

## Inside the ‘black box’ of a long-term sport-based youth development boxing academy in New Zealand

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### **Abstract:**

This study examined a well-established, boxing-based positive youth development program for boys in New Zealand. The authors were cognizant of calls for investigation into what occurs within the ‘black box’ of successful programs. The study was interested in identifying and describing what processes and procedures occurred within the Naenae Boxing Academy and the impact that participation in the academy had on the boys in their wider lives. The study used a mixed method approach involving the systematic analysis of boxing sessions, extensive interviewing, surveys of participants, and multiple observations. The program was found to provide a consistent caring and safe environment for the boys. The teaching of positive values to the boys was central to the program, and it was also found that the values learnt impacted on the boys’ behaviors and relationships outside of the academy.

**Keywords:** Sport-based youth development | positive youth development | boxing

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

The belief that participation in sport and physical activity will lead to positive outcomes for youth is well established in western culture with Coakley (Citation2016), for example, describing it as having reached the status of a ‘taken-for-granted cultural truth’ (21). It is for this reason that sport is often the context chosen for positive youth development (PYD) programs. Sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs are implemented with a strong expectation that they will provide a successful avenue for PYD and that the learning that occurs within the program will also impact participants in their wider lives (Erdozain Citation2012; Ewing et al. Citation2002; Gould and Carson Citation2008).

While the expectation that this will occur is ubiquitous, it is not universal. A number of writers have commented that while sport has obvious potential to generate positive outcomes, there are times where it may have little or no effect or lead to negative developmental outcomes (Clarke Citation2012; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin Citation2005). In short, it is not sport itself that

determines outcomes, but the experiences that occur while participating in sport that will determine its impact (Gordon Citation2017; Hellison Citation2011). This uncertainty of outcomes means that it is important that successful SBYD programs are carefully examined to identify their practices and procedures. This knowledge will support programs in identifying and reinforcing their own good practices, while also allowing them to identify processes and practices that may improve their effectiveness (Petitpas et al. Citation2005).

The researchers in this study were cognizant of the criticism that there has generally been insufficient attention given to what occurs within programs (i.e., the processes and practices that generate these outcomes) (Holt Citation2016; Jacobs and Wright Citation2018; Petitpas et al. Citation2005; Talebzadeh and Jarfari Citation2012). The lack of knowledge of what occurs inside programs has led to them being described as ‘black boxes’ (Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom Citation2010) with researchers knowing that something has happened through participation in the program, but precisely what and why it occurred is unknown (Millar and Rowe Citation2009). Many writers have identified a need to better understand what occurs inside the ‘black box’ of SBYD programs (Holt and Jones Citation2008; Millar and Rowe Citation2009; Shek and Chak Citation2010). Holt (Citation2016) commented that several authors in his edited book on positive youth development through sport confirm the need for such studies:

Essentially these arguments are consistent with the suggestions put forward in Larson’s (2000) important article, in which he highlighted the need to unpack the ‘black box’ of how participation in youth programs lead to various positive developmental outcomes. Process is notoriously difficult to study but it remains a pressing issue for the advancement of PYD through sport. Specifically, continued research is needed to establish what features of sport programs work, under what circumstances, for whom, and the mechanisms that produce or limit the attainment of positive developmental outcomes. (229)

### ***Ecological framework***

Any attempt to unpack the processes and procedures occurring within a SBYD program is done with a strong awareness of the complexities and difficulties of doing so. An ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner Citation1979) is used in this study to aid this process. Bronfenbrenner suggests that the most suitable approach, when seeking to understand human behavior, is a socio-ecological one as ‘human abilities and their realization depend in significant degree on the larger social and institutional context of individual activity’ (p. xv). An ecological approach, therefore, emphasizes and legitimizes the experience of the individual within their immediate environment:

Very few of the external influences significantly affecting human behaviour and development can be described solely in terms of objective physical conditions and events; the aspects of the environment that are most powerful in shaping the course of psychological growth are overwhelmingly those that have meaning to the person in a given situation. (Bronfenbrenner Citation1979, 22)

One SBYD specific model that is firmly situated within a socio-ecological approach is Holt and colleagues’ (Citation2016) model of positive youth development, a model developed from a large qualitative meta-study of PYD through sport. This model identifies the need to factor in

‘more distal ecological systems that may produce or constrain the potential benefits that can be gained through participation in sport’ (235). A central component of the model is what they describe as the PYD climate. The climate is largely created through the quality of the relationships between peers, parents and other adults, so that youth participants feel that they have legitimate leadership opportunities and that they are part of a wider community.

### ***SAFE framework***

When exploring good practice within SBYD programs, the SAFE framework developed by Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (Citation2010) is a relevant and well-established option. The authors completed a meta-analysis of 213 school-based social and emotional learning programs leading to the identification of four recommended practices that they observed would contribute to programs being effective in terms of helping youth learn program values and apply them in other contexts. The four practices are described by the acronym SAFE:

- Sequenced: connected and coordinated sets of activities to foster skills development.
- Active: active forms of learning to help students master new skills.
- Focused: emphasis on developing personal and social skills.
- Explicit: targeting specific social and emotional skills.

While acknowledging the importance of understanding the processes and procedures occurring within the ‘black box’, the authors were aware that the impact of participation in SBYD programs on the lives of participants outside of the gym, is often seen as an important indicator of success. (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin Citation2005; Gould and Carson Citation2008; Papacharisis et al. Citation2005). For this reason, this study also considered the degree to which participation impacted participants’ lives away from the gym.

