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The Current Youth Sport Culture and its Impact on Sport Participation Experiences of Low Socioeconomic Status Families

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Abstract

Purpose: The rise of sport specialization can jeopardize the opportunities for families of low socioeconomic status (SES) to participate in organized sport. However, obtaining an athletic scholarship may be a motivating factor for low SES youth to sport specialize. Yet, the experiences of low SES athletes in sport participation are not well known. **Method:** We used an Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore experiences of low SES families with children participating in sport and how this may be impacted by the current youth sport culture that promotes sport specialization. We engaged in semi-structured interviews with 12 low SES parents. **Results:** The following 4 interrelated themes emerged: (a) Benefits of youth sport participation, (b) Negatives and/or barriers to youth sport participation, (c) Strategies to get involved in youth sport, and (d) Facilitators for youth sport participation. **Conclusions:** Findings indicate that while low SES youth sport parents are motivated to involve their children in sports, there are many barriers that hinder their opportunities for their child to participate in organized sports. These issues are exacerbated by the current youth sport culture which emphasizes sport specialization with very few existing facilitators to involve their child in organized sport.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The rise of sport specialization can jeopardize the opportunities for families of low socioeconomic status (SES) to participate in organized sport. However, obtaining an athletic scholarship may be a motivating factor for low SES youth to sport specialize. Yet, the experiences of low SES athletes in sport participation are not well known. **Method:** We used an Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore experiences of low SES families with children participating in sport and how this may be impacted by the current youth sport culture that promotes sport specialization. We engaged in semi-structured interviews with 12 low SES parents. **Results:** The following 4 interrelated themes emerged: 1) Benefits of youth sport participation, 2) Negatives and/or barriers to youth sport participation, 3) Strategies to get involved in youth sport, and 4) Facilitators for youth sport participation. **Conclusions:** Findings indicate that while low SES youth sport parents are motivated to involve their children in sports, there are many barriers that hinder their opportunities for their child to participate in organized sports. These issues are exacerbated by the current youth sport culture which emphasizes sport specialization with very few existing facilitators to involve their child in organized sport.

Keywords: socioeconomic status; youth sports; sport specialization; interpretative phenomenological analysis; physical activity; organized sport

INTRODUCTION

The youth sport culture has drastically changed during the past 20 years where at present, roughly 50% of high school athletes also participate in a club sport team.¹ Club sports are more expensive than their interscholastic counterparts with parents spending on average annually \$1,500 compared to \$200 respectively.² In the 2018-2019 school year, there was a reduction of 43,395 youth athletes participating in sport from the year prior, which may be partly due to high school programs declining because of tightened school budgets and the shift toward club team participation.¹ The rise of club team participation limits accessibility to those that can afford to pay-to-play. This leaves out the children in lower socioeconomic status (SES) who lack alternative athletic opportunities.^{3,4} The lack of youth sport accessibility for this population may result in fewer opportunities for positive attributes that come with youth sport participation such as improving quality of life by reducing morbidity and mortality, maintaining a healthy lifestyle later in adolescence and adulthood, social interaction, and having fun.⁵ Instead of these positive attributes, in some cases, sport participation maybe driven by winning, maximizing sport performance, and obtaining a college scholarship for athletic performance.⁶ This shift in the youth sport culture may be a driving factor of sport specialization in adolescent sports.

Sport specialization is commonly defined as “intentional and focused participation in a single sport for a majority of the year that restricts opportunities for engagement in other sports and activities.”⁷ Despite the evidence of overuse injuries associated with the sport specialization trend, high school athletes are still joining club teams to improve upon their skills and showcase their abilities to collegiate coaches and scouts outside of the traditional interscholastic season.⁸ The desire of obtaining an athletic collegiate scholarship, by the athlete or parents, may be an enhanced motivator for low SES youth athletes to highly specialize and why they may be undeterred by the risk of overuse injuries. Consequences of injuries linked to sport specialization could be more detrimental to this population due to low SES families typically being uninsured or publicly insured and its association to health care disparities.⁹ Currently, multiple studies have collected data from sports medicine clinics or club sports and have demonstrated that family SES is proportional to youth sport specialization.^{9,10} However, the experiences of low SES families in sport participation and rates of sport specialization on a non-insured or non-club sport setting has yet to be qualitatively described. It is even more critical to understand these behaviors specific to the low SES youth athlete population because of how detrimental health care delays and disparities would be as compared to the normally studied youth sport population.¹¹ The overall objective of this study was to explore experiences of low SES families with children participating in organized sport and how this may be impacted by the current youth sport culture that promotes sport specialization. Understanding the experiences of low SES families is important in developing targeted solutions and promotion of organized sport equity in the United States.

