‘Ahhh it was like paradise, but inside’: children’s experiences and perceptions of a free physical activity program

As most Canadian children are not attaining the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity, it is imperative that affordable and accessible programs are implemented to help children become more physically active. Specifically, community-based programs that are free and easy to access have shown to be advantageous for promoting beneficial health behaviours at a population level. The Grade 5 ACT-i-Pass (G5AP) is a community-based physical activity program in the mid-sized Canadian city of London, Ontario that offers free programming to all grade 5 children (ages 9-11 years) at various recreational facilities across the city. The data from 28 focus groups with past G5AP participants (n=101) were analyzed to understand the influence of the program on children’s perceived physical activity levels, and to investigate the enablers and/or barriers that children believe influenced their participation in, or access to, G5AP programming. Five distinct themes were identified during the analysis, including two themes describing participants’ perceived changes to their physical activity levels (i.e., additional physical activity opportunities, and well-being and self-efficacy), and three themes explaining enablers and/or barriers to G5AP programming (i.e., program structure and implementation, spatial accessibility of programming, and social supports and constraints). The findings from the focus groups were used to generate recommendations for current and future community-based physical activity programs as a means to improve the health and well-being of children.

Keywords: physical activity, child, community-based, intervention, barrier, enabler, qualitative, focus group

Introduction

Canadian children’s low physical activity levels are an ongoing public health concern, with only 28% of children 5 to 17 years of age accumulating the recommended 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily (MVPA) (ParticipACTION 2022). Engaging in physical activity promotes beneficial outcomes for children, including improved cardiovascular health and bone density (Janssen and LeBlanc 2010; Poitra et al. 2016), lower risk of depression and anxiety (Biddle et al. 2019), greater

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cognitive functioning and academic achievement (Castelli et al. 2007; Tomporowski et al. 2008), higher self-esteem (Biddle et al. 2019), and greater spiritual development (Lodewyk, Lu, and Kentel 2009). It is therefore important to establish strategies that encourage children to be physically active for supporting their overall health and well-being.

Community-based programs are a desirable method of health promotion as they can account for a variety of determinants that can either increase participation in physical activity opportunities (e.g., parents encouraging their children to be active, interest in activities that elicit MVPA, and local recreation spaces) or restrict the accessibility of recreational programming (e.g., lack of local recreation spaces, insufficient transportation options, and financial constraints; Baker and Brownson 1998; West and Shores 2008). Community-based health promotion can expand beyond the absence of diseases by promoting the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health and well-being of the community through population-level programs and interventions that are tailored to meet the needs of a specific geographic area or demographic group (McLeroy et al. 2003; Murphy 2014). Evaluations of physical activity initiatives have found that community-based programs that provide children with a supportive and appropriate environment can positively influence children's physical activity levels (Beets 2012; West and Shores 2008). Thus, offering accessible recreational opportunities outside of school could be a valuable approach to bolstering children's physical activity levels (Beets et al. 2009).

Community-based health initiatives have nevertheless been critiqued for their inability to promote substantial changes in health-related behaviours (Guldan 1996). One challenge of creating effective, community-based health promotion programs is recruiting and retaining participants. There are a variety of factors that influence

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participation in and the accessibility of programs. Health behaviours are shaped by and embedded in often intersecting socio-material structures, such as the local gendered and cultural norms affecting perceived access to services, the accessibility of resources (e.g., availability within different neighbourhoods and translated materials), the quality of the transportation infrastructure (i.e., roads, bike lanes, and public transportation), and the financial means to afford services (Christensen, Lærke and Bentsen 2015; Pate et al. 2003; Ravensbergen et al. 2016). The combination of societal expectations and environmental barriers can ultimately limit or encourage engagement in health promotion efforts. Consequently, it is challenging to create a program that applies to the whole community, which may result in decreased effectiveness and lower participation in the program amongst certain socio-economic groups (Nilsen 2006). Considering these challenges, evaluations of community-level programs are vital in order to assess how a given program influences health outcomes for different subgroups within the community and to discover cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences that shape health behaviours (Brodersen et al. 2007).