### ***Background to the Naenae Boxing Academy***

This study examines the Naenae Boxing Academy (NBA), a SBYD program that has been serving young boys in New Zealand for 12 years. The Billy Graham Youth Foundation (BGYF), which administers the NBA, was established in New Zealand by Billy Graham, a well-known, New Zealand-born boxer who has won championship titles in both New Zealand and Australia. The Foundation’s vision is not, however, centered on developing competitive boxers but on using boxing as an avenue to develop ‘vibrant, independent and responsible youth contributing to their communities’ and on ‘helping youth to be the best they can be’ ([www.bgyf.org.nz](http://www.bgyf.org.nz)). There is a belief that ‘boxing is a good sport to hook kids in’ (Graham and Gifford Citation2012, 77) and that young people will achieve positive outcomes by participating in high-quality, boxing-based programs which challenge and expand their horizons, perceptions, values, abilities and actions ([www.bgyf.org.nz](http://www.bgyf.org.nz)). For these outcomes to be achieved, the BGYF believes that the program needs to provide a safe space for youth, a space where they can develop a sense of belonging, have fun, and learn both positive values and the skills associated with boxing (Graham and Gifford Citation2012).

The BGYF’s first academy and the focus of this study, the NBA, was established 12 years ago for boys in the community of Naenae. While initially focused on boys, a girls only class has recently been introduced. Due to the limited time it has been running, this class was not included

in the study. Naenae is a working-class community of around 8,000 people, situated in the lower North Island of New Zealand. It is highly ethnically diverse with high numbers of European (Pakeha), Maori, Pacific Island, and Asian peoples. It is also an area of low socioeconomic status; therefore, it has many of the pressures associated with poverty and unemployment, including high levels of youth crime and disengagement with education. At-risk young people in these communities are often living in challenging family circumstances and many have learning difficulties.

There are three main avenues for boys to enter the NBA: a) through an open enrolment day, b) referrals from local police youth aid officers, and c) referrals from local schools. The power of the group as an agent of socialization is deeply embedded in the program, and the selection process ensures that there is a mix of boys with a variety of strengths, needs, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some preference is also given to those referred by police. Because of the positive reputation of the academy, there is always a long waiting list to join the program.

The academy offers three levels of participation:

- Fundamentals class (9-10 years): two 60 minute sessions per week.
- Juniors class (11-13 years): two 90 minute sessions per week.
- Seniors class (14-18 years): two 180 minute sessions per week.

There is also an extra class available for boys who are planning to box competitively. A very small percentage (less than 5%) choose to do so.

In 2018, the lead author was contracted through his university to complete an external evaluation of the NBA and two other BGYF Boxing Academies that had been more recently opened. The current article is based exclusively on data from the Naenae boxing academy as it was the most well-established in terms of program culture, procedures, and processes.

## **Methodology**

This case study of the NBA boxing academy involved a mixed-method approach using a convergent design (Creswell and Plano Clark Citation2011). The primary data sources included surveys, systematic observations, and extensive field notes as well as interviews and focus groups with youth participants, coaches, and other adult stakeholders. Supporting data sources included documents and artifacts. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the first author's university human ethics review board. Note that Billy Graham gave permission for his name and the program's name to be used in publications.

### ***Data collection***

#### ***Survey***

The Personal and Social Responsibility Questionnaire (PSRQ; Li et al. Citation2008) was completed by boys in all three levels (n = 77). The PSRQ was developed to assess youths' self-reported behaviors as they reflect personal and social responsibility. The survey asked boys to respond to the statement 'in my boxing training...' on 14 items rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree. Seven items comprise a personal

responsibility (e.g., I try hard) scale, and the other seven comprise a social responsibility (e.g., I help others) scale.

### *Systemic observation*

The lead author observed six lessons (two for each age group) using the second version of the Tool for Assessing Responsibility-based Education (TARE 2.0; Escartí et al. Citation2015). The TARE 2.0 is a valid and reliable observation system that assesses teacher and student behaviors that are commonly observed in quality SBYD programs. The TARE includes nine teacher behaviors:

- modeling respectful behavior
- setting expectations
- creating opportunities for success
- fostering social interaction
- assigning tasks
- promoting leadership
- giving choice/voice in the program
- providing roles in assessment, and
- promoting transfer of life skills learned in the program.

The TARE also includes nine types of student behaviors/interactions: participation

- Engagement
- showing respect
- cooperating
- encouragement
- helping others
- leading
- expressing voice, and
- asking for help.

The teacher and student behaviors are rated every three minutes on the following five-point scale: 0 = Absent; 1 = Weak; 2 = Moderate; 3 = Strong; 4 = Very strong.

### *Field notes*

The first author observed over 30 classes and recorded open field notes (Strauss and Corbin Citation2015) on 18 of these occasions. Objective information on the number of participants, coaches, observers and the drills and activities were recorded. The observer also noted what he perceived to be key events or exchanges, describing them and commenting on his reaction and initial interpretation. Notes were also taken during and/or after informal site visits, meetings about the project, and research team meetings.

### *Interviews*

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with adult stakeholders (n = 19), a BGYF board member, community members (n = 7), program coaches/managers (n = 4), and parents (n = 7). The community members included three community police officers, two adults who had regular contact with the NBA, and two local business owners who had contact with the boys and their families. All the parents interviewed regularly attended sessions at the gym. All interviews were one-to-one and held either in a secluded room at the gym or at a venue selected by the interviewee. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and followed a series of guide questions (e.g., 'can you give examples of the impact on the boys of attending the gym - either positive or negative?').