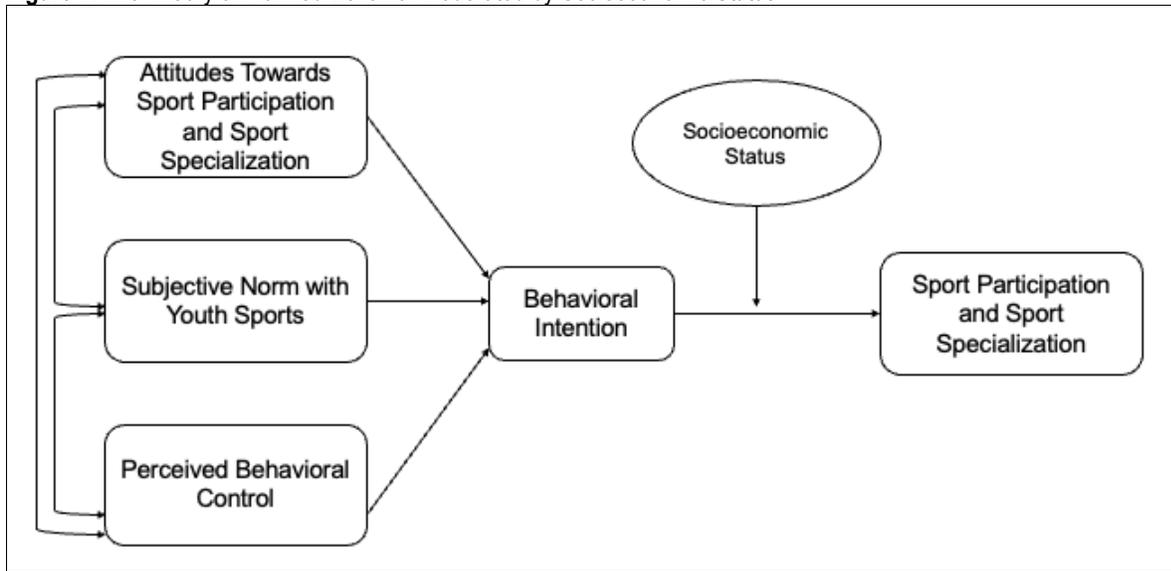
METHODS

Conceptual Framework: Theory of Planned Behavior

The theory of planned behavior was used as the conceptual framework to best explore the experiences and to extricate the emergent themes to enrich the understanding of sport specialization and sport participation for low SES families.¹² Researchers have explored beliefs and intentions toward physical activity among families from diverse socioeconomic status, and researchers have asserted that a behavior is more likely to occur if the intentions are strong, and this in turn is determined by expectations about profitable outcomes (attitude), social approval (subjective norm) and strong control belief (perceived behavioral control).¹² According to the theory of planned behavior, in order to change behaviors, barriers must be eliminated.¹² There is evidence to show that SES can affect the degree to which individuals translate their intentions to behavior where the relationship between intention and behavior is weaker in lower SES populations compared to higher SES populations.¹³ For the purpose of this study, the adapted socioeconomic status theory of planned behavior model will be used as the conceptual framework for the semi-structure interview guides (Figure 1).¹⁴

Research Approach

To elucidate an understanding of the participants' experiences as low socioeconomic status parents of youth athletes, this study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach theoretically rooted from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.¹⁵ IPA is focused on examining how participants make sense of their person and social world.¹⁵ In this study, the researchers examined low SES participants' experience, feelings and meaning with their child's participation in organized sport and the phenomenon of current youth sport culture and sport specialization. Two aims are central to IPA research approach. First, the researcher must attempt to understand each participant's world and describe “what it is like,” while focusing on a specific experience.¹⁵ With the second aim, the researcher must perform an interpretative analysis where they elucidate and present the specific meanings and feelings of participants.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Participant quotations were used to depict how people made sense of the phenomenon of current youth sport participation as a low SES family.¹⁷

Figure 1. The Theory of Planned Behavior Moderated by Socioeconomic Status

Participants

Prior to data collection, Sam Houston University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study protocols. Participants were recruited via social media and email. Prespecified eligibility criteria included individuals that, 1) identified as a parent, 2) had a child between the ages of 8-18 years old, 3) their child participated in an organized sport in the past 12 months, 4) qualified as low SES, 5) would be willing to complete a sport participation survey 6) would be willing to complete a 45–90-minute interview. SES eligibility was based on family size and total household income (THI) in compliance with the official 2020 US Census Bureau federal poverty guidelines as issued and published each year.¹⁸ The participant's THI poverty guidelines were multiplied by 125% and 185% to determine eligibility as low SES.¹⁸ Other SES factors such as education level, free-reduced lunch, insurance type, single parent household, and zip code were collected but were not SES eligibility criteria. Area of Deprivation Index (ADI) was based off zip code and classified in state score (Decile 1: least disadvantaged to decile 10: most disadvantaged) and national score rankings (100% being the most disadvantaged).¹⁹ Twelve (12) participants qualified and completed the research study. The sample size aligned with other IPA studies.^{15,17,20} Prior to data collection, each participant provided informed verbal consent agreeing to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to protect the participants' identities and of their children or family (Tables 1 & 2).

Table 1. Participant and Child Demographics

Parent pseudonym	Parent sex	Child sex	Child age	Child grade	Child's primary sport	Child's sport specialization level
Abby	Female	Male	15	9	Ice Hockey	High
Lisa	Female	Female	10	5	Basketball	Moderate
Dottie	Female	Male	13	9	Baseball	Moderate
Sarah	Female	Male	14	9	Football	Low
Diana	Female	Female	16	11	Basketball	Moderate
Serena	Female	Female	17	11	Tennis	Low
Liz	Female	Male	14	9	Football	Low
Misty	Female	Female	16	11	Volleyball	Low

Parent pseudonym	Parent sex	Child sex	Child age	Child grade	Child's primary sport	Child's sport specialization level
Lionel	Male	Male	12	8	Soccer	Low
Simone	Female	Female	11	6	Swimming	High
Katie	Female	Male	16	11	Football	Moderate
Toni	Female	Female	9	4	Baseball	High