The Grade 5 ACT-i-Pass (G5AP) is a community-based physical activity program in London, Ontario, Canada (Gilliland et al. 2015). With the generosity of various public and private service providers (including, but not limited to, the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, and City of London Recreation), the program provides all grade 5 elementary school children (ages 9-11 years) and an accompanying guest free access to recreational programming across the city. To participate in the program, parents complete either a paper or online copy of the registration form. Subsequently, the child is mailed a pass that can be used to attend any of the designated G5AP activity times. The G5AP encourages physical activity by removing some financial constraints and informing children and their caregivers of the recreational

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opportunities available to them across London, Ontario. Among children ages 9 to 11 years, previous quantitative evaluations of G5AP child- and parent-reported survey data have shown that the pass is popular within subgroups associated with lower physical activity levels, including girls, children from low-income households, and children with low geographic accessibility to recreational facilities (Clark et al. 2018, 2019).

This study is an extension of prior evaluations of the G5AP, which have thus far been quantitative and survey-based, by undertaking a qualitative exploration of G5AP participants' perceptions of the program to develop a deeper understanding of the complex factors that influence children's physical activity levels and access to recreational programming from their perspectives. This qualitative study offers a rich description of children's experiences with the pass from a large sample of program participants (n = 101). The findings from this study not only provide suggestions for future years of the G5AP, but also importantly point to recommendations for the development and administration of community-based physical activity programs for children. The purpose of this study is to investigate children's experiences and perceptions of the G5AP, including gendered, socioeconomic, and geographic differences in children's experiences. Through this research, the following questions are explored: (1) how did the G5AP influence children's perceived physical activity levels? and (2) what enablers and/or barriers did children feel they encountered when accessing or participating in the G5AP?

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Methods

Research approach

This study was exploratory with a focus on the descriptions of past participants' experiences and engagement in the program. As a result, a descriptive approach was used to analyze the data. Margarete Sandelowski (2000, 336) defined qualitative descriptive studies as a "comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events." Unlike grounded theory, phenomenological, or ethnographic approaches to qualitative research, descriptive studies offer more literal interpretations of the data, prioritizing the exact words and language used by the participants (Sandelowski 2000). Descriptive qualitative studies are considered appropriate for exploring the relationship between health behaviours and determinants as the methods produce findings that directly investigate the interactions between the participant and a particular determinant (Colorafi and Evans 2016). Thus, a descriptive approach provided findings that represented the experiences of G5AP participants and describe what and how different factors influenced their participation in the program, ultimately creating suggestions for community-based programming.

Participants and recruitment

This study protocol was approved by Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (REB #103954). Participant recruitment began in the fall of 2015, following the completion of a larger evaluation of the G5AP. Eligible participants were children enrolled in a grade 6 class in the 2015-2016 school year who were registered for the G5AP the previous year. Due to associations between demographic factors on physical activity participation, the research team prioritized the inclusion of a sample of children with a variety of demographic backgrounds to represent the varying

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experiences of G5AP participants. To achieve this, the research team used the neighbourhood demographics from the 2011 Census of Canada to select a variety of schools based on the location (urban/suburban), median family income, and the quantity of service providers in the school catchment areas (Clark et al. 2018). Elementary school principals were contacted via email to discuss their school's participation in the study. In total, ten schools were recruited to participate in this study. The participating schools included an assortment of median family incomes of the school catchment areas: two low-income schools (i.e., <$60,000 CAD), five middle income schools (i.e., $60,001 - $90,000 CAD), and three upper-middle/upper-income schools (i.e., >$90,001 CAD). The schools also varied by the number of local service providers (i.e., recreational facilities providing programming to G5AP participants) located within 1,600 metres from the school. There were five schools with a low number of local service providers (i.e., zero or one facility), three schools having a moderate number of local service providers (i.e., two facilities), and two schools having a high number of local service providers (i.e., three or more facilities). A sample was randomly selected from a list of children at each participating school who had parental consent to partake in a focus group. This process resulted in a diverse group of study participants.

Of the 1,673 grade 5 children enrolled in the program, 101 G5AP registrants (6.04%) across 10 elementary schools took part in 28 different focus groups. The sample of participants was roughly balanced in terms of those who identified as users (n=55) versus non-users (n=46) of the program, and girls (n=53) versus boys (n=48). Nearly half of the participants were from middle-income areas of the city (n=49), with the remaining participants living in low-income (n=30) and upper-middle/upper income (n=22) areas. Participants were also located in areas with varying amounts of local

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recreational facilities, including low (n=47), moderate (n=24), and high (n=30) number of service providers.