### *Focus groups*

Youth participants (n = 14) participated in semi-structured focus group interviews about their experience in the program (8 senior, 6 junior). The focus groups were held in a separate room at the gym with no boxing personnel present. There were two focus groups of four senior boys and one focus group of six juniors. The interview occurred either before or after the boys' boxing session and lasted around 45 minutes. The focus groups followed a series of guide questions (e.g., 'If a friend was thinking of joining the gym what would you tell him he would learn from doing so?').

All interviews, individual and focus groups, were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. The data were entered into NVivo 12 (NVIVO Citation2008) software to facilitate data management and aid analysis.

### *Documents and artifacts*

To ensure the analysis was grounded in a thorough understanding of the boxing program, existing documents, resources and policies were reviewed to provide context (Patton Citation2015). Two books by Billy Graham were reviewed to give insight into the philosophy underlining the development of the BGYD and the NBA (Graham Citation1998; Graham and Gifford Citation2012). In addition, 54 unsolicited testimonials that had previously been sent by parents to the NBA were made available to the researchers.

### *Data analysis*

Inductive analysis and constant comparative methods were used to examine the qualitative data (Strauss and Corbin Citation2015). A qualitative codebook was developed by the third author, who was not involved with data collection, and reviewed by the research team. The codes included operational definitions of themes that were applied across all the data (Richards and Hemphill Citation2018). Several methodological strategies were employed to promote the trustworthiness of findings (Creswell Citation2015; Greene Citation2007). First, the first author spent an extensive amount of time (over 30 sessions were observed) in the gym over the three months period of the study. This prolonged engagement helped to gain the trust of participants and helped ensure the authenticity of the interpretations of the data. The second and third author also visited the boxing gym on several occasions. Second, audit trails of the data were maintained using qualitative data

management software. Third, the three authors routinely debriefed through face-to-face and virtual meetings before, during, and after the study. Fourth, all individuals interviewed were given a copy of their transcript and offered the opportunity to clarify or change any of their comments. Finally, the research team were aware of the potential for misinterpretation where there are cultural differences between the research team and those being interviewed (Vaiotei Citation2006; Wright et al. Citation2018). A proactive approach was taken to address cultural sensitivities by inviting a Pasifika researcher [the fourth author] who was also familiar with Maori culture to serve as a cultural advisor. This researcher helped design data collection protocols and was involved in the data analysis and writing phrases. He performed an important role in ensuring that a legitimate Pasifika world view was present throughout all stages of the study.

### **Findings: inside the ‘black box’**

The intent of this study was to look inside the ‘black box’ of a successful SBYD program to examine their practices and processes. The findings are organized and presented in terms of five distinct but complimentary topic areas that, as a whole, provide a comprehensive understanding of the program: (a) the NBA ‘climate’, (b) the program content, divided into the teaching of values and fitness and boxing skills, (c) data related to the boys’ and coaches’ behaviors, (d) the boys’ perceptions of their experiences in the NBA, and (e) the impact of participation on the boys and the community.

#### ***Program climate***

The program climate (Holt Citation2016) has been clearly identified as being an important element in whether a youth development program is successful in achieving its objectives. The NBA has worked hard to establish a distinct climate in their academy. One important element is the physical presentation of the gym. As Billy Graham explained, the way it looks, feels and smells is an important element of the experience. When the boys enter the gym, they find a clean, tidy, well-lit, and well-organized space. There is carpet on the floor and a well-maintained boxing ring has a prominent place. The walls are clean and covered with photos of past boxing champions, and there is a display cabinet full of neatly organized trophies. There are rows of heavy boxing bags hanging down two sides of the gym and a variety of weights and fitness equipment carefully stored and easily available. The toilets are regularly cleaned and maintained and always appear fresh and sanitary. Every boy is allocated his own locker with his photo and name attached to the front. The storage lockers have no locks to secure them as a matter of policy because, as the boys stated, ‘no one steals anything here’. The gym values order, because some boys do not experience this at home, and it is intended to give a strong message about alternative ways of living (Billy Graham).

The BGYF has a fundamental belief that the NBA should be a ‘safe place’ for the boys, and the interviews with the boys indicated that they felt this was true. Many reported that the gym offered them a place where they felt secure and offered respite from the trials of their lives away from the gym. One junior boy explained, ‘Sometimes if you get angry or upset or if something happens at school, I just come here and it all goes away, and you feel good again’. There was also a strong feeling of belonging, of being part of a ‘family’. As a senior boy explained, ‘It is just really welcoming and makes you feel at home I guess, so it is basically another home and it is just like everyone here is family’. Another senior boy expanded on this sense of support, ‘Everyone

here has like got your back and supports you. And not just with boxing, if you feel like a hard time with something they will listen to you and maybe give you advice on something’.

