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Psychological Needs Fulfillment and Engagement Within After School Programming: A Thematic Analysis of Program Rentention

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PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS FULFILLMENT AND ENGAGEMENT WITHIN AFTER

SCHOOL PROGRAMMING: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PROGRAM RETENTION

by

LOREN C. FAUST

Under the Direction of Gabriel P. Kuperminc, PhD

ABSTRACT

The current qualitative study draws on Larson's theory of positive youth development and on concepts from Self-Determination Theory to postulate that program participants will derive a sense of enjoyment and challenge in program activities when they perceive that the program supports their psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Self-determination theory suggests that when programs support participants' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the participants will in turn experience a higher sense of motivation and engagement within the program. The emergent themes found from the thematic analysis helped to support this theory by suggesting that Cool Girls participants experience a sense of engagement and motivation through program activities that promote autonomy/independence and peer/adult connections. Further, possible variations in perceived needs fulfillment across age groups were explored.

INDEX WORDS: After School Program, Adolescent, Engagement, Self-Determination,

Retention

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Georgia State University

2016

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Georgia State University

August 2016

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family and friends for their unlimited love and support – to my Mom for always being on my team and believing in me no matter what, to my grandmother for making sure I never went without anything I needed and was able to obtain any goal I wished, to Kandi for picking my chin up when grad school made me feel like I was not enough, and to Crystal for reminding me that if I keep focusing and keep aiming I am capable of anything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1   INTRODUCTION

Many youth experience high levels of risk that threaten their healthy development (Theokas, Almerigi et al. 2005). Accordingly, after school programs (ASP) have shifted from a focus on preventing problematic behavior to strategies that seek to mitigate risk and encourage positive youth development (PYD). This is accomplished through efforts to enrich the support that youth receive from the surrounding environment and through curricula that seek to promote a sense of engagement and interest (King, P., Schultz, W., Mueller, R., Dowing, E., Osborn, P., Dickerson, E., & Lerner, R., 2005). A wide range of activities typically offered in ASPs, including academic and health-related curricula (e.g., physical activity, nutrition information) as well as mentoring and opportunities for civic engagement are thought to promote positive outcomes across academic, behavioral, and interpersonal domains (Jones and Deutsch 2013). In order to benefit from the developmental opportunities available at ASPs, youth must first become actively engaged in the program and maintain this engagement over an extended period of time (Dawes & Larson, 2010). It has been argued that a sense of engagement in such programs is most likely to happen when youth experience the program as meeting their psychological needs for feeling competent, feeling connected to adults and other youth, and feeling that their participation makes a difference (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Moreover, it is likely that the types of program experiences that contribute to young people's perceptions that their psychological needs are being met will vary as a function of age. Youth at varying developmental stages have been shown to seek varying types of peer relationships and exhibit changing social-emotional needs (Jones and Deutsch 2013) Youth at varying developmental stages perceive program activities and developmental opportunities differently. Thus, program activities and developmental opportunities may contribute in different ways as a function of age

(Jones and Deutsch 2013). Indeed, youth may need and seek out environments that support specific developmental outcomes (Jones and Deutsch 2013, Kuperminc, Smith & Henrich, 2013). For example, youth who struggle academically may seek more programming and activities to help improve their academic performance. Age-related changes in perceived psychological needs and their relation to program engagement, however, have not been thoroughly researched.

1.1   What is Program Engagement?

It has been argued that simple measures of attendance in ASPs may not adequately capture youths' participation; such measures do not encompass how youth become active participants and benefit from their experience (Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawiki, 2010). For example, a parent's need for after-school child-care may be the primary reason that a youth continues to attend a program. Alternatively, engagement - which is characterized by an individual's level of interest, concentration, and enjoyment (Dawes and Larson 2011) - may provide more valuable information relating to program participation, youth outcomes, and program quality.

Engagement, experienced over an extended period of time, has been shown to be a contributing factor to the developmental opportunities available within ASPs (Dawes & Larson, 2010). Youth who possess a higher level of engagement within ASPs tend to invest more of their energy in program activities and outcomes, thus gaining a sense of ownership of program goals. Ownership has been associated with intrinsic motivation and encourages youth to seek out further involvement in program opportunities. However, youth must first enroll in the program and transition to a stage in which they are intrinsically motivated in the programs' activities (Pearce and Larson 2006).

Pearce and Larson (2006) explain the process of developing internal motivation through three stages. They described the first stage as the entry phase, in which the primary reasons for engaging in a program or activity are often external to the child. For example, parents may enroll a child in an after school program to ensure that they have adult supervision during their work hours. Second, the personal connection phase occurs as children begin to learn about and adopt the program's purpose and goals. Finally, the intrinsic motivation in program activity phase occurs as youth increasingly become active participants and become engaged in the program.

1.2   Psychological Needs Fulfillment

Research on positive youth development often draws on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) to argue that young people are most likely to thrive in settings that meet their psychological needs for connecting with adults and peers (relatedness), being themselves and having a choice in what they do (autonomy), and feeling capable (competence) (Dawes & Larson, 2011; Kuperminc et al., 2013). Participants who perceive a program as supporting these psychological needs may experience a sense of enjoyment and challenge from the program activities. This increase in perceived enjoyment and challenge may encourage individuals to personally choose to continue involvement with programs or activities that are interesting and beneficial to them (Duerden, Gillard, 2011). In other words, the experience of having their psychological needs fulfilled through involvement in program activities is likely to encourage youth to increase their sense of engagement in those activities. The process may also be cyclical, in that engaging activities may also contribute to youths' perceptions that their psychological needs are being fulfilled.

1.2.1   Autonomy

Autonomy, defined as an individual's sense of control over their choices and surroundings, has been shown to promote self-directed decision-making related to program involvement (Ryan and Deci 2000, Robak and Nagda 2011). Experiencing the program as encouraging personal choice, and not external control of choices, is likely to contribute to youths' continued involvement (Deci et al, 1991). A sense of internal control is important when discussing youth development, because with a higher sense of autonomy youth are more likely to perceive their successes as being a result of their own actions. Additionally, programs that support autonomy among youths have been shown to promote engagement by improving the participants' daily mood while attending (Weinstein & Mermelstein, 2007).

1.2.2   Competence

Defined as the internal recognition of one's ability to complete a task successfully, a sense of competence facilitates engagement within a program by supporting their need for self-based accomplishments (Elliot, A., Murayama, K., Pekrun, R., 2011). Elliot and colleagues (2011) describe a youth's need for self-based accomplishments by stressing the importance of direct, immediate, and ongoing support while participating and completing tasks. These three types of support help maintain attention and focus when completing a task, which highlights the importance of a supportive and encouraging environment.

1.2.3   Relatedness

Relatedness, or the desire to belong and make personal connections with individuals from the surrounding community, has been described as a fundamental human characteristic (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This desire to develop positive connections with their surroundings fosters an environment in which youth feel comfortable sharing personal opinions and experiences (Guay, Marsh, Senecal & Dowson, 2008). Further, this sense of comfort with their

surrounding community may promote meaningful bonds with peers and program coordinators. Research has shown that meaningful bonds help develop positive social behavior among youth and thus increases youths' confidence in relationship building.

1.3 Age Appropriate Programming

It is important to consider how age may play a role in what needs are most influential in encouraging extended engagement and thus promoting positive youth development (Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae, 2012). As youth develop and transition through school they begin to seek higher levels of peer connections in their environment (Lehmann, Denissen et al. 2013). It has also been shown that emotional independence from parents increases as youth develop along with a corresponding increase in the importance of relationships with peers (Steinberg and Monahan 2007, Jones and Deutsch 2013). Further, the psychological need for competence may characteristically change or become more dynamic as the youth develops (Elliot, McGregor, Thrash, 2002). For example, activities that provided a sense of competence for elementary aged youth may not academically be appropriate for high school aged youth.