Table 2. Participant SES Demographics

Parent pseudonym	State	ADI decile	ADI national	Number of people in household	THI	Child free-reduced lunch	Health insurance	Level of education	Spouse/partner	Spouse/partner level of education
Abby	IL	5	43%	5	Less than \$25,000	Yes	Public	Associate or 2-year college degree	No	
Lisa	WI	10	98%	5	\$50,001 to \$75,000	No	Public	High School Diploma or GED	Yes	Bachelor or 4-year college degree
Dottie	TX	9	93%	5	\$25,001 to \$50,000	Yes	Private	Associate or 2-year college degree	No	
Sarah	WI	9	75%	4	\$50,001 to \$75,000	No	Private	Bachelor or 4-year college degree	Yes	Bachelor or 4-year college degree
Diana	WI	7	58%	8	\$75,001 to \$100,000	No	Public	Graduate or professional degree	Yes	Bachelor or 4-year college degree
Serena	WI	2	26%	3	\$50,001 to \$75,000	No	Public	Bachelor or 4-year college degree	No	
Liz	IN	1	20%	5	\$75,001 to \$100,000	No	Public	Graduate or professional degree	Yes	Graduate or professional degree
Misty	PA	5	49%	3	\$50,001 to \$75,000	No	Public	Bachelor or 4-year college degree	No	
Lionel	TN	6	64%	7	\$100,001 to \$150,000	No	Public	Graduate or professional degree	Yes	Bachelor or 4-year college degree
Simone	WI	5	49%	4	\$50,001 to \$75,000	No	Public	Associate or 2-year college degree	Yes	Bachelor or 4-year college degree
Katie	TX	5	63%	8	\$75,001 to \$100,000	Yes	Private	High School Diploma or GED	Yes	High School Diploma or GED
Toni	WI	1	24%	2	\$25,001 to \$50,000	No	Public	High School Diploma or GED	No	

Data Collection

Three sources of data were utilized in this study: surveys, semi-structured interview protocol, and reflective interview notes. The surveys and the semi-structured interview questions were reviewed by a panel of six experts with expertise in the fields of athletic training and/or qualitative research. The surveys consisted of demographic information to determine eligibility and the sport specialization information which asked questions about their child's sport participation behaviors. Sport specialization level was determined using a commonly used 3-point scale.²¹

Interviews were audio recorded by virtual meeting software video and all completed by the first author. Each participant completed an interview ranging from 40 minutes to 80 minutes. Each interview began with the interviewer describing the purpose of the study, the interviewer's positionality, and obtainment of participant consent. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, which included broadly worded questions that were inspired by the IPA framework and the theory of planned behavior moderated by SES (Figure 1).^{14,22} The previously completed surveys served as information for the interview guide. The interview guide was used flexibly during the interview process to allow the interviewee to dictate the order and magnitude of the discussed topics and acted as a checklist to ensure that the same basic line of questions was completed across all participants.¹⁵ Participants were asked to reflect on general experiences as parents of youth participating in organized sport. These general experiences were not specifically prompted to describe experiences across time thus participants were free to describe experiences that were most meaningful, impactful, or memorable as a low SES parent of a youth athlete.²² Reflective field notes were recorded by the interviewer during and after each interview session.¹⁷

Data Treatment and Analysis

After data were collected, audio-recorded interviews were sent to a third-party service for transcription. All transcripts were reviewed for accuracy by the first author and sent to participants for member checking. Data were analyzed thematically using a four-step IPA analytical process.¹⁵ First, the first three authors independently read, reread, and listened to each participant transcript and interview and related field notes several times to develop a deep understanding and familiarity with the content. While doing so, the authors noted items of interest and early interpretative commentary in the transcripts and field notes in the form of descriptive and exploratory comments. Second, the first author reduced transcripts, reflective notes, and descriptive exploratory comments associated with each case into emergent experiential grounded themes. At this stage, themes reflected both the participant's words as well as the authors' interpretation of those words.¹⁵ Third, emergent themes were compared within each participant's documents to form a set of inductive clusters of related themes. Throughout this process, all steps were completed for each participant's data independently at the case level using NVivo. After thematic clusters were identified at the case level, the final step was to search for patterns and connections across participants through constant comparison. Thematic clusters that were considered in line with the purpose and framework of the study were summarized and presented as results. Yardley's four principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research in IPA studies and recommended by Smith et. al. was followed to evaluate this research study.^{15,23} These four principles included 1) sensitivity to context, 2) commitment and rigor, 3) transparency and coherence, and 4) impact and importance.²³

RESULTS

Based on the data analysis, the following four interrelated themes emerged: 1) benefits of youth sport participation, 2) negatives and/or barriers to youth sport participation, 3) strategies for youth sport participation, and 4) facilitators for youth sport participation (Figure 2). These four interrelated themes describe experiences related to the attitudes and beliefs of sport participation, the subjective norms of youth sport culture, low SES parents perceived behavioral control toward sport participation, and barriers and facilitators for low SES families to participate in sport. These four themes will be described, exemplified, and interpreted within the context of the current literature below.