Because this is a boxing academy and the boys often spar together (discussed in detail later in the findings), there is a potential tension between feeling safe and placing themselves in the situation of physically fighting others. The boys reported that this was not an issue. For those who chose to spar in the ring, there was a strong feeling of a social contract between the boxers:

I feel really safe here [sparring] because when you shake someone’s hand it is a sign of respect and when you are in the ring and you ... like touch gloves before you start, that is like saying, ‘I am not going to hurt you as hard as I can’. (Junior boy)

Developing and maintaining authentic and respectful relationships is considered key to creating a positive climate (Hellison Citation2011; Holt Citation2016) and is central to how the academy operates. The field notes recorded that the boys are often encouraged to support and care for each other. They are told repeatedly by the coaches that they needed to look out for each other and that they were family and brothers. One example was that everyone is expected to know the names of all the other boys in their group. This is regularly tested with a boy being asked to walk around the group and name every person. If he has forgotten a name, he is required to shake hands with the boy, introduce himself, and ask his name. The feeling of being supported starts the first time they enter the gym. When a new boy arrives, all the boys present stop work, greet him, shake his hand, and welcome him to the class. This supportive climate resulted in several boys commenting that the gym was a way in which to overcome feelings of being alone: ‘It’s really fun and it’s just an easier way to talk to friends and not feel lonely and everything. Because everyone joins you with the medicine ball – like you are not left out’. (Junior boy)

The NBA considers that it is important that the boys had positive adult role models who live in ways that are congruent with the values being promoted. This was supported by the parents and comments along the lines of ‘I am constantly looking for ways for my son to have good men in his life’ were common, especially from mothers bringing up boys alone. The adults ensured they were always respectful to each other and the boys. The first author reported that during multiple observations, he never once heard an adult raise their voice or be in any way aggressive. The modelling of this way of relating demonstrated an alternative pattern of behavior to what many boys experienced in their own lives away from the gym. The feeling that the coaches and adults in the gym were respected and were there to support them was very strong. Of the boys who completed the PSRQ (n = 77), 97.5% strongly agreed with the statement ‘In my boxing training – I respect my coaches’, and no boys disagreed with the statement. In focus groups, some of the boys commented on their respect for the coaches:

I don’t really think adults cared about what I did as a kid, but whenever I come here they are always talking about what I have done in sport or in the weekend or when I was away....I broke my arm a few months ago and one of the coaches rang up [called] to see if I was okay. (Junior boy)

One area that people felt contributed to the specific climate of the gym was a small number of clear and non-negotiable rules that were followed by all those associated with the gym. The three main rules were (a) no swearing, (b) no gang-related regalia or actions, and (c) no hats to be worn



within the academy at any time. It was interesting that the fact there were rules, and that they were followed, was a source of pride for the boys. When asked what made the NBA special, most of those interviewed mentioned 'the rules'. The rules were enforced predominately by the boys themselves, and the lead researcher was politely asked on one of his early visits to remove his hat by a junior boy.

Another area that contributes to the NBA climate is the high level of involvement of the New Zealand police. Local police officers are encouraged to attend the academy and to participate with the boys. This is done in an open manner with officers sometime participating in full uniform. One officer who attended regularly often wore a tee shirt with 'Care Enough To Be a Cop' prominently displayed across the front. Groups of police officers, male and female, who are in training are also regularly invited to attend.

### ***Program Content***

The program content is another crucial element in the NBA's success and can be broadly divided into two areas: a) values education and b) the developing of boxing expertise and fitness.

#### *Values*

At the heart of the gym is the teaching of positive values, teaching that is based around the Passport to Success, a booklet containing eight core values. A great deal of emphasis is put on these values, and all participants and parents/caregivers (who are encouraged to reinforce the values at home) receive a copy of the booklet. The values are prominently displayed on posters throughout the gym and spare copies of the Passport to Success are always readily available. The eight values are:

- Respect: Willingness to treat with courtesy; to hold in high regard, to honor, to care about yourself and others
- Responsibility: Willingness to be answerable, to be trustworthy, and accountable for your own conduct and behavior
- Compassion: Willingness to help, empathize with, or show mercy to those who suffer
- Consideration: Willingness to be kind, thoughtful, and consider the interest of others before self.
- Kindness: Willingness to help, show concern for and be friendly to others.
- Duty: Willingness to do what is right or what a person ought to do; obligation.
- Obedience: Willingness to obey rightful authority.
- Honesty and Truthfulness: Willingness not to steal, cheap, lie, or be unfair.

While each value is named and defined as above, each is also supported with a series of statements to help the boys understand the value in more depth. The value of kindness, for example, is supported by the statements:

Make sure your words are seeds, not bullets; Kindness is a language that the deaf can hear and the blind can read; The best portion of a good person's life is their little nameless unremembered acts of kindness; Let no-one come to you without leaving better and happier; Show kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes and

kindness in your smile; It's hard to give away kindness because it keeps coming back on you; Be random with an act of kindness every day.

The boys are encouraged to learn the values, until they can recite the definition and the support comments by memory. The values are mentioned at the start and end of most sessions when the boys gathered together. During the final gathering of each session, one of the boys will attempt to recite a value, or the coach will select a boy to read out a value from the booklet. There is often a follow up comment from the coach on the importance of the value(s). It was noted that there were only a small number of occasions where there was a direct comment to the boys on the importance of the values to their lives away from the gym. While there was a lack of explicit addressing the issue of transfer, the importance of transfer was something that the NBA was aware of. As the police liaison officer explained:

What we're trying to do for a lot of these boys, is when they come to the gym is go this is what good looks like, this is what a good relationship looks like, this is what love looks like, this is what care looks like, you come here and feel safe you should be feeling that in your own home you know.