Developmental theory posits that increased cognitive abilities, such as self-regulation, may lead youth to their environment (Lehmann, Denissen et al. 2013). Accordingly, researchers encourage the use of developmentally-appropriate curriculum within the positive youth development model in order to promote positive developmental outcomes (Lerner, Lerner et al. 2005). By applying developmentally appropriate practice, programs may be able to increase retention rates among mid to late adolescent participants who have traditionally shown a decline in program interest and participation (Meschke et al, 2012). This decline has been associated with a lack of program material that is applicable to what is taking place within their lives and changing (Jarus, Anaby et al. 2010). Programming that does not adjust the curriculum

accordingly, by incorporating activities and themes that apply to their developmental needs, may push youths to withdraw from program activities that either bore them due to their simplicity or intimidate them due to their complexity. Youth may need to be involved in activities that not only offers greater choice, but also gives them a role in creating/developing their own program (e.g., projects that they design, plan, and carry out).

Based on these findings, age differences in youth's perceptions of needs fulfillment are likely. However research is limited on how programs might seek to tailor program activities to meet varying developmental needs and what steps would be necessary to develop a comprehensive curriculum that would cover the targeted age groups (Jones and Deutsch 2013). For example, how might a program that aims to promote positive social and academic outcomes among female youth alter its curriculum in order to encourage these outcomes across a broader age range of participants? Also, how might this age specific curricula encourage youth engagement in ASPs among late adolescent participants who typically lose interest? The current study aimed to answer these questions by gathering youth's perceptions on what motivates them to become and stay engaged in ASPs. The inclusion of participants ranging in age from 9 to 16 enabled an examination of how such perceptions and motivations might have evolved across different age and grade levels.

1.4   Current Study

The current study examines youth's perceptions of psychological needs fulfillment and how it may work to promote engagement and continued participation in the after-school program Cool Girls, Inc., an inner-city program that works to promote healthy social and academic development among female youth. Secondly, the current study examined possible age-related variations in what psychological needs are most influential in encouraging program engagement.

I explored the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness among three youth groups: (a) pre- adolescent girls who are in the 2nd to 5th grade, (b) early adolescent girls who are in the 6th to 8th grade, and (c) mid to late (i.e., high school aged) adolescent girls who are currently involved in the ASP's high school leadership program. By using the thematic analysis method, I explored ways in which ASPs can further develop their curriculum to help encourage continued participation and positive outcomes among participating youth.

Previous research has shown that for youth to benefit from the opportunities provided by ASPs, they must first become actively engaged in the program activities over time (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Therefore, the first goal of this study was to expand previous research by exploring how youths' perceptions of experiences that support their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness may have facilitated program engagement. The second goal of this study was to explore whether perceived needs fulfillment varies across age groups.

2   METHOD

2.1   Cool Girls

Cool Girls, Inc. is an after school program that strives to support both academic and life skills development for girls in grades 2 through 12. Specifically, Cool Girls, Inc. focuses on increasing participant's access to resources such as positive adult figures and opportunities for academic assistance. For the current study, participants ($N=18$) were recruited as a part of a larger evaluation of the Cool Girls, Inc. program. Most participants were African American/Black (88.9%), while some were Latina/Hispanic (5.6%) and Caucasian/White (5.6%). The youth ranged in age from 9 to 16 years old ($M = 12.11$, $SD = 2.19$) and all were female. Additionally, 7 participants were enrolled in the 2nd to 5th grade (38.9%), 6 were enrolled in the

6th to 8th grade (33.3%), and 5 were involved in the ASPs high school leadership program (27.8%).

2.2   Procedure

To gather qualitative data from youth participating in the Cool Girls, Inc. program, site coordinators at each school were asked to nominate 5 girls that represented the typical club member. The typical club member was defined as a member who attends the club regularly and actively participates in club activities. The study was approved by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board. Parental consent and youth assent was obtained from youth and guardians. Once completed, participants were reminded that the interviews would be recorded, and that they could stop participating at any time.

Follow-up questions were used to help obtain more clarification about emergent themes (Brod et al., 2009). The use of a semi-structured interview format, combined with follow-up probing questions, allowed the interviewer to alter the protocol as needed throughout the interview process. At the completion of the interview, the participants were asked to complete a brief 1-page demographic information form (Appendix B). Members of the GSU evaluation team conducted interviews independently with each participant. All of the evaluation team members were female, in order to provide a comfortable environment for the female participants to share their experiences. Also, in an effort to encourage cultural understanding between participant and interviewer, the team was made up of five ethnically diverse interviewers (Bassett et al., 2008). Two of the interviewers identified as Caucasian, two of the interviewers identified as African American, and two of the interviewers identified as Latina. Additionally, one Latina interviewer was able to conduct the interviews in Spanish for one participant who used English as a second language.

2.3   One-on-One Interviews

To begin the interview, each participant was asked to complete a brief "ice-breaker" that required her to think of words describing her experience in Cool Girls. The "ice-breaker" helped to open the conversation about the participant's experiences, and acted as a reference point throughout the interview. On average, interviews took 30 to 45 minutes to complete and were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide addressing engagement and perceptions of when and how the program fulfilled psychological needs (Appendix A). For my analysis, I focused on interview questions that elicited answers relating to engagement/motivation, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For example, relevant questions included, "What is your favorite thing about Cool Girls?", "Why is this your favorite?", or "What do you enjoy about the activities?". Example questions to elicit perceptions of autonomy, competence, or relatedness, include the following: "When you're at Cool Girls, do you get to make decisions about the things you do?", "When you're at Cool Girls, do you think you're good at the activities you do?", "When you are at Cool Girls do you feel close to the Cool Girls staff and volunteers?", and "Have you made new friends your age since joining Cool Girls?" Additionally, questions that were not initially intended to measure these themes may have been used if the participant's response related to the above mentioned themes.

2.4   Data Analysis Strategy

2.4.1   Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a six-step method that allows the researcher to identify, analyze, and detail themes that may be present within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). In comparison to other qualitative methods, such as grounded theory or phenomenology, thematic analysis can be guided by established theory in an effort to enrich further understanding of the theory (Crowe,

Inder et al. 2015). Whereas, both grounded theory and phenomenological methods aim to develop theory from the data with limited pre-conceptions. Thematic analysis, however, allows for a more exhaustive description of the data through its flexibility and ability to emphasize similarities and differences within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

2.4.2 Coding Process

In step 1 of the thematic analysis, 4 researchers completed a thorough review of the transcribed interviews in order to become familiar with the data (Creswell, 2007). With the exception of myself, who acted as the project coordinator, the 3 additional researchers who helped complete the coding process were separate of those who helped complete the one-on-one interviews. In step 2, the initial development of emergent themes, each researcher conducted a summary content analysis to reduce the data inductively into themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Coding meetings were held to compare each researcher's theme list, and a codebook, which facilitated consistent coding across all researchers (Appendix C). Once a working copy of the codebook was developed, step 3 consisted of each interview being coded by two of the four researchers to ensure reliability. During this step, some of the themes were revised as new themes emerged or existing themes no longer seemed applicable. Cohen's Kappa was calculated) of .70 or higher was removed from the code book and was excluded from further analysis. This was done in an effort to code the themes reliably.

Step 4 began the process of identifying patterns present within the themes, such as themes that were often found together. For purposes of this analysis, the team focused only on the themes related to engagement/motivation, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. All patterns were discussed as a team in an effort to explore how the themes may support the theoretical linkages between psychological needs fulfillment and program engagement. For step

five, the research team further defined each theme in order to understand which portions of the data were being captured and how it was important to the analysis. This step produced the finalized codebook, complete with a comprehensive analysis of how each theme contributed to the data. This finalized codebook was then used in the sixth step of the thematic analysis that integrated the findings and results into a final report.

Previous research has shown that for youth to benefit from the opportunities provided by ASPs, they must first become actively engaged in program activities and maintain their involvement over time (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Therefore, the first goal of this study was to explore how participants described their level and quality of engagement while in the program. The second goal was to expand previous research by exploring how youths' perceptions of experiences that support their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness may have facilitated program engagement. Lastly, the third goal of this study was to explore how perceived needs fulfillment varies across age groups.

3 RESULTS

The overall analysis for the qualitative program evaluation produced 13 themes, along with 27 sub-themes. For the current study, however, only the five themes and the accompanying sub-themes that were applicable to the research questions were used (See Fig 4). The applicable themes were *engagement, autonomy, competence, adult connectedness, and peer connectedness*. The theme of engagement included two subthemes, related to the question of level and quality of engagement, labeled *focus/concentration* and *enjoyment/fun*. The remaining four themes related to the question of if and how Cool Girls promotes psychological needs fulfillment, including adult connectedness with the subthemes *Cool Girls staff* and *Cool Sisters*. Though each theme and sub-theme is presented separately, it is important to note that they are not completely

independent. Due to the nature of the research question, the themes were often related and could be found within the same segments of a given interview. Additionally, some interviews included negative experiences related to specific themes, and acted as possible barriers for the participant.