Data collection: semi-structured focus groups

Prior to the focus groups, members of the research team visited schools to meet with the selected participants to further explain the purpose of the focus groups, and to distribute parental information and child assent forms to ensure the parents/guardians and the child consented to partake in the study. Subsequently, the whole research team met to review the scripts and provide suggestions for the discussions to deliver consistent facilitation of focus groups. Separate scripts were prepared for the user and non-user groups, as questions concerning changes in physical activity levels and experiences participating in the program did not apply to the non-user group.

Each focus group consisted of semi-structured conversations with two to four participants. Focus groups were selected in place of individual interviews as they provided participants with the opportunity to interact with peers, which can improve data quality by providing a supportive environment with others that have similar experiences (Morgan et al. 2002). The groups were mixed gender and were grouped into either G5AP users or non-users. Participants were identified as users if they used the pass at a recreational facility at least one time. Participants' gender status and school were determined from a G5AP survey completed by a parent/guardian (Gilliland et al. 2015). Focus groups were conducted during lunch and recess time in a communal space within the participating schools (library, cafeteria, or gymnasium), and participants received food and refreshments. The average focus group duration was 33 minutes and they ranged from 25 to 47 minutes. Participating schools either had two recess/lunch periods lasting 40 minutes each (balanced school day) or two 15-minute recesses with

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one 60-minute lunch period (traditional school day; Clark, Wilk, and Gilliland 2019). Nutritious snacks were provided during each focus group and, wherever possible, the research team finished focus groups at least 10 minutes before the end of the lunch/recess period to give children time to play before returning to class. Additionally, to preserve the quality of the conversations, focus groups were kept shorter than the full period as the literature suggests that children can concentrate on an activity for about 45 minutes (Gibson 2007). There were four members of the research team who acted as moderators for the focus groups and they were each supported by a second team member who was responsible for notetaking and audio-recording. The moderators consisted of post-doctoral and graduate students who had experience leading focus groups and interviews with youth.

Before starting the discussion, participants were asked if they consented to the discussion being audio-recorded, followed by introductions. To consider the power dynamic between the participants and the interviewers, moderators informed participants that they were free to discuss any subject matter they thought was relevant to the discussion and that they did not have to respond to questions they were not comfortable answering (Morgan et al. 2002). Participants were also informed that there are no wrong answers and that their responses were confidential. The focus groups consisted of five (non-user groups) or eight (user groups) open-ended questions, and prompts were used to facilitate discussion or to expand on a topic. Questions focused on their experiences during the program (e.g., what was your experience with the ACT-i-Pass program?), factors that facilitated or hindered program use (e.g., what did you like about the ACT-i-Pass program?), and possible solutions or changes that would encourage participation in the G5AP (e.g., what would you change about the ACT-i-Pass program that would make it better?). Focus groups proceeded until all questions

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were answered and children felt they had no additional information to share with the research team.

Data analysis

Conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 412 pages of transcripts. The transcripts were de-identified and reviewed for accuracy by the members of the research team. The focus groups were analyzed in the software NVivo 12 guided by Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) procedure for an inductive conventional content analysis. A content analysis was deemed to be the appropriate method as it provides a summary of children's experiences, which complemented the descriptive approach of this study (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Sandelowski 2000). This process involved researchers interpreting the data from the focus group by coding and identifying patterns in the discussions (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Unlike a summative quantitative approach or a theory-directed approach to content analyses, conventional content analyses allowed researchers to explore the experiences of participants without preconceived ideas, resulting in inductive category development and themes derived from the conversations with children (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

The analysis progressed in five steps. Figure 1 displays the coding process that resulted from the analysis of the data, including examples of the codes, categories and themes developed. First, the transcripts were reviewed by two team members (EO and KR) to familiarize themselves with the data. The analysts did not moderate or participate in the focus groups; as a result, they had no prior knowledge of the topics covered in the conversations with participants before reading the transcripts. Subsequently, these same team members re-read the transcripts, and began coding words and statements based on key concepts. This process included documenting any

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first impressions from the initial analysis, particularly the key ideas shared by the participants concerning their physical activity levels during their grade five year and their access to G5AP programming, including important discussion points, experiences or suggestions repeated by multiple groups; and the tone and language used by participants. This set of codes was then discussed with the wider team to inform how the codes were organized into categories based on the context and their relation to one another. Finally, categories were further combined into larger, overarching themes, which were finalized through iterative team discussions.

