semi-structured interviews, and c) noted observations.

Questionnaires. The questionnaire comprised three sections: a) background information (N=7 questions), b) reasons for joining the club, which were preceded by the phrase 'I joined this club to...' (N=7 questions) and, c) experiences of being in the club, which were preceded by the phrase 'In this club… (N=10 questions). Response options for all questions, except four background information questions, were on a five point Likert scale that were anchored at one end with the term 'strongly agree', and the term 'strongly disagree' at the opposite. For the four background questions not on the previously highlighted scale, one ('school in area') required a yes/no answer and another asked the child their age. For the final two questions about their time in the club and weekly training frequency the children answered using a five-point Likert scale, which ranged from 'less than 1' to 'greater than 4'. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

Interviews. Three rounds of interviews were conducted over three months at each site with participants who were chosen at random from those who had agreed to take part and completed a questionnaire. A total of 60 interviews were conducted at the SSC and the GSC but two swimmers stopped coming to the pool at the FSC during the study leaving only 18 who completed the three interviews giving a total of 54 with a total of 174 interviews conducted across the three sites. The first round inquired into reasons for joining the club with the other two focused on experiences of being in the club with at least a month between them. The first and third authors conducted the interviews at the Australian and German sites respectively as native speakers and the first author conducted the interviews at the French site with the assistance of a fluent French and English speaker.

Observations. Field notes were made at each site and used to inform the interview data analysis. They focused on social activity, interaction, observed relationships between swimmers and between swimmers and coaches before, during and immediately after training, and at swim meets and on the regimes of training at each site.

Data analysis

Questionnaires. Responses to each of the items (except two of the background items, 'age' and 'school in the local area') were linearly transformed into the percent of maximum possible score (POMP) and used in all subsequent analysis (Cohen, Cohen, Aiken, & West, 1999). This was performed in order to provide a more comprehensible presentation in the subscale scores. After POMP transformation, a response of '5' (i.e. strongly agree) to an item yielded a POMP score of 100%, a response of '4' (agree) to an item yielded a POMP score of 75%, a response of '3' (neutral) to an item yielded a POMP score of 50%, a response of '2' (disagree) to an item yielded a POMP score of 25%, and finally, a response of '4' (strongly disagree) to an item yielded a POMP score of 0%.

A series of one-way analysis of variance tests were conducted on each of the single items to assess for significant differences between the independent variable (i.e. the three countries of France, Germany and Australia). In total, 24 one-way analyses of variance tests were completed. An alpha level of $p = .01$ was chosen to reduce the risk of a type I error due to the number of tests being completed. Significant main effects were examined in follow-up analyses using Bonferroni pairwise comparisons. Once again, an alpha level of $p = .01$ was selected. Analyses were performed with SPSS v17.0.

Interviews. We used content analysis to analyze the data inductively and to produce a systematic overview of it. through the reduction of information that was categorized into strong common themes. This process began with reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to identify and note recurrent themes that we then systematically identified across the data set.

Field notes. Field notes were used to help interpret the data generated in the interviews and triangulate the interview data.

Results

1. *Reasons for joining their clubs*

Analysis of the data collected through the questionnaires produced three main reasons for the participants joining the respective swimming clubs which were: 1) to be in a club, 2) to improve swimming performance and, 3) the influence of parents (see Tables 1 and 2). Analysis of the data generated through interviews confirmed the importance of the desire to improve swimming performance and the influence of parents while also providing more detailed and nuanced data on these themes. The qualitative data did not support the desire to be in a club as a major reason for joining across all three sites but did suggest that it formed a very significant reason at the German site. The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data thus led to the identification of two core reasons for joining the respective swimming clubs which were, a) to improve swimming performance and, b) the influence of parents.

a) Improve swimming performance. In interviews most of the participants at the three sites said that they felt they had some ability in swimming that they wanted to develop. Most of the participants at the SSC had positive experiences of the school swimming carnival, open to them from the age of eight years that acted as the origin of interest in competition:

> So, yeah, that's why I joined the club. I wanted to do better this year at zone (first level of competition above the school carnival typically involving 15-20 schools) and I didn't do very well last year. I did a PB of 40 (seconds for 50 metre free style) but by now I'm down on that by 3 seconds, which is good. (Australian female, 10yrs)

Indeed, a significant main effect on the one-way analysis of variance test for the item 'I joined this club to improve performance' was present ($F = 11.45$, df 2, 126, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .15$). Post-hoc analysis indicated a significant difference between Germany and Australia only ($p < .01$) with the Australian children yielding a POMP score of 87.12% compared to German children (70%) (see Table 2). Interviews further suggested that approximately

75% of the Australian children had been stimulated by a taste of success at their first school swimming carnival. For all but four of them the school swimming carnival had also provided their first taste of competitive swimming.