3.1 How was the Level and Quality of Program Engagement Described?

Participants spoke of experiencing a sense of excitement when participating in specific activities. Whereas engagement in activities has been defined as occurring when young people experience activities as enjoyable and capturing their interest and concentration (Larson, 2000), the linkages between these three components of engagement appear to differ for older and younger youth (*See Figure 1*). For example, elementary and middle school aged youth included educational activities that assisted with the participant's homework in their discussion surrounding engagement. In contrast, high school aged youth felt engaged and excited by activities that promoted self-improvement and encouraged a relaxing environment. This excitement seemed to encourage a heightened level of focus, enjoyment, independence, and/or feeling of competence while partaking in activities. This process was expressed through the subthemes of *focus/concentration* and *enjoyment/fun*. Further, the participants continued attendance to program activities, and thus continued enrollment in the program, was influenced by their level of engagement.

3.1.1 Focus/Concentration

When the participants (16 of 18) were excited about their involvement in the program, they expressed an increase in focus and concentration on activities. Elementary aged participants, for example, discussed concentrating on activity instructions as a way to make sure they did not miss out on what other program members were doing. Accordingly, an elementary aged participant remarked *"I pay attention because I'm really enjoying this and I don't wanna like, go*

off to space. I might miss something and I won't be getting it." Educational activities that

assisted in the youth's homework assignments were also described as encouraging a heightened

sense of concentration and focus among elementary and middle school aged youth. For example:

"...it was something you wanted to do 'cuz you would get homework help and could learn about

other things.". In contrast, high school aged participants discussed a sense of focus and

concentration occurring in the context of group field trips and tasks that promoted goal-

development. For example, one high school participant recalled a field trip to a local university

that helped her explore possible college goals; *"...we met with some of the students... gave us a*

tour around the school and the dorms and some of the students showed us their classes."

3.1.2   Enjoyment/Fun

In addition to feeling focused while participating in Cool Girls, finding program

enrollment and activities enjoyable and/or fun was also given as a description of something that

kept the participant engaged (18 of 18). Age, similarly, played a role in how enjoyment and fun

was defined. Elementary aged youth found activities that allowed for peer communication and

team building to be enjoyable and encouraged continued program involvement. For instance, the

following elementary aged participant spoke of wanting to stay at the program longer and

expressed that they often did not want to leave once their parents came to retrieve them:

"...Sometimes I don't want to leave when my parents pick me up... because it's super fun."

Similarly, this sense of enjoyment while participating in program activities that supported peer

connection and self-confidence was expressed by middle school aged youth: *"We play games,*

we have fun, we get to connect with each other and just be ourselves." High school aged youth,

however, described the program as a place to relax and relieve stress: *"I enjoy them [program*

activities] a lot actually 'cuz like you get relaxed and you want to be engaged in something. You

don't want to be bored." Similarly, another high school student stated *"it's a place that I can go to after school and I don't have to be stressed."* The ability to connect with both peers and adults was also given as an example of a program characteristic that promoted enjoyment and fun among high school aged youth: *"...you really get to bond with other people. Not just your friends, but other people there. So that's my favorite part."*
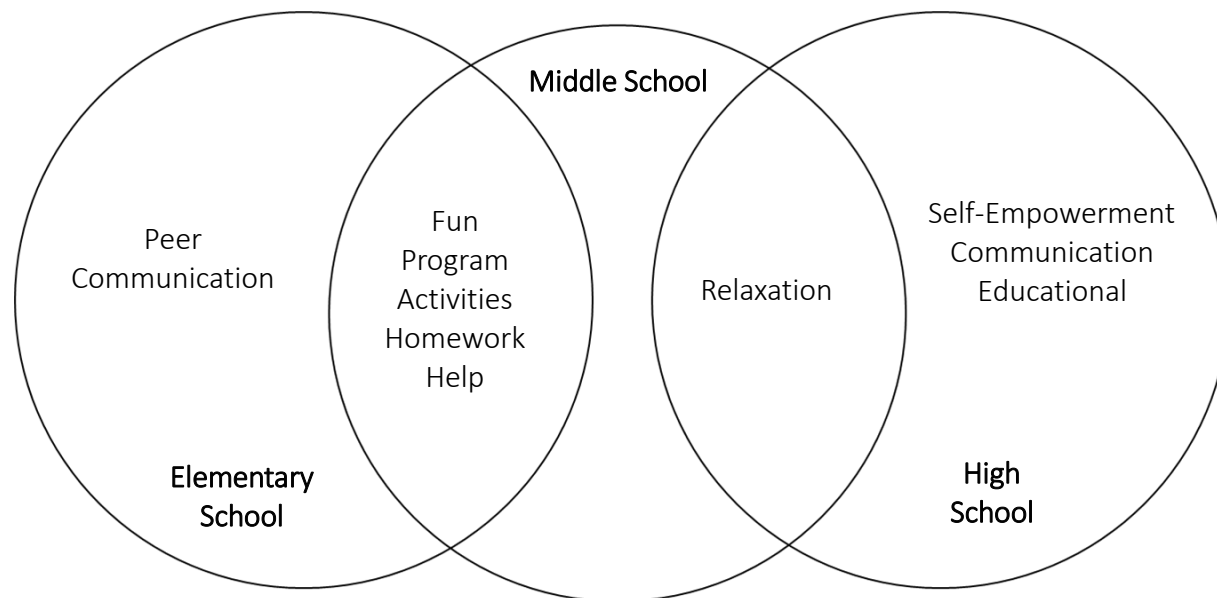
Figure 1 Engagement by Age Group

3.2 Do Youth's Perceptions of Needs Fulfillment Promote Program Engagement?

While discussing their continued enrollment and development of engagement within the Cool Girls program, the participants (16 of 18) often referenced ways in which they felt that Cool Girls fulfilled psychological needs that were important to them (*See Figure 1*). Figure 1 illustrates the most common experiences that contributed to participant engagement across age groups. These experiences correspond with critical aspects of the Self Determination theory. For example, a sense of autonomy was associated with the desire to continue participating in the program due to the participant's enjoyment and focus when contributing to the structure of the curriculum. Competence, described as a sense of successful knowledge application, allowed for

the participants to focus on the development of leadership skills. Further, the presence of interpersonal relationships with both peers and adults was described as a source of fun or enjoyment in the program.

3.2.1   Autonomy

The ability to make decisions for themselves and express themselves properly was a consistent theme throughout the interviews and was often used to describe ways in which young women benefited from program enrollment. For example, nearly all of the participants (16 of 18) felt as though they did not have the confidence to express their opinions or emotions in a group setting prior to joining Cool Girls. Across age groups, participants described how taking part in Cool Girls, helped them develop the skills necessary to express themselves confidently and concisely. Whereas elementary and middle school youth offered similar explanations focused on the ways in which adults and peers helped them gain confidence and skills, the high school aged youth described Cool Girls as offering an environment that facilitated expressing their xxx. Elementary and middle school aged youth experienced this sense of confidence when conversing with both peers and adults within the program (*see Figure 2*). For example, one middle school aged participant noted: *"They* [adults] *teach us how to overcome our fear and just be ourselves and tell how we feel."* Similarly, an elementary school aged youth shared: *"I get to express myself in Cool Girls"* when referencing topics such as peer relationships and bullying. This similarity between elementary and middle school aged participants is illustrated in *Figure 2*. Congruent with their sense of concentration and focus when taking part in activities that promoted self-empowerment, high school aged youth depicted a sense of autonomy when making personal choices within the Cool Girls program. For example, one high school participant stated *"...depending on what topic it is, I'll be engaged in it, and I'll be very excited*

to share my opinion about the topic." Gaining this feeling of independence, self-empowerment, and increased engagement encouraged the participant to develop a sense of internal motivation to continue attending program activities. For example, a high school aged participant shared: *"I really want to continue to stay until I go off to college and then I hope to come back and be a future Cool Sister to a younger Cool Girls so that I can share my experiences with them,"* when drawing a relationship between their sense of autonomy and their continued program enrollment.