[Insert Figure 1]

Methodological rigour

Various techniques were applied throughout the study to enhance the quality of the analysis. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness were used to assess the quality and accuracy of the themes created from the data (Colorafi and Evans 2016). Trustworthiness consists of four components: (1) credibility (i.e., the results presented represent the experiences of the focus group participants); (2) dependability (i.e., the results being replicated if the study was conducted by another researcher); (3) transferability (i.e., the applicability of the results to different groups or settings); and (4) conformability (i.e., the impact of researchers' perspectives of the outcomes presented). One technique utilized to add trustworthiness to the findings was the adoption of critical friends by involving wider team members in the analysis process. While analyst triangulation focuses on the reproducibility of the findings through intercoder reliability and agreement (Campbell et al. 2013), critical friends aim to create plausible findings based on the data collected for the study (Smith and McGannon

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256 2018). This process challenges individual interpretations of the data by encouraging
257 researchers to reflect upon their comprehension of the data and to consider alternative
258 interpretations from other members of the research team (Smith and McGannon 2018).
259 For instance, in this study, the discussions about the initial codes, categories and themes
260 between the analysts and critical friends resulted in the restructuring of the themes due
261 to the nuances in boys' and girls' experiences in the program. KNF, SEC and JG were
262 the ideal individuals to act as critical friends for this study due to their expertise in
263 children's physical activity and health determinants, experience analyzing interviews
264 with children, and familiarity with content analysis. Additionally, the focus groups
265 included children from various demographic and economic backgrounds, which
266 provided rich data containing a variety of perspectives and experiences, ultimately
267 improving the transferability of the findings to children who reside in comparable urban
268 and suburban areas of similar high-income countries (Carter et al. 2014).
269 Reflexivity was used to recognize the influence of the researchers'
270 positionalities and knowledge of the subject matter on the findings (Rettke et al. 2018;
271 Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Specifically, Kezar (2002) argued that various aspects of
272 an individual's identity, such as education, social status and life experiences, can shape
273 the way a person interprets and adds meaning to information. The two primary analysts
274 (EO and KR) for this study were athletic adults and cis-gender women researchers.
275 Being adults may have affected the relatability of children's experiences and their
276 perceived barriers. Further, both analysts being athletic women brought a gendered
277 perspective from their involvement in sport and use of physical activity spaces. It is
278 important to consider how these experiences and social positions may have influenced
279 their interpretation of the data and the development of themes (Mason-Bish 2019; Shaw
280 2010). It was particularly important when looking at differences in the responses

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between gender and socio-economic groups to critically reflect on the analysts' knowledge of the literature and the amount of variation in responses that warranted differences between groups. To consider different interpretations of the data, the analysts met at multiple points during the analysis to have an open dialogue about the codes, categories and themes developed during their independent analyses. Through these discussions, the analysts reflected on the decision-making process when grouping codes and categories and alternative interpretations of the data to develop a plausible explanation of children's experiences in the program. This process involved continuous journaling and discussions about the interpretation of the data, resulting in alterations to the reorganization and renaming of codes, categories and themes.

Results

The analysis of the focus groups identified five distinct themes. The themes were categorized based on each research question: (1) perceived alterations to participants' physical activity; and (2) identified enablers and barriers to G5AP programming.

Children's perceived physical activity levels

Participants believed that the G5AP increased their physical activity levels, as illustrated by two themes: (1) additional physical activity opportunities; and (2) well-being and self-efficacy.