Theme 1: Benefits of Youth Sport Participation

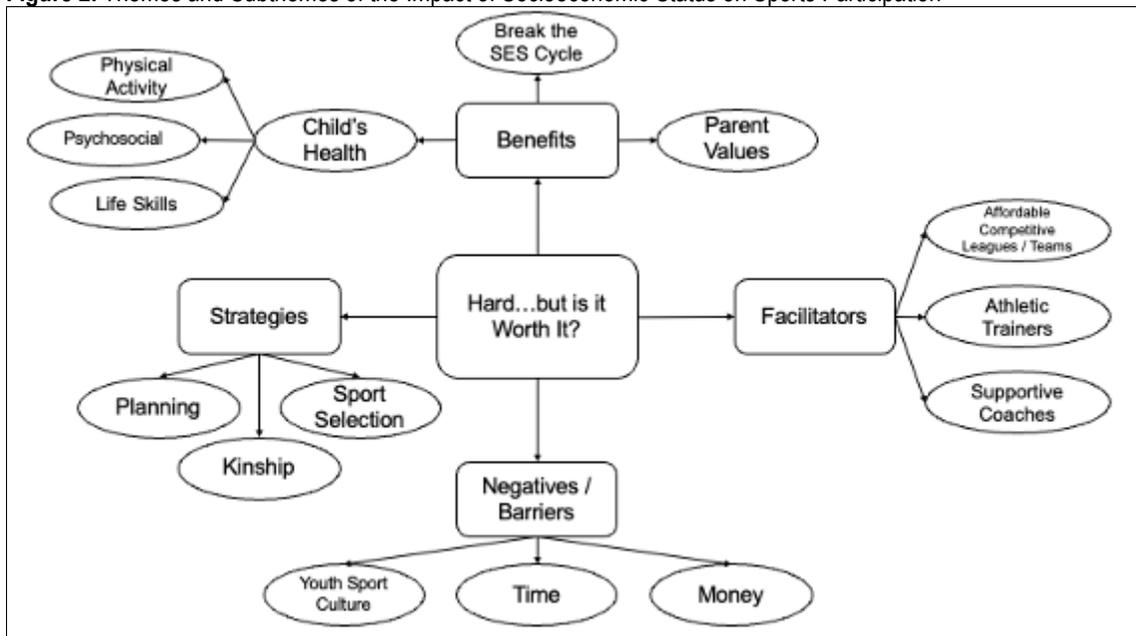
The following theme describes experiences for why youth sport participation is important or beneficial for the low SES families in this study. All parents in the study described how sport participation benefited their child in multiple aspects of their child's life and how it aligned with the parent's values. This theme is supported by the following three subthemes of 1) child health, 2) parent values, and 3) breaking the SES cycle.

Child Health

All 12 parents in this study described how sport participation benefited their child's health through being physically active, having an enjoyment for sport participation, socialization with friends, learning life skills and their child's mental health. Lionel said, "We want them to be healthy, we want them to be active, we want them to exercise, we want them to appreciate the benefits of exercise. Besides that, it's a stress-reliever, without a doubt, or that's one of the ways we approach it." Furthermore, Sarah describes the benefits of sport participation for their child's health by: "I want him to have fun. I want him to have a good time. That's my number

one goal of having them be in sports is to be physically active, have fun and enjoy time with your friends. Those are my three main objectives for him for sports.”

Figure 2. Themes and Subthemes of the Impact of Socioeconomic Status on Sports Participation



Parent Values

All 12 participants' values supported their child's participation in sport by focusing on their child's health as opposed to focusing on collegiate athletic scholarship attainment. This was rooted in the parent's very own youth sport experience and the values they learned from focusing on positive and more realistic aspects of sport participation such as socialization, learning to be a team member, and learning discipline. Sarah described sport participation to align with her value as a parent through the following statement, "I'm going to say two things. I'm going to say that thankful that he can do it, and I'm very proud that he can do it. My husband and I both work hard to be able to set good examples for him, and so I'm proud that I can not necessarily afford to spend a ton of money on the high expensive club teams, but that he can do the programs that his friends are doing. I'm very proud that we can... I guess, proud and thankful that we can spend a little bit of money on him being able to do stuff that he loves, and not only that, but be able to hang out with his friends, meet new people, meet different people and not even just your friends' friends."

Breaking the SES Cycle

This subtheme was unique to the low SES youth sport experience. These families clearly value youth sports for its health benefits for their children, but they also view it as a means to breaking the socioeconomic status cycle. Not only do they want their children to be healthy but to associate themselves with other positive peers and environments to stay out of trouble that can be found through sports. Parents perceived that the youth sporting environment may have added future financial benefits beyond a collegiate scholarship. Abby describes sport as life changing: "If anything, everyone told me, "You're crazy your kids are in sports," "You can't afford this," and "How are you going to do this?" Just last night, someone told me, "Yeah, good luck keeping this up." Like really? Screw you. It's been me all along, me trying to do what I can for my kids. I'm breaking that socioeconomic pattern. That's what I'm doing. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of being poor, and it's not going to happen. Can you imagine how many low-income kids' lives could change? Their lives would change by being able to play sports." Katie, an immigrant mother describes that through sport participation is how her husband was able to get off the islands. "Sports is all you've got, I mean, in his mind. And so, he wanted them involved in sports, and then he was, "That's how you got out of the islands, and got a better life, was doing well in rugby, because then you excelled. You got to go play in other countries." Diana describes that sport participation keeps her children out of trouble with the law. "I think that was good and that leads to friendships. It also helps keep friendships in a healthy way so that you don't have the temptation of going out and doing things that you shouldn't be doing, because you wouldn't be able to be on the team if you were getting bad grades or if you were drinking or doing other things that aren't allowed by not getting in trouble with the law."