Not only did most (16 of 18) girls report feeling as though they could express themselves freely, they also described an increase in confidence surrounding the idea of being different than those around them and feeling comfortable in whom they were. This encouraged the participants to relax and have fun with their peers. How the participant's expressed their attainment of autonomy varied between age groups as well. For example, elementary aged youth felt as though they were *given* or *allowed* the opportunity to express themselves by their peers and adults. One elementary student stated, *"Normally I don't talk to girls about the problems but I know if I go to them and talk about my problem they'll try to help me solve it",* when talking about why she felt she was able to share with her program peers. High school aged participants' narratives focused instead on *claiming a* sense of autonomy accepting the possibility of feeling or wanting things that were different from their friends or group members: *"...it doesn't matter what other people think. It's what I want, what I think, and that people shouldn't be able to change that."*
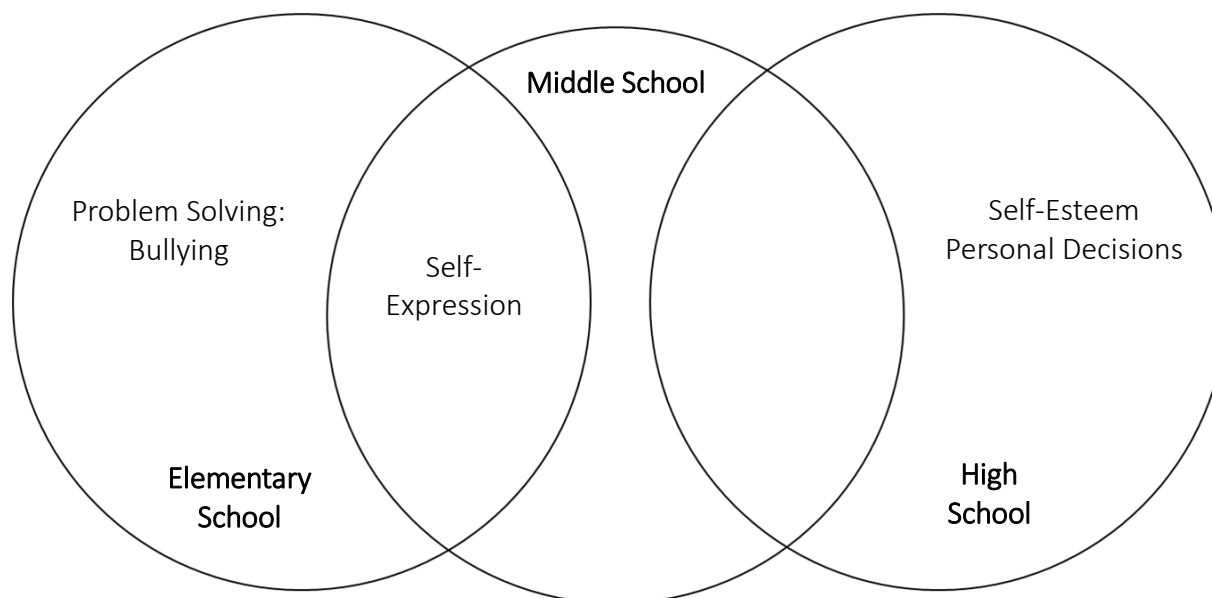
Figure 2 Autonomy by Age Group

3.2.2   Competence

Most participants (15 of 18) discussed that once they felt capable of completing a task

successfully or apply previously obtained knowledge, they were more likely to seek out similar

activities or experiences. Educational program activities provided by Cool Girls, such as

homework assistance, were described as encouraging this sense of competence among

elementary aged youth. This was attributed to a heightened sense of concentration/focus when

participating in these educational activities. As demonstrated in *Figure 3*, each age group

differed in how they discussed their sense of competence. Middle school aged youth discussed

being engaged in opportunities for personal improvement when taking part in activities that they

had a previous interest in. This can be seen in the following quote from a participant when

discussing her desire to take part in activities that focused on science, her favorite school subject;

"Cool Girls has a lot of good science programs. Like, they have a technology program at

Georgia Tech. They show you how to fix things, things like that. I just like science period. I'd do

anything dealing with science." Additionally, younger participants expressed an increased sense

of engagement when working harder and focusing on tasks. This was often associated with an internal motivation to gain further understanding of a new topic, as shown in the following quote from an elementary aged participant: *"Like if I try to do it, and I don't get it, I just keep on trying harder and harder... And eventually I'll get it!"* In contrast, high school aged youth focused more on opportunities for leadership skill development when discussing their increased sense of competence: "*When we volunteer we get different activities to do and I think keeping up with the activities can be hard so I have to try really hard.*"

Group Activities

Sport

Elementary School

Middle School

Personal Improvement

Concentration

Leadership Skills

Educational

High School
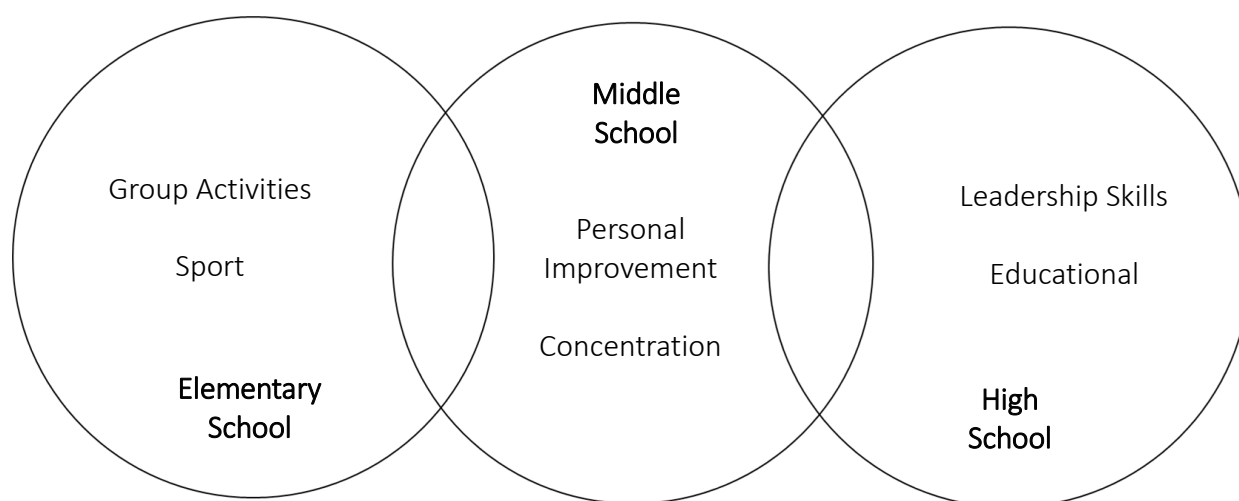
Figure 3 Competence by Age Group

3.2.3 *Adult Connection (Relatedness)*

The theme of having a positive adult figure to relate to while participating in the Cool Girls program was present in almost all (16 of 18) of the interviews. As demonstrated in *Figure 4,* each age group discussed a different individual that they felt closed to while participating in Cool Girls. Feeling as though there was an adult with whom they could share their opinions with or seek assistance regarding personal issues appeared to promote a sense of familial connectedness to the program as a whole, similar to that experienced within their home. They

felt as though it was a safe place from which they could receive resources and confidently express themselves. This theme was broken down into two sub-themes, Cool Girls staff and Cool Sisters, to define what role the adult figure played in the youth's life.