Additional physical activity opportunities

Participants who used the pass perceived an increase in their physical activity levels during the program as the G5AP provided additional activity options after school. For instance, one participant stated, 'I would play more soccer, so I was more active' (Boy,

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G5AP user). Another child agreed with the sentiment, explaining, '[the G5AP] did increase the amount I did them [sports]' (Boy, G5AP user). With the additional activities available, some participants credited the G5AP for reducing engagement in screen-based activities after school as, prior to the program, they would 'come home and there was nothing to do except video games or draw' (Boy, G5AP user). As one participant explained, 'Instead of thinking like "oh I'll just go to my room and play video games" I was like "oh maybe I should go to the ACT-i-Pass"' (Girl, G5AP user).

In addition to the supplementary activities, participants felt that the free programming available with the pass increased their physical activity levels, as 'it was free so if you wanted to try it [an activity or sport], you could, and you didn't have to pay for like a year of classes' (Boy, G5AP user). A handful of participants explained how free programming offered additional physical activity opportunities that they were previously unable to participate in due to enrolment fees. One participant explained, 'I got to go skating and swimming and usually I don't do that stuff. But it was free, so I went a lot' (Boy, G5AP user), with another participant sharing a similar sentiment, stating, 'it encouraged me to try more sports, 'cause they are more open to me 'cause they are free.' (Girl, G5AP user). Further, some participants highlighted the benefits of free programming for low-income families that had limited access to recreational opportunities since 'free is something that can get just any kid to probably do something' (Girl, G5AP user). Participants mentioned that 'there will be students I guess who don't have as much opportunities that others… as other students' (Boy, G5AP user) and that the G5AP 'once helped out my friend who, she was like out of money I don't know why, but she just didn't have money with her so I got her in with the ACT-i-Pass' (Girl, G5AP user). Ultimately, providing free physical activity opportunities supported parents as 'they're [service providers] too much money for

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most people' (Girl, G5AP user) and allowed parents to 'just, like, drop [their children] off and go without having to know every time if there was like different money privileges' (Girl, G5AP user). The responses from the participants indicated that the free, supplementary programming offered by the G5AP enabled participation in additional recreational opportunities, resulting in perceived higher physical activity levels.

Well-being and self-efficacy

Participants indicated that they enjoyed the activities available with the G5AP and they developed physical activity-related skills through the program, which engaged them in physical activity. Many of the participants who took part in the program described the ACT-i-Pass as 'really awesome! It was a good time and I really enjoyed it' (Boy, G5AP user) since 'I got to like try different activities at the gym. I got to do volleyball and dodgeball and everything. I really loved it.' (Girl, G5AP user). Additionally, participants, predominantly girls, indicated that they enjoyed that the G5AP provided 'a whole bunch of activities that I've not tried before' (Girl, G5AP user) and 'encouraged me to try more sports' (Girl, G5AP user). According to one child, 'Yeah, it [the ACT-i-Pass] definitely did it for me [increased physical activity levels], 'cause this year I actually started dance and then I started running' (Girl, G5AP user). Another participant explained, 'Well at the time, I didn't do volleyball, so I tried volleyball, like something new. I also did cheer 'cause like I've never done it before' (Girl, G5AP user). By attempting new activities, participants felt they had expanded their physical activity-related skills: 'I learned like bumping, spiking [volleyball skills]' (Girl, G5AP user). Alternatively, the majority of boys felt the program provided extra activity options, but 'it wasn't any new sports for me' (Boy, G5AP user). As one boy explained, 'I do a lot

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of activities, but it kind of just adds to more activities' (Boy, G5AP user). As a result, boys wanted to maximize their use of the pass as they enjoyed being more active after school: 'I'm gonna use this [the pass] a lot 'cause it's for free and it's for like a limited amount of time… I'm trying to get as much exercise in as possible' (Boy, G5AP user).

Some participants also reported maintaining higher physical activity levels following the program. Specifically, participants felt that the G5AP had a long-term effect on their physical activity even after the one-year pass ended, explaining that they 'actually started dance and then I started running' (Girl, G5AP user) and 'it [ACT-i-Pass programming] was my first time [playing basketball] and now I'm gonna try out for the basketball team' (Girl, G5AP user). Another participant felt they were more active following the program: 'My dad now is gearing to go find every single free skate that's available and he's trying to get us to be able to go to stick and puck on Fridays and free skates on Sundays and Wednesdays' (Boy, G5AP user). Overall, the program introduced participants to new, enjoyable activities; helped them develop physical activity-related skill sets; and encouraged enrollment in programming the following year.