Theme 2: Negatives and/or Barriers to Youth Sport Participation

Despite many reasons to have their children participate in youth sports, there are many negative and barriers for low SES youth families to access to opportunities for youth sport for their children. This theme is supported by the following three subthemes 1) cost of sport (fees, equipment, travel), 2) time, and 3) the youth sport culture.

Cost of Sport (fees, equipment, travel)

The cost of sport was described by all 12 parents in this study as sometimes being overpriced depending on the type of sport and it's setting whether it was interscholastic, club, travel, league due to the fees related to each setting, expenses for equipment and gear they would have to purchase yearly, and the expenses related to travel teams. These sport settings were often described as cumbersome to provide for the children or not an option at all for their family. Toni describes most sport participation costs to be associated with equipment. *"Yeah, I would say every year, you got to get new shoes, new apparel, and then new bats. Those are not cheap, so that's a big thing. Then just the sports, in general, I know with her little league. You're paying hundreds of dollars just for the one season. Then if you do any little camps like a winter baseball camp or a summer baseball camp, you've got those. Then a lot of it is mostly equipment, I would say. There's a lot in equipment, and then just paying for camps and the actual sport itself."*

Lisa stated that travel teams are very expensive and come with many sacrifices. *"Money's usually the big one. Traveling anything is so expensive, and it almost makes it seem like you have to eat ramen for the next two years because you're basically giving up everything for this child to play the sport and that's fine, but then I look back, I have two other kids. At some point, I could potentially have three kids playing club sports, and at that point, it just makes me nervous because there's no way we can afford to give all three of our children these same opportunities. At some point, there's got to be something that gives. I don't know what that is yet because we don't have to worry about it yet, but that I would say is the biggest thing. Even time isn't a big deal. You can find the time. I can't make more money up here."*

Misty has similar sentiments in which their family can only afford to do school-based sport. *"Yeah. She's always been school based. We've looked into club, but it is unbelievably expensive. Like \$3,000 a season. And that's only, I think it's November to January. Plus, traveling, plus hotels. So, it's just not something we can do."*

Abby said that in order to for her children to participate in club sports, they have to rely on scholarships, but they do not come easy. *"So, it doesn't guarantee the next three years; I have to reapply, but this one year, he has a world of opportunities. I heavily rely on scholarships. While scholarships are thin and rare for, say, college level, and he's always wanted to be on travel and he's been asked to be on some of the higher levels, but we've had to shut it down because there's no money. He was invited to go to an all-hockey school, and this was just for grade school or middle school and they had us tour there and they led us to believe that a scholarship was possible, not to worry. I was straight up with the income, and they said, "No, no. Come, come." Then at the end of the day after my son had his hopes up so high, they completely shut it down and said, "Hey, don't you have a grandparent that loves you a lot that can pay for this?" I said, "No, we ain't got no one. I told you that." I lost all respect for that school, and my son realized, "Hey, life's a lot harder than what it seems."*

Time

Time was described as a logistical barrier for many of these low SES youth sport families. Time restrictions could be because an individual was a single-parent, single-income household which required multiple jobs, and or having multiple children that required transportation to other obligations. Time presented itself as a barrier for these low SES youth sport families to the point where they would not consider organizations or travel teams that required substantial travel as an option for their child to participate on. Misty describes that with two kids it can be difficult as a single parent to get her children to and from practices, especially if they are in different locations. *"It is hard time wise. Especially with two daughters. Sometimes they have to be in different places and there's only one of me. So definitely time and getting them where they need to be. I think just the logistics has been the hardest just because of one person and two kids."*

The Youth Sport Culture

Lastly, the current youth sport culture was described by most parents (11 out of 12 participants) as a negative culture due to the pressures for their families to play on the expensive versions of their child's sport such as in club and travel teams and how recreational level sport participation was viewed as competitively inferior to the expensive versions. This youth sport culture was described as limiting accessibility to sport for these low SES families. The pay to play culture that Abby's son is experiencing leaves him with a negative youth sport experience. Abby describes a sense of hopelessness from her son, *"He doesn't expect anything to happen with the NHL because of the competition, the finances. Basically, he's poor, he doesn't expect anyone to notice him because he's not on those higher-level teams. So, he wants to be a hockey coach. He also wants to be a successful person."* Simone had to go against the social norms of the current youth sport culture by giving their child a break from sport. In doing this,

they could potentially lose opportunities for positive youth sport experiences. *"Last year he kind of wanted to take a break but it's really hard because even at 11 years old, it's like, there's this big concern if they miss a season that they're not going to be where everyone else is and he won't be on the same team next year with all of his friends."*

Lisa stated that they are not able to afford the competitive/elite versions of sport for her kids. This reality is described as saddening because they feel like their child will be at a competitive disadvantage. *"Those rec kids have no chance of catching up to the kids that have been doing club ball for four or five years at that point. I don't know, but I wish there was more of an opportunity for her to play volleyball not at a competitive level."* The youth sport culture is further described as limiting accessibility to low SES youth sport families by the expectations of club participation to be a competitive athlete. Sarah described being told, *"The basketball coach literally said to the head of high school basketball coach, literally said that if your girls do not play in this league, then they will not play in high school."*

Theme 3: Strategies for Youth Sport Participation

Despite there being many barriers of sport participation for these low SES families, they continue to persevere in promoting and providing sport participation opportunities for their child. As described by several participants, youth sport participation is "hard but is it worth it?" Due to their desire for sport participation and its health benefits, these families engage in strategies to involve their child in sport. This theme was supported by the following three subthemes 1) kinship, 2) planning ahead, and 3) sport selection.