Peer: All Members

Adult: Program
Coordinator

Elementary
School

Middle
School

Peer:
Members as
Sisters

Adult:
Mentors

Peers: Specific
Members

Adult: Mentors and
Volunteers

High
School
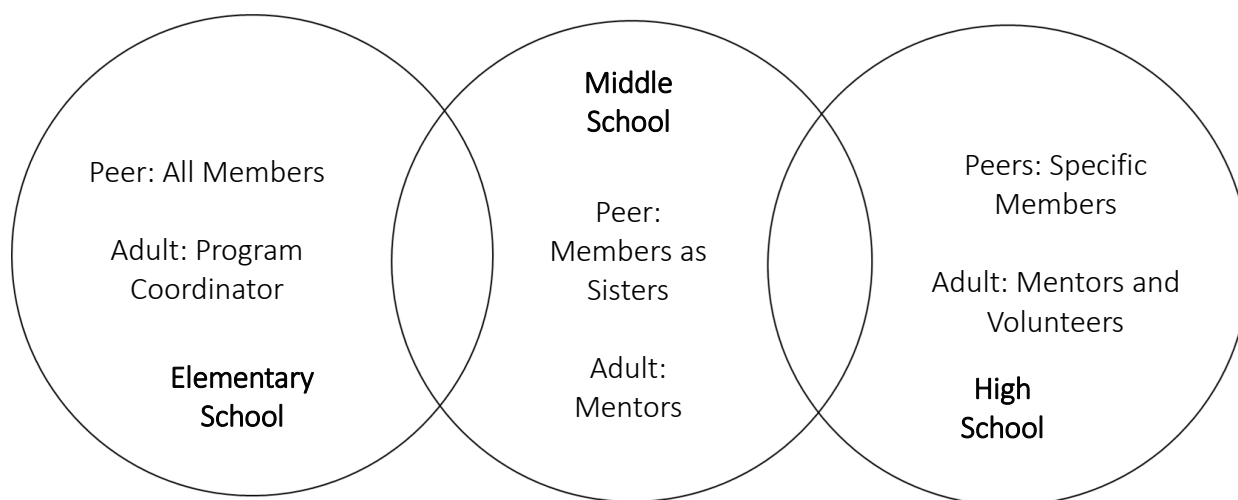
Figure 4 Relatedness by Age Group

Cool Girls Staff. Program facilitators at each participating school were the most common (16 of 18) adult figure discussed by all participants across ages when asked about adult connections. Most facilitators seemed to take on a maternal role for the participants, and helped form a familial environment within the program, as exhibited by a high school aged participant: *"In Cool Girls club we used to call our teacher Mama P. We never did call her by her real name we used to always call her Mama P."* By creating a sense of belonging and connection, the familial environment acted as an encouragement to stay involved in the program as exhibited in the following quote by a middle school aged participant: "*When I first got to Cool Girls they didn't know me real well, but as I kept coming and coming, they* [program coordinators] *started to be my friends and helping me*." Further, one elementary aged participant spoke of her connection with her program facilitator as a form of security and dependence: *"They made me feel good. Like, I had some people that were around that will always be there."* This sense of

security was shown to be most present in elementary aged participants and to have a positive impact on not only the participant's likelihood to continue enrollment in Cool Girls, but also school attendance as a whole.

Cool Sisters. One benefit of continued enrollment in the program is the opportunity to be matched with a "Cool Sister" as a mentor. A total of 11 participants in the study currently or previously had a cool sister. The relationship between the cool sister and program participant was most commonly described as a source of support or advice during their time in the program. Similar to the theme of *focus/*concentration, the advice and program activities commonly surrounding the topic of college or future goals for the high school aged participants promoted increased levels of engagement in the program. For example, one high school student spoke of her Cool Sister pushing her to be the best at what she participates in; *"...she pushes me to be the best and I think that's what really interesting. Like, I wouldn't trade her for any other Cool Sister."* However, when the relationship was unsuccessful or ended abruptly, participants expressed a lack of commitment to the program and thus a lack of interest in other available program activities. For example, when asked if the participant wanted to participate in the "Cool Sister" mentor program following the end of their previous mentor relationship, a middle school aged participant stated: "*if it's* [her failed mentor relationship] *going to be like that, I don't want a cool sister at all.*"

3.2.4   *Peer Connections (Relatedness)*

In addition to *Adult Connections*, peer connections and friendships were among the most common (18 of 18) encouraging factors. Many participants spoke of stressors, such as bullying, that they experienced while attending school during the day. However, by participating in Cool Girls, most felt that these stressors were easier to face. This can be seen in the following quote

from a middle school aged participant who describes being in the program as a form of mentoring and a source of good advice*: "…it's like mentoring you get good advice and you have, well, you get to hang out with your peer."* Further, it should be noted that these relationships tended to grow stronger between specific members of the program as their enrollment in the program continued through the years as illustrated in *Figure 4*. This is shown in the following quote from a high school aged participant: *"And I look at many of my fellow peers as sisters. And I look at all of us as a family."* This was in contrast to the elementary aged and middle school aged participants who spoke of their peer relationships in terms of "all-members" as opposed to specific members that they were close to: *"…when everybody comes together. Like, when they have big group events. Everybody come together and can be happy*."
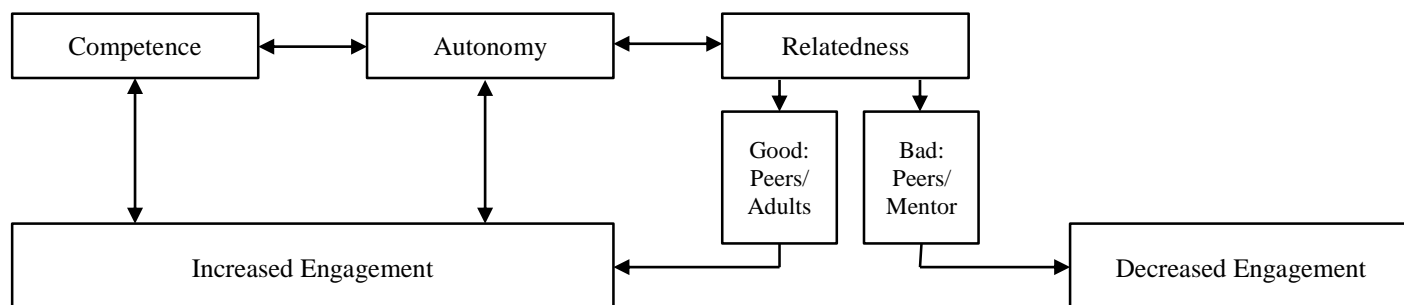
Figure 5 The Relationship Between Psychological Needs Fulfillment and Program Engagement.

3.2.5 Possible Barriers to Program Engagement

Although most participants spoke positively about the program, some (4 of 18) shared experiences that acted as barriers to developing a strong sense of engagement in the program. It was posited that negative experiences related to fulfillment of the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness would decrease program engagement. However, the findings suggest that *Peer Connectedness* is the primary psychological need that directly

contributes to the participants perceived level and quality of engagement and thus their choice to maintain enrollment in the program. For example, when asked what made her continue to attend the Cool Girls program, one middle school participant stated, *"If I keep coming, I can have a lot more friends than I do. And, I thought I would have a lot more fun than I had last year."* This link between peer connectedness and quality of engagement appears to be one-directional, in that participants discussed ways in which negative interactions with program peers contributed to their feelings of not belonging in the program and no longer wanting to attend. This relationship, however, did not appear the other way around. Figure 4 summarizes the impact peer connectedness may have on program engagement.

Peer Connectedness Barriers. Negative interpersonal relationships with fellow group members had a direct effect on their level of focus, concentration, and enjoyment. Similar to *Autonomy*, younger participants' reactions to negative interpersonal relationships seemed to influence their ability to focus on program activities, whereas high school participants' reactions to negative interpersonal relationships seemed to contribute to a sense of stress during participation. For example, an elementary aged participant spoke of a time when she struggled to concentrate on program activities because of a disagreement she was having with a fellow group member; "*We become friends again later, but it is hard when we have conflict in our group activities*". In contrast, high school participants referenced their internal state as contributing to their lack of enjoyment. For example, a high school aged participant shared a time that she did not feel like she could relax and have fun while at the program because of an altercation with a group member; "*...some of the girls can be straight up mean, because they think they are better than us*".

Decreases in *Peer Connectedness*, and the corresponding decreases in participants' sense of program engagement, also had a reciprocal relationship with both autonomy and competence. There was an interplay between peer connectedness, autonomy and competence such that fulfillment of one need influenced fulfillment of the others in order to promote positive program engagement. Accordingly, failure to fulfill one of these needs seemed to prevent fulfillment of other needs, as demonstrated in the following quote from a middle school participant who spoke of her lack of confidence in sharing within the program when conflict occurred; "*I like being around people, but I don't like to see people sad or mad, so when that* [disagreements] *happens I don't talk*".