When the boys were asked about the values, there was universal acceptance of their importance. There was no reluctance to discuss how they had impacted them with one boy, for example, talking of how he kept a copy of the Passport to Success in his school desk. He reported that whenever he felt like he was going to get into trouble he would read it for guidance.

While the boys spoke positively in general terms about the values, it was noted that there was inconsistency in the degree to which different values were mentioned. The values of respect, for example, was mentioned 23 times by the boys during interviews while compassion and consideration received five mentions each and duty only two. This aligns with the observations of coaching sessions with neither the field notes or interviews identifying a system in place to ensure that the teaching of values occurred in a sequential manner, and it was noted that respect and kindness were the values most often mentioned by the coaches. There was also little attempt to explicitly integrate the teaching and learning of values into the physical activity segments of the observed sessions.

#### *Development boxing skills and physical fitness*

While the values are fundamental to the program, there is also a strong acknowledgement of the centrality of physicality and the importance of developing boxing skills and physical fitness. A 'standard' session involved the following stages:

- Gathering together to focus the group on the day's session.
- Sustained skipping (jump rope) to music
- Medicine ball activities in pairs
- Punching drills using punching bags
- Sparring with partners either in the ring or on the floor
- Gathering together to close session

The initial gathering together as a group at the start of each session is an important part of building relationships and a sense of community. Boys are asked about their week and whether ‘anything had happened for you that you would like to share’. The boys were eager to tell the group about events such as competing in sports, parents taking them places, or arguments with their siblings.

The physical training is challenging, and the boys are expected to work hard and to push themselves physically. The skipping (jump rope) is completed with music pumping loudly and continues for an extended period of time. The medicine ball activities that follow are completed with a partner. The first mirrored the punching action as the boys throw medicine balls back and forward and the second involves the boys linking feet and with a sit up action passing the ball to their partner from above their heads. The punching bag activities, also completed in pairs, ran in 30 or 60 second bursts alternating punching and resting. If the boys eased off when the training became difficult, they were encouraged to persevere and supported by both the coaches and other boys to ‘go for it’ (field notes).

Sparring gives the boys an opportunity to box, one-on-one, in the ring under controlled conditions. The majority of boys chose to spar in one-minute rounds with match ups selected by the coaches. The boys are required to wear head protection, and the sparring was closely monitored by the coach, who is in the ring at all times. The boys who chose not to spar continued to practice, under direct supervision, on the floor with controlled punching and blocking or work individually on the punching bags.

Each session concludes with the boys gathering together to discuss the day’s activities and to consider the Passport to Success values. The final act is to give the boys fruit and ‘thank you’ (because the boys had to say thank you when they received one) energy bars. There is a great deal of consistency in the program and while there are small variations, every session contained the key elements described above.

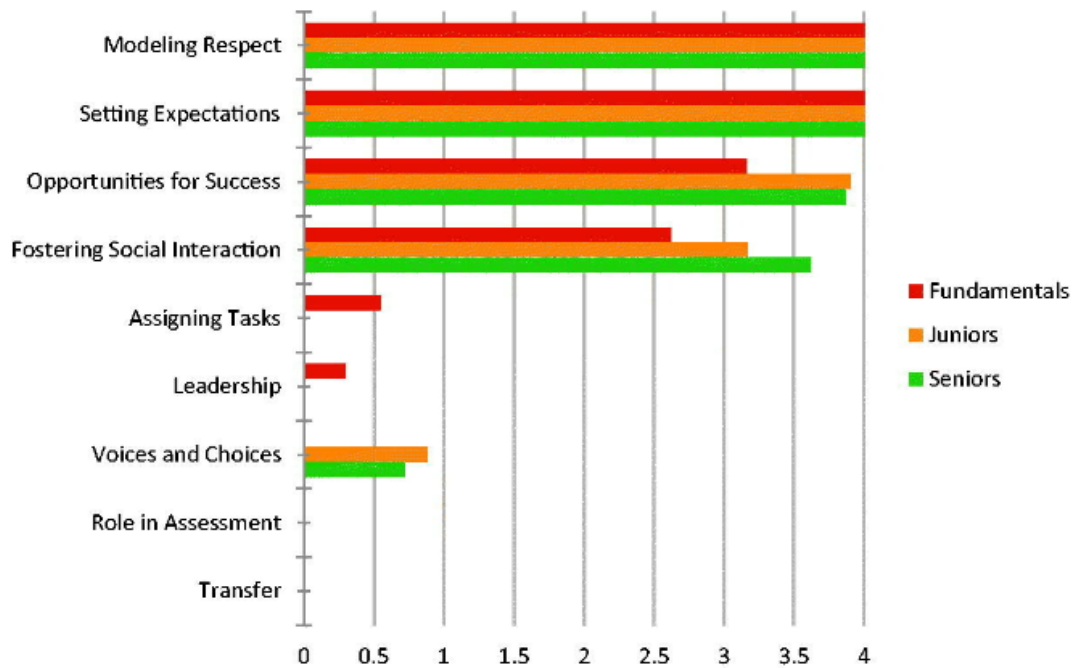
One strong advantage the NBA has is that there is a group of coaches with extensive boxing backgrounds. Three coaches are former New Zealand champions, and this background gives them a high level of credibility with the boys and a depth of knowledge that allows for quality instruction. Field notes identified a consistent effort to improve the boxing skills of the boys, and the coaches spent considerable time working with groups and individual boys honing their skills. The consistent teaching and learning of boxing specific skills is an integral part of the academy experience.