Kinship

Kinship was described as a need to increase sport participation opportunities for their child among all participants. Kinship refers to social ties including having connections to someone who had a higher standing in their youth sport community, exchanging services or volunteering, or familial kinship. These social ties were strategies for low SES youth sport participation because these parents could utilize parents or stakeholders in their community for financial or logistical support. Abby described how she was able to offer sport managerial services in exchange for sport opportunities for her child. *"I became a rep for a power-skating camp as a volunteer. Basically, all this time, I volunteer, I was manager for seven years in exchange for some type of compensation to keep... Yeah, so I've been playing that game since he was born."*

Lisa describes that without familial kinship there would be more barriers to sport participation for her child. *"If we didn't have help from our extended family, there's no way that she would be able to have these opportunities. Even the club volleyball team she just made is double that, and that scares the bejesus out of me, but we have family who has said, 'We'll help you.' We have people who will help us because there's no way we would be able to afford. I stay home. I'm a stay-at-home mom, so we only have the one income, and it makes me feel bad that I wouldn't be able to afford to give my child these opportunities if it weren't for our amazing family."* Serena, who is a single mother, describes kinship with other single mothers to overcome barriers related to transportation and timing of work. *"It was a well-oiled machine. And it wasn't that you had to know someone to reach out to them to get into their carpool. It was kind of like they just took up all the families that had kids that were involved, and just the next thing you know you get an email from somebody saying, 'Hey, you want to be part of our carpool?' But it was very nice."*

Planning Ahead

Planning ahead was demonstrated by all parents in our study whether it was by gathering as much information to be best prepared to apply for the next cycle of youth sport scholarships or by setting aside finances for the cost of sports for the upcoming year. Parents in our study described a need to plan ahead financially and build a good profile of their child so that they could give their child an opportunity to participate in youth sports. Abby described preparing a portfolio of her son's accomplishments related to sport, academics, and extracurriculars to help with obtainment of sport opportunities. *"When he was younger, I started a portfolio, and that also helped throughout the years. So, he was in USA Hockey Magazine, he was with something with AHA, and then I started saving all the letters of recommendation and then I started saving the grades. I basically had a portfolio. I think there were a few times where it saved me."* Serena stated that she saves her tax refund for the next school year to ensure she has the funds to pay for organized sports for her child. *"Basically, every year when I get my tax refund, I set it aside for the next year. So, it's everything from like school registrations to my property taxes, to all of those sports that they're going to play, and the costs associated with them. So, it's really how I finance it with my tax. So, I get a tax refund and just putting it in a savings account and just knowing that that's what it's there for."* Shifting finances for sport opportunities was described by Misty. *"She has cross country and volleyball in the same season, so August is a very, very expensive month because I have to pay all those at the same time. So, the boosters and the athletic fees. So, I actually in January I start saving for August. Yeah. If there's an entertainment budget or a food budget, I might steal \$20 every month from January to July to make sure that I have enough money in August to pay those. I mean, I know what the fees are, I know how much I have, so I just kind of whittle away at it until I have it."*

Sport Selection

Selecting a sport was a strategic decision based on cost and time that was implemented by all parents in our study. Factors contributing included familiarity with the sport, easy access, family schedules, location, and travel. Diana describes that selecting more accessible sports that require less travel and equipment was the strategy that allowed her children to have sport opportunities. *"Well, first, we have six kids, and they all are in some type of sports. She's our oldest. For us, access has to be ... it can't be overwhelming. We're not interested in doing a sport all year long. Also, track is a sport that it doesn't matter your financial background. If you can buy a pair of shoes, you can run. You look at like softball, which would be the alternate for girls in the spring. That's an expensive thing. They go all year long. They go on travel teams. It's not a lot of gear, but there's gear. Part of it is that either basketball or track, really doesn't cost much money if you choose to do it. You just show up and try hard."*

Theme 4: Facilitators for Youth Sport Participation

Facilitators for youth sport participation are described as external solutions that the parent has no direct control over. These solutions are thought to be structured programs and stakeholders such as athletic trainers and coaches who support the parent's goal of having their child participate in youth sport in a safe manner. This theme is supported by the following three subthemes 1) affordable competitive teams, leagues, or programs and youth sport scholarships, 2) athletic trainers, and 3) supportive coaches.

Affordable Competitive Teams, Leagues, or Programs, and Youth Sport Scholarships

This subtheme describes the structural programs that exist or need to exist. Accessible programs for low SES youth sport families and scholarships to support these families were described as solutions to increase their child's opportunities to participate in sport. These structural facilitators are described as a solution to the negatives and barriers related to being a low SES youth sport family navigating the current pay to play culture. These structural facilitators are supported by youth sport stakeholders such as existing youth organizations like the YMCA, school districts and coaches, parents unifying and volunteering their time to improve youth sports affordability.