4   DISCUSSION

The goals of this study included exploring how Cool Girls, Inc. participants experienced and defined their level of engagement with the program. Additionally, a second goal was to examine participants' perceived fulfillment of their psychological needs for a sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and how the fulfillment of these needs may correspond to their level of engagement. Lastly, the study aimed to consider age-related variations in these processes. Building on research showing that prolonged engagement promotes positive developmental outcomes for program members (Dawes and Larson 2011), the findings of this study can inform future program development by providing information to guide strategies that encourage program engagement.

As a whole, the findings revealed several aspects of the Cool Girls program that either supported or failed to support participants' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings suggest that how and if these psychological needs are met plays a role in the extent to which participants become engaged in the program and express a desire to maintain their

involvement. Elementary, middle, and high school participants expressed these psychological needs differently at times; however, similarities did exist across age groups, both in terms of how they defined their psychological needs and the role that needs fulfillment played in program engagement. The following sections include discussion of the ways in which needs fulfillment played a role in level of program engagement, other barriers to program engagement, and the role of participant age. Limitations and potential next steps will also be discussed.

4.1   Importance of Program Engagement

Exploring how participants experienced and defined their program engagement was the first goal of this study. Participants in the current study described having higher levels of engagement in program activities when they had some personal choice in selecting activities. Increased engagement in the program was also closely related to participants expressing a desire to maintain their enrollment in the program. . The findings provided further empirical support for previous research by Pearce & Larson (2006) and Mahoney, Parente & Lord (2007), which revealed the importance of intrinsic motivation regarding program engagement. Specifically, when asked about their motivation to return each year, participants expressed feeling a sense of excitement or enjoyment from sharing their opinions within the group and that this encouraged them to want to continue participating. Continued program enrollment is important because research has shown that youth who have prolonged enrollment in after-school programming are more likely to experience positive developmental outcomes (Dawes & Larson, 2011).

Program engagement has also been shown to have a bidirectional relationship with program quality (Mahoney et al., 2007), such that program quality sets the stage for highly engaging activities, and highly engaged members are more likely to invest in the quality and development of the program. In the current study, Cool Girls participants' comments suggested that by

contributing to the daily curricula of the program, they developed a sense of ownership and pride in the program. Middle school and high school aged participants, in particular, related their involvement to a perceived sense of autonomy and their desire to contribute to the program. Previous research has shown that similar programs have experienced a quality increases as participants perceived their wants/needs were being met (Durlak, Weissberg et al. 2010).

Findings also indicated that youth experienced barriers to engagement. Specifically, participants noted that problems in interpersonal relationships with peers and the related stress left them feeling less engaged. Interpersonal relationships with peers have been shown to have a larger impact on the social and behavioral maturity of youth than relationships with parents and/or adults (Waldrip, Malcolm et al. 2008). Additionally, the importance of peer interpersonal relationships grows and begins to influence both academic and social outcomes as youth mature (Hartup 1996). Cool Girls participants explained that negative interpersonal relationships led them to lose their sense of enjoyment or focus and reduced their desire to continue their enrollment. This was especially true for the middle school participants, for whom peers were often cited as a primary influence on their level of program engagement. The high school youth expressed having smaller peer groups, and found that their peer relations were stronger, more stable, and less likely to become negative.

The *Magnification Hypothesis* may help explain the role that peer relationships play in youths' level of program engagement. Defined as the influence that strong relationships have on an individual's behavior, the magnification hypothesis can function to either encourage or deter pro-social behaviors in youth (Berndt, 2004). For example, an increased sense of engagement within an ASP may be attributed to close program peers that have similarly high engagement. Accordingly, middle school aged Cool Girls participants that described a positive or high quality

peer relationship within the program also spoke of an increase in engagement and higher probability of returning the following year. However, this may also function in the opposite direction by magnifying or promoting non-pro social behavior if the peers lack a sense of engagement in the program.

4.2   Engagement and Psychological Needs Fulfillment

The second goal was to explore the interplay between engagement and psychological needs fulfillment. Many of the program areas that influenced the participants' sense of engagement coincided with their experiencing fulfillment of their psychological needs. This sense of needs fulfillment is critical to positive youth development because youth are more likely to thrive and exhibit positive outcomes in settings that meet their psychological needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Kuperminc et al., 2013). Further, research has suggested that youth who are continuously attending and are engaged in an ASP are more likely to exhibit this social behavior of involvement in other areas (Cosden, Morrison et al. 2001, Jones 2011). For example, positive social behavior in an ASP might extend into a greater sense of connection to school and improved school attendance.

4.2.1   *Competence and Autonomy*

Interestingly, youths' experiences of program engagement were linked to each psychological need in varying ways (*See Figure 1*). Autonomy and competence, for instance, appear to have a mutually reinforcing link to engagement. Participants who experienced high levels of autonomy and/or competence discussed feeling highly engaged in the program, and this sense of engagement, in turn, then seemed to reinforce a sense of autonomy and/or competence. Participants who were highly engaged felt increased levels of autonomy, and thus, felt confident in their ability to express their opinions and feelings. One way in which sense of autonomy can

affect personal and academic development is by decreasing the level of stress experienced by youth during transitional periods such as school or grade changes (Guay, Ratelle & Chanal, 2008). Research has shown that youth experience high levels of stress when transitioning between elementary and middle school, and then again between middle and high school (Hartup and Stevens 1999). A sense of autonomy, however, may help mitigate this stress by providing the youth with the tools necessary to express their feelings and opinions confidently when interacting with peers and adults.

The data also suggests that as participants progress through the program they interact with their environment differently. For example, elementary aged youth discussed taking advantage of opportunities of autonomy that were provided through the program. Whereas, middle school aged youth seemed to internalize these opportunities and view them as a chance for personal development. Lastly, high school aged youth tended to take more control of their environment, viewing Cool Girls as facilitating, rather than providing them with, this sense of control. Specifically, high school youth made use of their environment and exhibited this by taking on leadership roles. This trajectory of change has empirically been shown to be related to parental and peer relationships through child development (Steinberg and Silverberg 1986). As a child develops, their interactions with their parents and peers change and thus lead to a change in how they recognize and demonstrate autonomy within their environment.

Competence fulfillment from program participation (specifically, academic competence) also contributed to program engagement by providing youth with the opportunity to receive academic assistance with homework. Youth who ordinarily struggled to complete homework assignments expressed a sense of relief and enjoyment from having the opportunity to complete difficult tasks with assistance from program leaders. This was done by incorporating homework

help into program curriculum, providing participants with time to complete homework before returning home. Research has shown that the importance of homework completion increases for students as they progress through their education (Cosden et al., 2001). However, students growing up in low-income neighborhoods have been shown to struggle with homework completion. This could be because of their parent's lack of time or resources to assist the student with their homework. When ASPs provide an environment in which students feel comfortable seeking academic help, students may experience less stress and be able to direct more energy toward engaging with program activities.

4.2.2 Relatedness

A sense of engagement seems to be built on experiencing positive relationships within the program. Participants felt that the nature of their relationships with program peers directly affected their ability to initiate and maintain program engagement. This was true for both positive and negative peer relationships. Positive interpersonal relationships were associated with an ease of gaining and maintaining a sense of engagement. Feeling welcomed and relaxed were two descriptors participants used when detailing how their positive relationships made them feel while at the program. In contrast, participants described negative interpersonal relationships as a deterrent to program engagement. They described negative relationships as leading to feelings of high stress and discomfort, which in turn, led participants to limit their activities in the program.

Similar to competence and autonomy, the one directional relationship between relatedness and program engagement was expressed differently by each age group. For example, who the participant considered to be a part of their peer group varied across the three age groups. Elementary and middle school aged participants included all members of the group when discussing how their peer relationships played a role in engagement. In contrast, high school

aged students focused more on specific peers with whom they have formed intimate friendships through the program. This is exemplary of developmental theory regarding peer relations, in that, as youth develop they tend to transition from larger peer groups towards closer and more intimate relationships (Hartup and Stevens 1999, Hirsch 2005, Goodwin, Mrug et al. 2012). This may be because as youth age, they begin selecting peers based on similar emotional and social attributes. These more intimate relationships are characterized by a marked increase in self-disclosure and empathy. Further, these relationships have been shown to act as building blocks to more intimate and possibly romantic relationships later in life (Oudekerk, Allen et al. 2015).