Enablers and barriers to G5AP programming

The following three themes reflected the factors that the participants felt facilitated or hindered program participation: (1) program structure and implementation; (2) spatial accessibility of programming; and (3) social supports and constraints.

Program structure and implementation

Participants discussed various aspects of the program design that affected their participation in the program. First, some participants mentioned that the variety and

types of programming available with the G5AP enabled their participation. Participants highlighted that the variety of activities 'removed the restriction of the times' (Boy, G5AP user) as they could 'use it anytime you want.' (Girl, G5AP user). Another child expanded on this idea by explaining, 'it was also nice because they [the service providers] were dotted around the city, so [it was] not just one place [that] was next to where every single place was. It was spread out, so that north could get involved, south, west, east' (Boy, G5AP user). Several participants also felt that the selection of activities encouraged the use of the pass, as there were a variety of activities that could reach a broad assortment of interests. Specifically, participants spoke about the combination of drop-in times where 'you could just walk in and do something' (Boy, G5AP user), and weekly activities where 'it was kind of like a schedule, so it was kind of like a weekly thing' as a favourable feature of the program (Girl, G5AP user).

Although the variety of programming facilitated the use of the pass, a number of participants reported time constraints as a barrier to program participation, particularly participants who were classified as non-users. Participants referred to pre-existing commitments (e.g., organized sports, music lessons, and schoolwork) as barriers to participating in the G5AP, with children explaining, 'I couldn't go to too many things, 'cause the schedule conflicts' (Boy, G5AP non-user). This was particularly a barrier amongst those who are already highly active. This was emphasized in the following quote:

> Well, I play sports so often, it's kind of hard to fit in my schedule. I'm training four or five times a week and then I have a game on the weekend and sometimes you just not able to get it [the ACT-i-Pass] in your schedule with school and all that. (Boy, G5AP non-user)

Likewise, other participants explained, 'I do dance a lot of days of the week and I have violin, so I didn't really have much time to do whatever I want' (Girl, G5AP non-user)

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and ‘it’s like a soccer practice program where there are like tournaments and everything and sometimes that would stop me from going anywhere with ACT-i-Pass’ (Girl, G5AP user).

To alleviate the issue of schedules conflicting with program times, participants suggested expanding the G5AP programming and activity options. During the focus group discussions, participants described the need for ‘more variety of programs, like different sports’ (Boy, G5AP non-user). As one participant recommended:

> I wish, like, similar programs were on separate days, ‘cause I know a lot of weeks I could never do it because the one thing that I really wanted to do that week I was always busy… So it would be more helpful if the same thing was like twice in one week in the ACT-i-Pass. (Boy, G5AP non-user)

A few participants expressed interest in a higher number of outdoor activities, such as ‘a reserved area for like snowball fights and stuff’ (Boy, G5AP non-user), ‘set up a water fight like you would have water balloons’ (Boy, G5AP non-user), or ‘tubing or skiing would be fun’ (Girl, G5AP user). More social and unstructured activities were also suggested: ‘If it [ACT-i-Pass programs] takes place at, like, [an anonymous] park and we played like manhunt or whatever, some sort of communal thing where you can gather up at a park or whatever’ (Girl, G5AP user). Alternatively, another participant emphasized the need for adventurous activities: ‘If they don’t have archery then maybe archery, because I’ve always wanted to try that’ (Boy, G5AP non-user).

Some participants highlighted mechanistic issues around receiving the physical pass, distributing the pass, and replacing a lost pass. One child mentioned, ‘another reason I couldn’t use it [the pass], I never got it. They never delivered it’ (Boy, G5AP non-user), with another child explaining, ‘it [the pass] came to me two months late.” (Girl, G5AP non-user). Another participant felt that losing their pass affected their participation in the G5AP:

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> I went skating and then I lost it for the whole year, so we ordered another one. We got the other one, and then somehow I don't know where my mom put it. Then I had found it right at the end of the year, so I only got to use it twice for skating and then it was expired. (Girl, G5AP user)

A handful of participants also highlighted challenges trying to acquire a new pass, with one child explaining, 'I lost it, and they went to go get me one, but by the time I got it [the pass], it was expired' (Girl, G5AP user). Since they did not have their pass, participants 'only got it for a month' (Boy, G5AP user), 'only did it with a friend' (Girl, G5AP user) or 'couldn't use it' (Girl, G5AP user). Overall, participants felt that difficulties receiving or misplacing their pass limited the amount of time they could utilize G5AP programming.