A high POMP score of 80.59% for the French children also suggests that a desire to improve performance formed a significant reason for joining the club (see Table 2). The interview data supported this as one of the FSC boys makes clear in an interview: "I joined the club to get better at swimming four years ago then I started to get better and better and get better places in competition so I started to enjoy it more and more" (French male, 11 yrs).

Table 2: *Table showing responses to reasons why children from three different countries join swimming clubs*

	France (N=76)		Germany (N=20)		Australia (N=33)		Total (N=129)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
I Joined this club:								
To improve Performance	80.59	±18.97	70.00[c]	±28.79	87.12[c]	±15.46	80.62*	±20.55
To be with friends	56.25[a]	±31.12	78.75[ac]	±23.33	51.52[c]	±27.91	58.53*	±30.38
To get fit (for swimming)	77.63	±27.26	80.00	±25.13	75.00	±24.21	77.33	±26.04
To have fun	59.21[ab]	±32.10	86.25[a]	±17.16	86.36[b]	±17.78	70.35*	±30.10
To be in a club	87.83[ab]	±15.54	71.25[a]	±24.70	71.97[b]	±17.41	81.20*	±19.27
Because I knew people in the club	54.93	±27.99	53.75	±33.71	46.21	±27.33	52.52	±28.78
Because my parents wanted me to	58.88	±36.22	66.25	±28.42	46.21	±23.49	56.78	±32.74

Notes: *significant main effect ($p < .01$)

[a]significant difference in mean scores in post-hoc tests between France and Germany ($p < .01$)

[b]significant difference in mean scores in post-hoc tests between France and Australia ($p < .01$)

[c]significant difference in mean scores in post-hoc tests between Germany and Australia ($p < .01$)

Unlike the Australian children they had not had any previous experience of swimming competition but learnt to swim early and had felt that they had some ability in swimming

they wanted to develop: "When I was very young I was a good at swimming and I wanted to get better and maybe compete and now I really love competing and doing well" (French female, 11 yrs). However, improving performance was not as strong a theme at the German site with interviews confirming that it was not a particularly significant reason for joining the club (Güllich, Emrich, Espwall, Olyslager, Parker, Rus, Lischka, & Thees, 2005).

All participants were already competent swimmers with years of experience of swimming in the same physical, social and cultural setting before they progressed to squads with this sense of competency forming a significant factor shaping their decision to make this move. As Kirk (2005) and others suggest, this sense of competence is important for encouraging ongoing participation in sport for children. At the FSC seven participants also nominated an enjoyment of swimming and of being in the water in addition to a sense of competence as contributing factors: "I joined because I love the water, I love swimming and I was good at swimming" (French female, 10 yrs).

b) Parental influence. POMP scores of 58.88% and 66.25% for the item 'I joined the swimming club because my parents wanted me to', showed that, for the French and German children respectively, this was important. POMP scores were lower, at 46.21%, for the Australian children on this item (see Table 2). However, interview data suggested that the parents of the Australian children exerted a far stronger influence than the participants had suggested in the questionnaire. With a little more probing into the influence of the school swimming carnival for them it seemed that their parents had encouraged them, and quite strongly with some of them, but that the participants wanted to give the impression that it was their own decision. For example, in the first interview an Australian girl explains how the decision was made to join a club and how it resulted in her qualifying for the third level of competition in the school swimming structure beginning with school, zone (about 15 schools) and area (about 12-15 zones):

Well, after the school carnival my parents and me talked about joining a club to see if I could

do better next year and get to zone so I did and the next year I actually got to area. So it was

really decided by all of us but I decided to join. (Australian female, 10 yrs)

Most of the swimmers at all three sites had some interest in the club themselves but typically their parents had suggested joining or had encouraged them. In interviews a majority of participants across all three sites said that the initial suggestion to join the club had come from their parents: "Two years ago my father wanted me to get involved (in the club) so he suggested I joined the club and since then I have really enjoyed it and want to keep going" (French female, 10 yrs).