Multiple parents described programs like the YMCA allowed accessible sport opportunities for their families. Abby stated, *"Well, we need to keep little programs like at the YMCA where it's \$400, \$500 a season. We need to have programs in place for people who have financial hardships and who can prove it. For Christ's sake, make public skate half the cost for people who are poor instead of \$14. It's better to have someone at some cost than have no one, right? You see what I'm saying? You have five people that paid full price, but you could essentially have ten, and that adds more income because you're not doing anything special to the ice to have those extra five people out there. You know what I mean? I don't know. Money blows."* Simone describes that the YMCA is better for their family for multiple reasons: *"We chose The Y for a few different reasons, one of which is location, and obviously, I'm there a lot too working out. The Y has really become family and part of the community for our family as well. My family plays basketball through The Y, I workout there. We've enjoyed it, it's right down the road. Price point was a big thing for us. When she first started, she was actually on scholarship for The Y, so that helped."* Sarah describes how the parents of their child's sport organization has focused their efforts to keep the cost low while still providing a positive youth sport experience. *"Parents really like that we keep the costs low, and so they would rather volunteer and have to host a lot. Also, if you host, you also don't travel a ton. For that reason, we're able to keep our costs a lot lower. We're fortunate enough for our school district lets us use the gyms without charging us gym fees, where other school districts, their schools will charge the organizations to use them because it's not through the school head coaches are on the board also, so it's not through the school, but yet we have the support of the school, and we're able to give back to the program."*

Athletic Trainers (ATs)

ATs for the parents of high school-aged youth athletes in our study were described as an existing external facilitator to their family participating in youth sports. AT's impact on their child's health and health care was described as reducing their fear of their child being injured in sport. This was a fear of low SES parents because of the potential cost of a sport-related injury may have on the family. Katie describes being thankful for the health care her son is able to receive for free as a high school athlete. *"They take good care of them. I think that they're in good hands over there. We don't have to really pay for a massage, or anything outside of what the school offers. I believe it saves him from getting further injured, or whatnot, just because they're in good hands."* Misty stated that she feels her daughter is safer participating in high school sports because she has access to an athletic trainer that understands their socioeconomic status and will tailor care for their needs and financial and insurance barriers. *"Yeah. They definitely make me feel better because I know, AT will either take care of it and if she would say, "I think you need to take (daughter) to the emergency room." I wouldn't hesitate because I know she's not someone that overreacts or is like, "Oh, yeah, go ahead and take her. They might see her." She fully knows our situation and so I know if she's telling me to go, then it's time to go. So, I definitely trust her a lot and take her opinion. That's definitely helped me not worry as much because I know she can take care of a lot. She's always very helpful. I think there was many times last year where maybe I could have taken her to a Med Express or something but the AT took care of it. So, she helped me a lot last year. And she helped again this year too. After she was cleared*

from concussion the AT is the one that helped ease her back into the sports. Those are part of the school so those are free. She was always down there before practice or making sure everything was good. So, we did luck out there too that we have really, really good ATs."

Supportive Coaches

Lastly, youth sport coaches that supported the parent's values of the benefits of youth sport for their child were described to be a facilitator for youth sport participation. This was demonstrated by coaches supporting multi-sport participation, not pressuring their child in a negative way, and providing affordable and fun opportunities for sport outside the interscholastic setting that did not involve the club or travel setting. Sarah describes that their child's coach encourages multiple sport participation. *"His football coaches the last couple years have said, "It's really good to do two..." The football coaches have really promoted doing track in the spring, and that's also why he tried track this past spring."*

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of low SES parents of youth athletes and how the current youth sport culture was perceived by these parents using the theory of planned behavior as a conceptual framework. The most important finding is that low SES families experienced many barriers to sport participation. Additionally, we observed many strategies these low SES families implemented to overcome barriers to their child's sport participation. Moreover, participants articulated desired facilitators that they have not experienced yet, but they believe would be beneficial to increase sport participation. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to describe the experiences of low SES youth sport families toward sport and sport specialization behaviors.

Theme 1: Benefits of Youth Sport Participation

Numerous studies have detailed the physical health benefits of youth sport as well as psychosocial benefits.²⁴ Larson et al. compared youth participation in sport with other forms of organized activities such as art, academics, community service, and faith programs and reported that students in sport had significantly higher rates of imitative, emotional regulation, and teamwork experiences compared to students in other activities.²⁵ The reported benefits of sport are consistent with our study with all 12 parents.

All parents in this study had a clear mindset on wanting to provide a positive youth sport experience for their children. Most parents in our study identified their child as being moderately to lowly specialized (9 out of 12 children) and described this as being influenced by their intention for their child to be involved in organized youth sport. Furthermore, breaking the SES cycle was unique to low SES families in this study. The SES cycle, or intergenerational poverty leading to what we know as the "underclass" is a difficult cycle to break due to a child's SES being determined by their parents. Numerous studies have demonstrated how physical activity in youth is associated with better academic performance and later in life, higher educational attainment.²⁶ For example, sport participation in 12th grade predicted a range of post-secondary outcomes for youth such as improved grades, university applications, and eventual educational attainment.²⁷ Sport participation may be particularly important to these families' lives because their children can gain personal and social benefits from activities, they likely would not otherwise experience. The parents in this study see sport participation as a method to break their SES cycle, to have better life outcomes unrelated to physical activity but in moving their child up in the United States social class.

Theme 2: Negatives and/or Barriers to Youth Sport Participation

The current pay-to-play youth sport culture limits accessibility for low SES families that may not be able to afford the club or travel teams due to cost and time. Previous studies have focused on how SES position influenced personal, social, and environmental factors for participation in physical activity involvement (including sport participation).²⁸ The barriers of cost and time were frequently described in our study and mirror other studies' findings of low SES associated with lower rates of physical activity.^{1,29} Abby described how difficult it was to get her son involved in ice hockey due to cost. Other participants in our study described cost as a barrier to their child participating in the club and travel version of their child's sport. Furthermore, studies have reported a cost barrier to participate in sport for their child if the child belonged in a single parent household.¹ Five out of twelve participants in our study identified as a single-parent household which cost of sport was a financial burden on their family.