### *Boys’ and coaches’ behavior within the program*

A number of writers have argued that for life skills to be embraced and enacted by youth it is important that they be integrated into the activities that occur within the programs (Gordon Citation2010; Hellison Citation2011; Jacobs and Wright Citation2018). Data presented in this section addresses the extent to which youth development was promoted experientially by the coaches and the extent to which youth participated in ways that would reinforce the learning around values.

Systematic observations of six lessons were completed with the TARE 2.0 (Escartí et al. Citation2015). Each of the three class groups were observed twice, and data was collected on the behaviors of the coaches and the boys. As displayed in Figure 1, the coaches were observed to be strong in creating social interactions, creating opportunities for success, setting expectations and modeling respect for the boys. These are all important contributors to the ‘climate’ in the gym that

Holt (Citation2016) identified as important in supporting PYD and are aligned with what is generally considered as best practice in PYD. There was little evidence, however, of coaches employing other more empowerment based best practice strategies: discussing transfer of learning, giving the boys a role in assessment or leadership opportunities, assigning tasks, or giving the boys opportunities to make choices or contribute to decision making. It is youth-centered, empowerment-based strategies such as these that often distinguish youth development programs from common practice in physical activity programs (Jacobs, Knoppers, and Webb Citation2013; Papacharisis et al. Citation2005). While there would be no expectation that these later behaviors would be as prevalent as the first four, it is notable that they were largely absent.



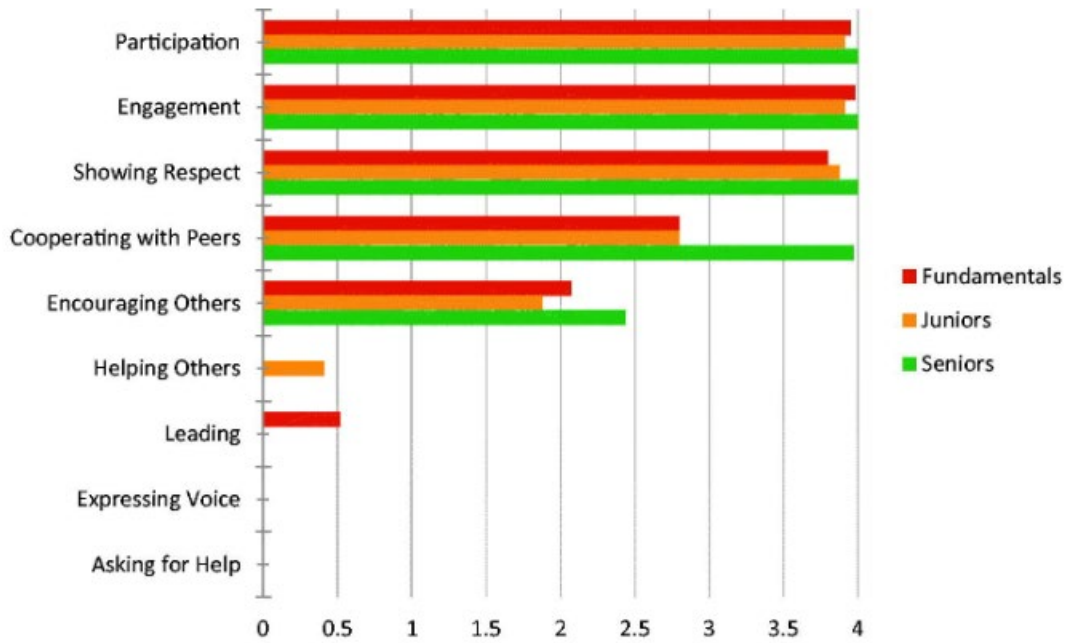
**Figure 1.** TARE observation results for NaeNae coaches.

Figure 2 summarizes the systematic observation data related to the boys’ behaviors. Consistent with previous research, the extent to which boys engaged in and demonstrated specific youth development behaviors was strongly influenced by the coaches’ pedagogical behaviors (Escartí, Llopis-Roig, and Wright Citation2016; Escartí et al. Citation2015; Wright and Irwin Citation2018). While they participated fully, were engaged, respectful, and cooperated well with others, there was little evidence of the boys asking for help, contributing to decisions, leading or helping others. Again, these are actions that would generally be considered as good practice for SBYD programs.

*Boys’ perceptions of the program*

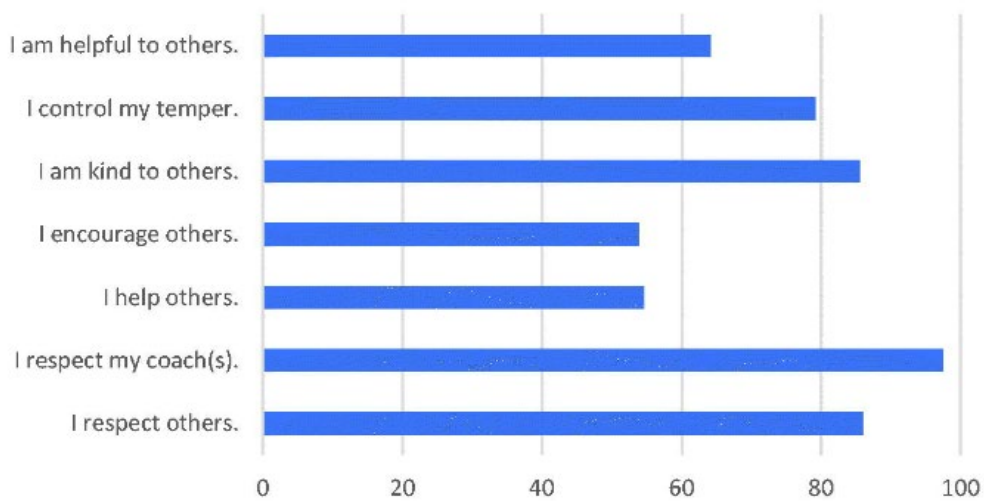
The PSRQ (Li et al. Citation2008) was administered to gain an insight into the boys’ (n = 77) perceptions of the program. Figure 3 summarizes the percent of positive responses (Strongly Agree and Very Strongly Agree) to social responsibility items. Youth self-reported high levels of respecting (86%) and being kind to others (85.5%). The mostly highly rated item referenced respecting the coaches (97.5%). However, more active, pro-social behaviors such as helping