2. Reasons for staying in the club

Two major reasons for staying in their clubs were identified. These were: 1) The social dimensions of being in the club and, 2) a sense of learning and achievement tied into an enjoyment of competition that we discuss below:

a) The social dimensions of being in the club. Data from the questionnaires on experiences of being in the club indicated the importance of making friends and/or being with friends in the club as a reason for staying in it at all sites (POMP scores of 75%, 90% and 77.27% for French, German and Australian children, respectively) (see Table 3). This pointed to the importance of the social aspects of the clubs that were explored more fully through interviews and observations. For all the participants their clubs provided a sense of belonging, identity and the social interaction through which humans learn about themselves and others (see for example, Bruner, 1990; Lave and Wenger, 1991). This social interaction and the meaning provided by membership in the clubs, we suggest, contributed most toward their enjoyment of it.

Membership involved participation in a number of different practices including, training, racing and taking part in social activities that, within the context of the clubs, were very social. Even at younger ages and in squads that do not emphasize competitive

swimming, training makes significant demands upon the time and energy of children such as those in this study with children in this study training up to six times a week. Observations of training at the three clubs showed how children interact before and after training and between training 'sets' while they rest and wait for others and this was confirmed by them during interviews.

Observational and interview data suggested that interaction before, during and after training formed part of the social aspect of training that made it 'fun' for most participants as a German female suggests in describing the pleasure of being in a meaningful group: "I like my swimming group, I feel good in it because being in this group makes training fun" (German female, 11 yrs). Indeed, the enjoyment of belonging to a group was strongest at the GSC where the participants placed great value on badges, other markers of membership and their position in the community of the club. These findings support the questionnaire results, which revealed a significant main effect for 'time in the club', ($F = 15.26$, df 2, 126, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .20$) with post-hoc analyses indicating a significant difference in POMP scores between Germany (87.50%) and France (47.04%) and Australia (46.21%) ($p < .01$) (see Table 1).

As field notes suggested, there was considerable social interaction in the changing rooms and showers after training at all three clubs where the girls in particular reported enjoying long chats as a girl at the FSC explains: "After training we sometimes have very long showers and do a lot of talking which I really love" (French female, 11 yrs). Field notes and interview data suggested that swimmers at all three sites created valuable social spaces for interaction and the development of friendship in the gaps between training sets in the pool as a ten-year-old female at the SSC explains: "We get to make friends and talk at training and at meets. We talk to each other at training, like when we're waiting for the last ones to finish the set and before David (coach) tells us what to do next and after and before".

Swim meets also provided opportunity for interaction and the development and enhancement of social relationships. The SSC conducted club races each Friday night after training for an hour to an hour and a half which were very low key and informal with no coaches involved and parents running them. These provided opportunities for the less competitive to taste racing, set a personal best time (PB) and develop racing skills in a supportive environment. However, neither the FSC nor the GSC offered club races with swimmers competing only in interclub races that led to provincial-level championships, which were the types of events that the better swimmers at the SSC also competed in.

Meets in all three countries were typically all-day events and longer for championship events such as state or provincial championships that provided far more time for social interaction than training did. Such extended periods of being together allowed the swimmers to get to develop social relationships with the coaches, their teammates and their teammate's parents and feel more part of a discrete social group. These meets provided an environment that was conducive to the enhancement of social relationships and a sense of belonging to the club. The sense of being in a team competing against other teams promoted identity with the club, social relationships within the club, and a sense of belonging: "Competition is so much fun and I really enjoy it because I am swimming with my friends and am part of the team" (German male, 12 yrs).

At the SSC parents drove their children to the meet and sat under the club flag where they and their children had ample opportunity for interaction with other swimmers, other parents and the coaches. At the FSC very few parents attended meets but the participants all said that they enjoyed the social aspects of meets. For example, in response to being asked whether he preferred training or competing one boy at the FSC said that, "Maybe (I prefer) competition because at meets I get to meet and talk with my friends in other clubs so that is a good part of competing" (French male, 10yrs). The German children also enjoyed the social aspects of competition and the opportunities it offered to confirm their sense of belonging in the club.

b) Achievement, learning and competition

Achievement in competition. Children from all three clubs had high POMP scores in response to the item 'In this club: I enjoy learning new skills' (85.86%, 82.50% and 86.36% of French, German and Australian children, respectively). Getting fitter was also given as a main reason for staying in their clubs (POMP scores of 83.55%, 81.25% and 80.30% were yielded for French, German and Australian children, respectively) (see Table 3). Interviews suggested that this meant both fitness as aspect of health, fitness for competition and a sense of well being from 'feeling fit'.