This transition is important when considering how to properly address peer relatedness within programming for multiple age groups. While younger participants may benefit from activities that promote group cohesiveness, high school aged participants may benefit more from activities centered on small group peer communication and conflict management. Previous research on the relationship between engagement and psychological needs fulfillment is limited. Specifically, the role of psychological needs fulfillment in development of program engagement has been under-studied. Programs that implement curricula designed to address these needs will likely encourage youth to become more engaged in the program and maintain enrollment. Further, the importance of peer relatedness to program engagement suggests that program activities that assist in peer development and encourage positive interpersonal relationships among members may function to support both autonomy and competence and increase program engagement.

4.3   The Impact of Age on Engagement and Psychological Needs Fulfillment

The third goal of this study was to examine the influence participant age had on both program engagement and perceived psychological needs fulfillment. Cool Girls, Inc. extends

from elementary school through high school aged participants, allowing for the interviews of this study to be broken into groups by school age. Meschke et al. (2012) stressed the importance of integrating age and development in programming, since it affects so many aspects of the youth's life. Further, as youth age, individuals other than their adult guardians play an increased role in their positive development (Lehmann, Denissen et al. 2013). Indeed, the findings from this study suggest that important age-related differences occur regarding engagement and needs fulfillment. These age-related findings are further illustrated in figures 1 thru 3, and discussed below.

4.3.1 Engagement

Elementary and middle school aged participants related their sense of program engagement, most commonly, to activities that focused on homework help and peer related communication (*See Table 1*). This is consistent with research showing younger youth benefit from the academic assistance provided through after school programming (Cosden, Morrison et al. 2001) For example, ASPs may work to remove the stress of having to complete homework at home. Middle and high school aged students found Cool Girls to be a reliable source of assistance in dealing with interpersonal issues and academic struggles. This sense of reliability and comfort, in turn, supported their continued engagement in the program. Further, most middle and high school participants felt that Cool Girls provided a place they could seek assistance from both peers and adult figures.

4.3.2 Psychological Needs Fulfillment

According to Harry Stack Sullivan's theory of personality development, the age related differences in the youth psychological needs may be attributed to how and when youth develop their personal identity. For example, Harry Stack Sullivan posited that who youth identify as the most influential person in their lives may lay the groundwork for future more

intimate and mature relationships because of their impact on the young person's social and emotional development (Berndt 2004). Alternatively, Erikson argued that mature friendships do not occur until much later (possibly early adulthood) and that this only takes place following the formation of their personal identity (Papazova and Antonova 2013).

In regard to relatedness, elementary school aged participants found the program fulfilled their psychological needs by supporting their need to express themselves both with adults and peers and by encouraging group based activities (*See Table 2*). Middle school aged participants were more focused on building interpersonal relationships with the peers and adult figures, whereas high school aged participants felt close to specific members/smaller groups who they had known for a longer length of time. It is likely that high school aged participants had participated in the Cool Girls program for a longer period of time, reflecting their greater familiarity and shared experiences with other participants.

Further, in regard to autonomy, both elementary and middle school aged groups preferred activities that allowed them to express themselves. The younger girls viewed Cool Girls as a setting that promoted their sense of autonomy. This is consistent with research showing that as youth mature their need for autonomy and respect increases (Deutsch and Jones 2008), specifically in environments outside of the home. In contrast, high-school aged participants expressed a sense of self-confidence and looked to the program as a setting in which to demonstrate and further develop their leadership skills. Program activities that helped the individual feel more competent varied across age groups. Elementary aged participants, for example, felt most competent when taking part in group activities that included all members and focused on academic material. Middle school aged participants felt competent when taking part in activities that focused on personal development. Lastly, high school aged participants

described activities focused on leadership skills and future goal building as promoting competence.

4.3.3   Age-Appropriate Programming

Research has also shown that as youth age they tend to decrease their involvement in after school programming (Roffman, Pagano et al. 2001, Deutsch and Jones 2008). One reason for such decreases in program involvement may be related to programming that fails to adapt to the participants' changing needs. Coinciding with the relation between program engagement's and psychological needs fulfillment, it can be inferred that if programs structure curricula around the specific age-related? needs of their participants, the program may promote increased engagement and retention (Hirsch, Roffman et al. 2000, Jones and Deutsch 2013). For example, elementary school aged participants may benefit most from program activities that are group-centered and promote group cohesiveness, academic/homework focused, and promote self-disclosure among peers and adults. While also benefiting from program activities that are group-centered and focus on group-cohesion, middle school aged participants may prefer activities that focus around self-development, self-disclosure, and peer communication skill building. Lastly, high school aged participants have expressed a desire to partake in activities that have an individual/small-group emphasis, and focus on leadership skills building and educational goal setting skills.

4.4   Limitations and Future Directions

4.4.1   Gender Differences

The current study focuses solely on female youth, as the Cool Girls program is constructed for female adolescents. However, the topic of program engagement and retention is

important for both female and male students. Future studies should incorporate both female and male participants in an effort to map these findings across genders and explore possible gender differences related to program involvement. The processes associated with developing positive and negative peer relatedness, for example, have been shown to differ for males as compared to females (Waldrop and Halverson 1975, Haynie, Doogan et al. 2014). Female youth are likely to be positively influenced by their female peers and have larger peer groups. Male youth, in contrast, are more likely to be influenced by negative behaviors in their male peers and tend to limit the size of their peer groups. If the current study had been able to incorporate both female and male input, the findings may have further reflected this gender difference in peer group size and influence.

4.4.2   Self-Report Data

This study used self-report qualitative data to obtain program participants' personal experiences related to program engagement and fulfillment of psychological needs. Although this method offers rich narrative data, qualitative studies are limited by selective sampling. For example, program participants with low levels of engagement were likely excluded from the current study (particularly in the older age groups) due to low program retention and possible program drop out by less engaged youth. Thus, the findings of this study may be specific to this program and demographic. Further, the sample collected for this current study is limited in that it only represents a portion of the programs participants. The findings are representative of this sample. Other after school *programs* that are inclusive of both male and female students and/or all male students may have differing experiences than what was exhibited by the Cool Girls Inc. participants.

4.4.3   Future Directions

Future steps may include observational measures to strengthen the reliability of findings by adding additional sources of data that can be triangulated with interview data. The processes involved in psychological needs fulfillment have previously been thought to be strictly internal; however, observable behaviors be used to measure needs fulfillment. For example, the positive and/or negative types of interactions among program members may be observed as a way of measuring relatedness. Larger peer groups could be observed as program activities that include all members working on one singular task in a positive manner. Smaller, more intimate relationships could be observed by the number of small groups that break away during program activities. The ways in which participants express their opinions and feelings with peers and adults in the program may be observed as a way of measuring autonomy. Behaviors to look for may include sharing one's personal opinion about program activities in which they participate, or self-disclosure between the youth in both emotional and social encounters. Lastly, the time spent by program members on academic based activities or the number of students who seek assistance from program staff with academic work may demonstrate level of competence.

Mixed-methods data may also enhance this study's findings in that it may provide an even larger picture of how psychological needs are met within after school programs and their impact on program engagement. This could include pre and posttest survey data that explore how youth experience their needs being met through program activities. Does their sense of needs fulfillment change over time? How might participants rate their levels of needs fulfillment based on specific program activities?

4.5   Conclusion

Participation in after school programming over an extended period of time has been shown to promote positive developmental outcomes among youth (Pearce and Larson 2006, Dawes and Larson 2011). The findings of this study suggest that the members of an after school program become more engaged by taking part in activities that are related to the fulfillment of their psychological needs. These needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) similarly changed over time among participants suggesting that to achieve program participation over an extended period of time, programs must adapt with the members as they age and develop. Therefore, it is suggested that future ASP curricula should be developed around the evolving psychological needs of their members.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Guide

<u>**Interview Guide**</u>

(1) Interviewer: *Hello, _____, thank you so much for agreeing to do the interview with me! My name is _____ and I am a researcher at Georgia State University. I am going to ask you some questions about what Cool Girls is like for you and what makes you want to be at Cool Girls. If there is a question you do not want to answer, we can skip it. If you want to stop at any time, we can stop and you will not get in trouble. As you can see, we are recording this interview so that we can write down the information we get from you. Once we have written it down, we will erase this recording. Also, your name will not be written down, so no one will know what answers you gave. Do you have any questions? If not, let's begin!*

Tell me about one of your favorite memories at Cool Girls. (Will have a screen shot of the Cool Girls page with a list of CG activities)

> *Why is this your favorite memory?*

What is your favorite thing about Cool Girls?