(54.6%) and encouraging (53.8%) others were rated lower. This is consistent with the TARE results reported above indicating youth were less likely to be given opportunities to demonstrate such behaviors.



**Figure 2.** TARE observation results for NaeNae boys.

### Percent Strongly Agree and Very Strongly Agree



**Figure 3.** Boys responses to social responsibility questions.

A similar pattern can be seen in Figure 4 regarding personal responsibility behaviors. Youth gave relatively high ratings on items involving a desire to improve (97.3%), trying hard (92.2%), and giving good effort (90.9%). However, an item related to setting goals was rated

lower (65.4%). This corresponds to the lower frequency of self-directed behaviors (e.g. choice and voice in the program) noted in the TARE observations.



**Figure 4.** Boys responses to personal responsibility questions.

#### *Transfer of learning of values to other areas of the boys' lives*

Four sources of data supported the finding that the values learned in the gym were transferred to the boys' lives outside of the gym. These were interviews with the boys, their parents, the police, and the unsolicited testimonials sent to the gym over many years by parents. During interviews, the boys reported changes in their lives which they attributed to their participation in the NBA. These changes included increased self-confidence. One junior boy reported, 'Probably like self-confidence like talking to people and stuff like that. I used to be quite shy and never really talked to anyone'. A senior boy commented similarly saying, 'Yeah but the gym is just an amazing place in general, it builds you up as a person and it teaches you life skills, that will help you throughout your whole life'.

Some specific comments about performing better in school were also made. For example, one junior boy explained 'I've learnt a lot from them [Passport to Success values] and some of them are good for school as well'. Another senior boy elaborated on the impact of the NBA:

It has helped me with self-confidence and helped me to collaborate more and teamwork and do more of what they teach here to do it at school and when out and about. Yeah, it helps. (Senior boy)

Many felt that they had better self-control (e.g. controlling temper) and got into fewer fights:

Yeah, I used to be an angry kid. I got angry real fast, but when I came here, I learnt how to control my anger. You can then take out all your anger and stuff on the bags or just talk to someone and you just forget about it. (Junior boy)

These observations were supported by many of the parents who were asked if they had noticed changes in their boys they attributed to participating in the NBA:

Just that [my son] believes in himself and that he is empowered as an individual to be a strong person by himself and also as part of a group so that he doesn't always have to have people around him ... Feel confident in himself to be able to make decisions and he is actually worthy. (Mother of junior boy)

Three community police officers with direct contact with the academy were interviewed for this study. All three worked individually with boys at risk and were strongly supportive of the academy and the impact it had on the boys who participated. One officer commented that:

We view the Academy as a perfect opportunity to engage with our troubled youth but just recently it has also become an excellent 'tool'—for want of a better term—to help us deal with youths that, for whatever reason, are no longer attending any educational institute and are effectively left to their own devices.

Another officer, with over 35 years of experience, was asked if he felt that the academy was something that actually worked in practice. His response was unequivocal '100%, yes 100%'. All three officers were clear that the academy wasn't a 'silver bullet' that would solve the problems for all youth, but equally, all were able to offer examples of boys whom they had worked with and whose lives had been turned around by the NBA. The officers regular attendance at the academy, and their ongoing referrals of boys to the program, showed their strong belief in the power of the NBA to positively impact the boys' lives.

The NBA made available 54 testimonials that they had received from parents. These were unsolicited and while not collected in any systematic way, they offered a view into how parents saw the influence of participation on their sons. The testimonials were all positive, and they offered a consistent message of thanks for the impact the NBA had had on their sons outside the gym. The following example from a single mother is indicative of the testimonials:

I believe if he hadn't joined the academy when he did he would not have finished his school year in 2006. He is currently getting ready to sit his NCEA level 3 [final year of high school exams] this year and has successfully managed to turn his academic records around and is achieving to his potential. His teachers and deans have been absolutely amazed at his academic achievements, commitment, dedication, maturity, and his sudden turnaround in taking responsibility for his actions.

## **Discussion**

While all successful SBYD programs are of interest, there is additional interest in programs that have been working successfully over many years (Lerner and Thompson Citation2002). These programs have survived, and in many cases flourished, working in the messy realities of day to day life in the front line of positive youth development, and there is much that can be learned from them. This study gives a view into the 'black box' of a successful, long-term, SBYD program.

Framed within an ecological approach, it considers the procedures and interactions that occur within the larger social and institutional context (Bronfenbrenner Citation1979).