The data generated from interviews allowed us to dig a little deeper into the importance of learning and achievement suggested by the questionnaire data. The subsequent 174 interviews conducted suggested that the hard work involved in swimming training was largely made worthwhile and rewarding through the sense of learning and improvement that was made explicit through competition. Furthermore, the notion of a PB (personal best) made a major contribution toward the children's sense of achievement in and through competing at any level of competition. It acted as a measure of personal achievement regardless of results in relation to others that has been noted elsewhere (Light, 2008, 2010b). MacPhail and Kirk (2006) also noted that competition and competing against others was one of the main reasons for young people becoming more committed and undertaking training in athletics. Enjoyment of competition was evident in high POMP scores in response to the statement, 'I enjoy competing' in the first section of the questionnaire with POMP scores being highest at the German site (87.50%) followed by the Australian site (84.85%) and the French site (73.68%) (see Table 1).

At the SSC there were two forms of competition available that provided significantly different experiences for the 'social' and 'competitive' swimmers. The club races provide low-key environments for competing, achieving PBs and learning about competition for the 'social' swimmers who would typically compete in one or two interclub meets targeted

by the club over the year. The 'competitive' swimmers also took part in club nights but focused on interclub racing and achieving goals such as qualifying for, making finals or winning medals in, championship events. The German and French swimmers did not swim in club races but did compete in interclub competition leading to provincial championships. Although there were a few swimmers who aspired to making finals or winning medals at the provincial championships in France they tended to value being part of the team more than setting and achieving individual results. There was also less stress placed on results in competition that at the SSC or the GSC as is evident in the very low numbers of parents who attended the provincial championships.

While the questionnaire data suggests that most children in the study enjoyed competing it highlights some significant variations between the three sites due to the different socio-cultural contexts within which they are situated. In particular, it suggests that the French children were less enthusiastic about competition than the German children or the Australian children who seemed to value competition the most. Interview and observation data suggests that the SSC swimmers tended to be more competitive in attitude and place more importance on results. Indeed, one way analysis of variance results demonstrating a significant main effect was present for 'in this club there is too much importance on winning'; ($F = 9.57$, df 2, 126, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .13$). Post-hoc analyses revealed a significant difference between the French children (POMP score of 51.32%) and both the German (31.25%) and Australian children (34.09%) ($p < .01$) (see Table 3). While not statistically significant, French children also had higher POMP scores for the item 'In this club: my parents expect too much from me' (34.54%) when compared to both the German (21.25%) and Australian children (20.45%) showing that more of them agreed with this statement (see Table 3). Furthermore, more French children agreed that training was too hard, reflected again in their higher, but not significantly different, POMP scores (40.79%) when compared to both German (32.50%) and Australian children (34.85%) (see Table 3). These differences must be considered within the context of different socio-cultural

environments and the different emphasis of the youth development programs and policies of the national governing bodies. Specifically, competition is limited with children in France until they reach thirteen.

c. Learning. Although squad training at all three sites focuses on competition a sense of achievement and learning was not restricted to performances in competition whether considered in regard to PBs or to results achieved against other swimmers. The questionnaire data suggested a strong enjoyment of learning new skills, improving technique and of 'feeling' better in the water. This sense of learning is difficult to separate from achievement in racing but interviews suggested most children in the study enjoyed improving technique and learning new skills for the sake of learning and not just for to improvements in results. As important competitions approached, coaches at the SSC worked more on the techniques of diving, turning and streamlining with most swimmers saying they enjoyed this. The coaches at the FSC did not do this but did focus more on technique and on activities designed to improve the swimmers 'feel' and contact with the water that the FSC swimmers valued. In fact, they tended to talk more about the importance of technique and 'feel' for their future development than the SSC and GSC swimmers: "it is very important to train well so you can develop your technique correctly and become a good swimmer when you are older so I try to do my technique the best I can" (French male, 12 yrs).

Discussion

Perhaps the most significant finding for this study is the way in which it underlines the importance of the social dimensions of swimming clubs for making being in them meaningful and enjoyable enough to keep children engaged. It also appears to contradict the assumptions of the DMSP about the ages at which children typically move into a specializing phase but digging deeper into the significance of the social aspects of

membership in the swimming clubs brings the results more in line with the ideas of the DMSP.

According to the DMSP children at the age of those in this study would be in a sampling phase with an emphasis on structured play and fun but competitive swimming is significantly different to most team sports and even other individual sports such as athletics (see for example, McPhail & Kirk, 2006). The children in this study were already involved in deliberate practice focused on improving achievement in competition. The eleven and twelve year old swimmers in particular were generally committed to training for performance with most training frequently enough to make serious participation in other sports challenging. This suggests that many of them can be seen as being in, or moving toward, a specializing phase at an earlier age than suggested by the DMSP.