> *Probe suggestions:*
>
> *Why is this your favorite?*
>
> *(m)What is your favorite thing about having a mentor (Cool Sister)?*

What is your least favorite thing about Cool Girls?

> *Probe suggestions:*
>
> *Why is this your favorite?*
>
> *(m)Are you able to talk with your mentor (Cool Sister) about this?*

Think back to when you started the program. Tell me how you got started.

> *Did you join because you wanted to or because someone else wanted you to? Were there any other reasons?*

Why do you come to Cool Girls now?

Can you think of any things that have changed to make you want to come to Cool Girls more or less? What are they?

> *Probes: New things you've learned about? Things that make you like it more? Less?*

(2)Interviewer: *Ok, now I'm going to ask you some questions about different things you do at Cool Girls and how you feel about them.*

What activities have you done at Cool Girls?

> *Probe suggestions: Girls Club, Cool Fitness, Cool Tech, field trips*

When you are at Cool Girls, how much do you enjoy the activities you participate in?
> *What do you enjoy about the activities?*

> *What is your favorite activity? Why?*

Do you think the things you do at Cool Girls are interesting?

> *If yes, what do you find interesting about them? Why?*

> *If no, what do you think would make them more interesting? Why?*

(M)Do you think any of the things you do with your mentor (Cool Sister) are interesting?

When you're at Cool Girls, how hard do you try with (or how much do you concentrate/focus on) the activities you're doing? Why?

> *Probe suggestions:*
> *If participant responds with something about the activities are easy, maybe say "why do you think they're easy/what makes them easy?" or "What would make the activities harder?"*
> *If participant responds that they do concentrate/focus, maybe say "What makes you concentrate/focus?" or "Why do you concentrate/focus?"*

(3)Interviewer: *Ok, now I'm going to ask you about how you feel when you're at Cool Girls and the kinds of things you learn when you're at Cool Girls.*

Tell me about something you have done at Cool Girls that you didn't get to do before joining.

> *Probe suggestions:*
> *What did you learn about this activity?*

(M) Have you had the chance to do anything with your mentor (Cool Sister) that you didn't get to do before joining Cool Gils?

When you're at Cool Girls, do you get to make decisions about the things you do?

When you're at Cool Girls, do you feel close to the other girls? Do you feel close to the Cool Girls staff and volunteers?

Tell me about someone at Cool Girls that you feel close to.

> *Probe suggestions:*
> *What do you like about this person?*
> *How do you feel when you're with this person?*
> *What kinds of things do you do with this person?*

When you're at Cool Girls, do you think you're good at the activities you do?

Tell me about something you do at Cool Girls that you're really good at.

Tell me about something at Cool Girls that you wish you were better at.

(4)Interviewer: *Ok, now I'm going to ask you about the girls you've met because of Cool Girls.*

Tell me about the other girls you have met at Cool Girls.

> *Probe Suggestions:*
> *Do you enjoy spending time with _____? Why?*

Have you made new friends your age since joining Cool Girls? If yes, tell me about your new friends.

> *Probe Suggestions:*
> *Are your new friends in Cool Girls?*
> *Do you have friends that are not in Cool Girls?*
> *What do you like about your new friends? What kinds of things do you do together?*

Do you see your new friends outside of Cool Girls? If so, tell me about a time when you saw your new friends outside of Cool Girls.

(5)Interviewer: *Ok, I'm going to ask you more about people you've met, about field trips you've gone on with Cool Girls and things you've learned on field trips.*

Tell me about some of the adults you've met since you joined Cool Girls.

> *Do you feel like you can go to this person/these people for help with personal problems? If so, tell me about a time you went to this person/one of these people for support or advice. If not, why?*
>
> *Have you met people with interesting careers? What have you learned about those careers that might help you in the future?*
>
> *Have you gotten new ideas about things you might do in the future? Tell me about one of those ideas? Has being in Cool Girls helped you think about that?*
>
> *If you wanted to learn more about a career you were interested in for when you grow up, is there someone you can talk to about that?*
>
> > *Is this someone you met through Cool Girls?*

Do your parents know any of the other kids' parents at Cool Girls? If yes, did they meet because of Cool Girls?

Do your parents know any of the Cool Girls staff or volunteers? If yes, who knows who?

Tell me about a time you went on a field trip with Cool Girls.

> *What did you like about this field trip?*
> *What do you wish you could change about the field trip?*
> *Tell me about the new people you met on the field trip.*
> > *What did you learn from the new people?*
> *What else did you learn from this field trip?*
> *Did this field trip/knowing you would go on field trips encourage you to join Cool Girls?*

(6 -M)Interviewer: *Ok, now I am going to ask you some questions about your mentor and some of the things you two do together.*

Do you have a Cool Sister?

> *Can you tell me about your experience with her?*

How long have you been matched with her?

How often do you get together?

What activities do you do together/like to do together?

How does having a Cool Sister affect your life or experience in Cool Girls (get at how having a mentor makes a difference in girl's decision to stay in Cool Girls)?

(7)Interviewer: *Ok, last we are going to talk about changes you would like to see with the Cool Girls program.*

Can you think of something you would like to see changed or added to the Cool Girls program?

> *You may need to give her examples: Do you like the field trips that you go on? Do you like the activities that you do in the club? Are there activities you wish you could do with the Cool Girls?*
>
> *Do you feel like you can talk to Cool Girls about these changes?*

(C)Interviewer: *That was the last question. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today! Here is a list of places kids can call for help in case they need it. It is good to know where to find help even if you don't think you need it now.* <Interviewer hands participant Youth Resource List>

> *I have one last thing I need you to do. Please fill out these questions and then we'll be finished.* <Interviewer hands demographics sheet to participant>

Appendix B: Demographics

<u>**Demographics**</u>

1.) Name: (first) _____ (last) _____

2.) What is your birthday? (month) _____(day)_____(year) _____

3.) When did you start Cool Girls? (month) _____(year) _____

4.) How old are you?

5.) What Grade are you in?

6.) What grades do you mostly make at school?
   a. Mostly A's
   b. Mostly B's
   c. Mostly C's
   d. Mostly D's
   e. Mostly F's
   f. I prefer not to answer

7.) What is your race/ethnicity?
   a. African American/Black
   b. Latina/Hispanic
   c. Asian/Vietnamese
   d. Pacific Islander
   e. Caucasian/White
   f. Other: _____
   g. I prefer not to answer

Appendix C: Cool Girls Qualitative Project Codebook

Cool Girls Qualitative Project Codebook

- Program activities
  - Fitness (CoolFit)
  - Academic (CoolTech / homework help)
  - Workshops / discussions
  - A Beautiful Me
  - Field trips
  - Community service / service learning
- Adult connections
  - Site coordinator
  - Cool Girl staff
  - Volunteer
  - Cool Sister
- Peer connections (only other Cool Girls)
- Enrollment (how the Cool Girl became involved)
  - Parent
  - Teacher
  - Peer
  - Personal (e.g., heard announcement, saw flyer)
- Knowledge
  - Problem solving skills
  - Sexual health (hygiene / menstruation / puberty)
  - Fitness / nutrition / physical health
  - History / heritage
  - Science, technology, engineering or mathematics
  - Careers
  - Goal setting
  - Internet safety
  - Safety at school / physical safety
  - Life skills (e.g., money management)
  - College / education
  - Interpersonal skills / communication skills / emotion regulation
- Application of knowledge (competence)
- New experience
- Academic help / assistance

- Self-esteem / body image / confidence
- Engagement
    - Interest / focus / concentration
    - Enjoyment / fun
- Autonomy / independence / sharing opinions
- Sense of community / relatedness
- Be myself / express myself
- Altruistic behavior / helping others / role model
- Recommendations
- Good quote