The NBA's climate is positive and supportive with the boys participating in a program that is relevant, enjoyable, challenging, and meaningful. As Bronfenbrenner (Citation1979) identified, it is experiences that have meaning for participants that are overwhelmingly the most powerful in shaping psychological growth. Situated within a supportive community, and strongly supported by a visible police presence, the boys are aware that the academy is connected to, and influenced by, a range of social and institutional contexts. Their experiences are significantly impacted by these wider contexts, and the boys' interactions with them is a central part of the NBA experience. This interconnectedness has been identified as important within the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner Citation1979). The academy is an effectively integrated ecological system where a range of contexts and people influence what occurs within the program, working to produce a coherent whole.

At its heart, the NBA is a values-based program, and the BGYF would judge its success on the degree to which the boys understood and applied the values presented in the Passport to Success inside and outside of the gym. The findings clearly show that this occurred. The boys believed the values were important and were able to give numerous examples of how they transferred them to areas of their lives. Feedback from the parents and police also identified that participation was seen to have had a positive impact. This level of transferring values and life skills is consistent with that reported in several other SBYD program evaluations (Jacobs and Wright Citation2018; Martinek, Schilling, and Johnson Citation2001; Walsh, Ozaeta, and Wright Citation2010; Wright et al. Citation2020).

In light of this success, it is interesting to consider the processes used for the teaching and learning of values and the facilitation of transfer of this learning. When considering the NBA in relation to what is perceived as best practice in SBYD, Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (Citation2010) SAFE framework offers a well-established lens through which to examine the program. The framework identifies four recommended practices, and the NBA could be described, at best, as being partially SAFE in relation to the teaching and learning of values. While the program focused on values education, and the values were explicitly explained, the program lacked two key components: a) a sequential approach to the teaching of values and b) active learning of the values through integration with the practical activities.

When specifically considering the facilitation of transfer of learning, the NBA had a limited focus on transfer, was not explicit about what it was, had no sequential approach to teaching about it, and did not integrate transfer of learning into the practical activities. There is a debate in the SBYD literature around whether transfer of learning can occur implicitly, without explicit instruction (Turnnidge, Cote, and Hancock, Citation2014; Pierce et al. Citation2018; Jones and Lavelle Citation2009). Many people involved in SBYD would consider that explicit teaching for transfer of learning is important (Gordon and Doyle Citation2015), if not crucial, for the successful facilitation of transfer of learning, and so the results obtained by the NBA give us pause for thought. The values were ubiquitous in the gym both in the physical form of the booklet and in the 'way they did things'. Thus, much of the learning around how the values described in the Passport to Success could be implemented in real life occurred implicitly and experientially through the boys' day to day involvement in the gym. Coaches and teachers involved in SBYD programmes should note that having the opportunity to experience the values in action, while in a secure safe place, generated quality learning without the need for explicit explanation and discussion of transfer. The successful transfer of learning of the Passport to Success values, without



incorporating many of the processes that would be considered best practice, demonstrates the strength of viewing the NBA as an integrated ecological system. It reminds us of the importance of considering complex programs such as these in their totality and the limitations of taking a reductionist view.

One area that was strongly aligned with best practice was the importance given to establishing positive relationships, a process that has been identified as an essential ingredient for successful youth programs (Li and Julian Citation2012; Hellison Citation2011). This study found that the quality of the various relationships was fundamental to developing the positive and successful climate (Holt et al. Citation2016) that was so central to the NBA success. The quality of the relationships was demonstrated by the way in which the boys constantly referred to the academy as family, respected the coaches, and looked out for each other.

While the evaluation of the program was extensive, there are a number of limitations. Restraints in finance and time mean that the voice of boys who had attended the NBA and then left were not included. It is also acknowledged that the testimonials, while offering an insight into the views of some parents, were restricted to those who had the confidence and ability to write one.

## **Conclusion**

As Holt et al. (Citation2016) commented ‘research is needed to establish what features of sport programs work, under what circumstances, for whom, and the mechanisms that produce or limit the attainment of positive developmental outcomes’ (229). The NBA, a well-established SBYD program with a long history of success, offers this opportunity as it has created a recipe that works well for them. The program is carefully positioned within the local community and emphasis is given to a) ensuring the boys receive a quality boxing experience, b) developing positive, respectful, and enduring relationships, c) building a sense of family, and d) offering unwavering support and care for the boys. They have created a safe space for youth, a place where they have a strong sense of belonging and can have fun while developing fitness and the skills associated with boxing. The findings from this study align with research conducted with other sports (e.g., soccer; Wright et al. Citation2020) and offer support to Holt’s (Citation2016) belief that the establishing and maintaining of a suitable climate is central to success in SBYD programs.

The intent of the program is to make a difference for the boys and their families. It is, therefore, appropriate to conclude with this heartfelt statement from the testimonial supplied by one mother:

My son is a product of Billy’s mentoring. He is a successful example of a young adolescent from a single parent family. My son had low self-esteem; was medicated for 4 years for ADHD, struggled with reading, writing and school, and unacceptable behaviour. Becoming a member of Billy’s gym provided a secure foundation for him to overcome all of his difficulties successfully. He continues to grow and inherit the qualities of life that all parents, teachers, and mentors seek in a young man who is now going from strength to strength. I remain indebted to the dignity Billy and Kerri Graham have returned to me as an individual and a mother who once thought her son was lost.

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