Considering the socio-cultural *context* of a swimming club provides valuable insight into how important children's social experiences of swimming can be for keeping them in clubs. For example, research that conceptualises swimming clubs as communities of practice illuminates the social nature of membership in them and the implicit learning that emerges from participation in their practices (Light, 2010a). This allows us to look at how coaches, friends, parents, other children's parents and other people involved in swimming clubs influence children's experiences and learning as individuals who constitute the communities of their respective clubs.

The DMSP suggests that the participants in this study would be motivated by having fun and by participating in structured play activities within a sampling phase. Such structured play is essentially social in nature involving social interaction and a degree of autonomy but, even for the nine year olds in this study, swimming training involves deliberate practice. However, it is fun and enjoyable because of the social nature of the clubs as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) with experiences of membership extending well beyond the time spent in the water. The important issue here for us is the

nature of the socio-cultural context of the club and the ways in which it provides for enjoyment. The results strongly suggest that fun, enjoyment and the meaning that swimming holds for the participants is inseparably tied into the social nature of the club, social interaction and the social relationships developed within it by the participants. That is to say, that the motivation and meaning typically provided by structured play during the sampling phase is provided through the social nature of the club.

The development of friendships through being in a club and relationships within the communities formed in and around the clubs made a major contribution toward enjoyment of swimming and the meaning it held for the children in the study. Friendships developed through shared experiences over extended periods of time also provided for the strengthening of feelings of belonging and identity with their respective clubs supporting similar findings in other settings (see for example, Light & Curry, 2009; Perlman & Goc Karp, 2010;Ryan, 1995). Peer friendships and other social relations, such as that with coaches that developed within the communities of the clubs, and more specifically within particular training squads, also gave meaning to achievements in competition, improvement in technique and achieving PBs.

Within the clubs in this study coaches played important roles in shaping the nature of children's experiences. This was not just in relation to what they were able to teach about how to swim fast and improve techniques but also in relation to how they shaped the nature of the children's social experience of being in the club. Coaches in any sport can exert a profound influence upon the children they coach with this likely to be intensified in swimming due to the high number of training sessions typically conducted each week and the length of a swimming 'season' that can extend to eleven months of the year when compared to team sports. Gould and colleagues (Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982) found that swimmers with coaches who adopt an autocratic approach, expect too much of their swimmers and lack empathy are more likely to drop out than others. In this study the swimmers all enjoyed a close relationship with their coaches and were positively disposed

toward them. They engaged in dialogue before, after and during training with them and generally felt both supported and valued by them. Côté and Hay (2002) suggest that such good experiences in sport such as having a good relationship with a coach and having good early experiences of a sport can lead to children and young people choosing to specialize in that sport. The positive relationships with coaches, early success and enjoyment of the social aspects of being in a club that many children in this study experienced contribute toward their enjoyment that is maintained as they move from a sampling to a specializing phase.

Commitment to improving performance in competition among many children in this study also suggests movement into a specializing phase before the age of 13. There were different levels of competency and competitive drive within each setting but once in a training squad most seemed to be able to find a level of competition that provided the right balance of challenge and success structured around the notion of a PB. A sense of competency also formed an important factor shaping the desire of the participants to compete. For the swimmers in the French and German clubs this feeling of competency was developed through their learn-to-swim classes but for a significant number of the Australian participants a taste of success in competition at the school swimming 'carnival' was identified as the main reason for joining the club.

Conclusion

In this paper we highlight the social nature of competitive swimming practised in a club and its importance for maintaining enjoyment, meaning and fun for young people as they move into a specializing phase at a relatively early age. While existing social connections and networks had little influence upon their decisions to join their clubs it became pivotal to their enjoyment, the meaning membership provided and to their desire to stay in their clubs. This clearly has implications for coaching and the management of youth swimming

clubs and for the development of strategies for redressing drop out from competitive swimming (and other sports) from around the age of 13 (see for example, Olds et al., 2009),

While this study identifies an early move into a more 'serious' approach to sport involved in the specializing phase among the young swimmers in it, our in-depth examination of the social and cultural dimensions of membership in the three clubs allows us to identify how this seems to maintain the enjoyment of structured play in the sampling phase. In doing so we provide a more nuanced reading of the DMSP focused on the social nature of being in a swimming club that provides another facet of the debate over the age at which young people should specialize. Our reading of how the socio-cultural context of the swimming clubs in the study contributes toward maintaining and extending enjoyment and fun into a specializing phase offers a more nuanced interpretation of the model by focusing on the social dimensions of membership in a sports club. This suggests that the DMSP may be a little rigid and need to account more for variations in the ways in which children and young people experience different sports as part of its ongoing development as a framework for understanding children's and young people's socialization into sport.

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