Another barrier identified was location of sport opportunities. Previous research observed associations with proximity to sport location, transportation to sport and resources for sport and sport participation rates. Logically, when sport facilities are located further away it becomes more difficult to travel and participate due to the scheduling.³⁰ These findings were similar to previous research that described barriers to sport participation based on SES as cost related (lack of resources, access to good equipment, transport), time (child's and parent's schedule, transport), and location (space, access, suitability, and transport).²⁴ These negatives and/or barriers to sport participation are described by the participants in our study as being magnified by the current youth sport

culture which promotes pay-to-play sport opportunities and sport specialization.³¹ Sport specialization behaviors present themselves as a negative and barrier to the low SES families in our study. Parents in our study expressed feelings of “hopelessness” and “lack of control” due to expectations placed from the youth sport culture which promotes sport specialization and for youth athletes to participate in the club version of the sport to be more competitive. This is due to them not being able to afford the expensive versions of their recreation or interscholastic youth sports and the feeling that their children are not able to ever catch up to children that have the opportunity to play the club or travel sports. Simone described the current youth sport culture as limiting the opportunities for her child to be a multi-sport athlete and thus being highly specialized in swimming. This has pushed for several parents in our study to seek out youth sport scholarships to cover some or all of the cost of their child’s sport. Abby describes that while youth sport scholarships exist, they are never guaranteed for the year you apply and the following years, further showing the negative impacts of the expensive youth sport culture limiting access to physical activity via sport participation for low SES youth athletes.

Theme 3: Strategies for Youth Sport Participation

Strategies for youth sport participation were seen as a parent driven behavior for the families in our study. Parents described needing to overcome the negatives and barriers of youth sport participation such as cost and time through kinship. This was accomplished by forming connections with youth sport stakeholders who would point them in the direction of youth sport scholarships opportunities or allow them the opportunity to exchange services for reduced fees in their child’s sport. The exchange of service, or reciprocity implemented by low SES families as a way to strategically build up their social support networks has been established in many studies.³⁰ Forms of kinship described by the participants in our study involved relying on other youth sport parents and sometimes other single parent households to be able to coordinate the logistical burdens related barriers such as transportation to youth sport events.

Furthermore, kinship was displayed through direct familial relationship with some of the low SES families in our study receiving financial or logistical support from family members. One strategy many families implemented was to plan ahead for the upcoming year of sport participation for their child by setting aside money at critical time points such as when they received their tax refund. This strategy has been demonstrated across other studies that focus on low SES population and their responses to scarcity.³² The stigma of low-income not being good with their finances is contrasted with the parents in our study planning ahead with the finances to afford the opportunity of organized sport for their child. ³² Another fundamental idea that low SES parents in our study implemented as a strategy was to select a sport that complimented their financial situations and their schedules based on resources, location, transportation, and support that was available to them.

Theme 4: Facilitators for Youth Sport Participation

Parents expressed a clear need for additional funding through youth sport scholarships or structural programs that were affordable and as competitive club teams as solutions for low SES youth to be involved in organized sport. These structural facilitators were described as existing help that the low SES families did not have to go out of their way to obtain. The parents in our study described how community support through stakeholders such as school district administration and coaches can be a facilitator for sport participation. This support allows for affordable or free rental of facilities or support of participation of multiple sports and affordable sports.

Further structural support was described by parents of high school age children having access to an athletic trainer. High school athletic trainers are uniquely positioned health care providers and at an optimal public health intersection where they can provide equitable health care to vulnerable low SES adolescents. Athletic trainers are essential in providing a high standard of care which impacts life-long health and physical activity during a critical time such as adolescence. Athletic trainers have direct care with a significant number of low SES students attending public secondary schools. Post et al. demonstrated that nearly 95% of all secondary schools in their study used services of an athletic trainer, yet the presence of an employed athletic trainer on-site is negatively impacted by the median household income and percentage of free-reduced lunch students at school.³³ In our study, only 3 participants identified that their child was on free-reduced lunch, but due to SES inclusion criteria based on Census Bureau poverty thresholds, all participant’s children in our study qualified for free-reduced lunch.¹⁸ For low SES student athletes, athletic trainers in the secondary school setting might be one of their primary forms of equitable health care.

Limitations

Bias is inherent in qualitative research; however, with an IPA approach, and multiple-analyst triangulation was conducted in effort to minimize those biases as well as implementing Yardley’s four principles.²³ Our investigation provided a broad view of low SES youth sport parents of children of various ages, locations, sports, and sport specialization levels. Future studies should further generalize these findings and identify differences between all settings.

CONCLUSION

In this study we identified four themes that demonstrated 1) the importance of the youth sport experience for low SES families, 2) the many barriers these families face to participate in youth sport due to the current youth sport culture, 3) the strategies these families implement to overcome these barriers, and 4) the few structural facilitators that exist for these families to participate in youth sport. Future studies and interventions should consider youth sport participation for low SES athletes through the lens of a public health approach by implementing policy change. Youth sport stakeholders and allied health practitioners should strive to provide more structural support for these low SES youth sport families through affordable and competitive programs, shifting away from the pay-to-play culture, providing more youth sport scholarships, and receiving support from comprehensive coaching, and funding quality health care from athletic trainers.

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