Moreover, some participants felt that limited information about the G5AP reduced their use of the pass, as they were not aware of all the aspects of the program. One child explained, 'when we signed up for this [the ACT-i-Pass], I had no idea there was an email, I had no idea there was a bus, I had no idea of anything… just give more information' (Girl, G5AP non-user). A couple of participants also reported difficulties entering service providers due to the front desk staff being unaware of the G5AP, so 'it was like really hard to get signed in' (Boy, G5AP user). When entering service providers, one participant explained, 'the managers would all know about it, but when I would go in for a drop-in program, the front clerk person wouldn't really understand what that [the pass] was' (Boy, G5AP user).

To improve program awareness and clarify aspects of the G5AP to children, many participants recommended additional promotions and resources to increase program enrollment and pass use. Participants recommended continuing to provide in-class presentations for recruiting children to the program, which is emphasized in the following quote:

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> It [the presentation] was pretty helpful, because, like, it kinda told us a bit like about the program, so like we would know a bit more about it before we go ask our parents 'can we have this, can we have this?' (Girl, G5AP non-user)

Another child felt that the presenters 'were energetic about it and they said that we could do a lot of things with it and I was excited to test it [the pass] out' (Girl, G5AP non-user). Further, participants thought that reminders and promotions would overcome the issue of forgetting about the pass. Through emails, children felt that the G5AP would benefit from program co-ordinators sending 'them something that says "have you used the pass?" just to remind them and the child that they have it and they won't forget about it' (Girl, G5AP non-user) and this would overcome the problem of 'lost information and I go searching through my room and then my room is a mess, so maybe there should be like, some like email kinda thing where it has all your information on there' (Girl, G5AP non-user). Finally, participants wanted clarity about the locations that accepted the pass by explaining, 'at the places [service providers] that you could do it [the program], they should have a sign that says "ACT-i-Pass is able to [be] use[d] here"' (Boy, G5AP user).

Spatial accessibility of programming

Participants described spatial accessibility as a barrier to G5AP programming. Descriptions of the spatial accessibility encompassed the distance to G5AP service providers and transportation options. The accessibility of service providers and programming was described from two distinct perspectives based on the socioeconomic status of the school. Participants that attended low- or middle-income schools felt they 'mainly [used local community center], just because they're closer' (Boy, G5AP user). Transportation was also an issue highlighted by participants in lower-income areas as it 'sometimes would put restrictions on where we could go' (Boy, G5AP non-user), with

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485 another child mentioning, ‘we only use stuff in my neighbourhood cause my mom
486 doesn’t [have] that much money to [get] gas’ (Girl, G5AP user). Alternatively,
487 participants that attended middle- and upper-middle-income schools spoke of large
488 distances to selected service providers obstructing them from their preferred activities
489 and/or service providers: ‘The YMCA is kind of far and my parents don't want to drive
490 me, or I don't have anyone to drive me’ (Girl, G5AP user). Participants also mentioned
491 that they were already enrolled in the local recreational opportunities: ‘some of the
492 ACT-i-Pass programs were further away and the ones that were close to me, like the Y,
493 I already had a membership there so I feel like I didn’t get as much use out of it’ (Boy,
494 G5AP non-user). As a result, some participants noted that ‘it was a bit difficult [using
495 the pass], because where I live the only thing I really can do is a hockey arena but I’m
496 already signed up for that’ (Boy, G5AP non-user).

497 Going forward, participants felt that the G5AP needed to improve the
498 accessibility of programming. Participants emphasized that decreasing the distance to
499 recreational venues would improve the overall accessibility of the program:

500 > [The ACT-i-Pass should] try to make things in different areas, because I think it seemed
501 > that a place where all the dance programs were downtown or something and like all the
502 > sports things were like more like the other part of London. (Girl, G5AP user)

503 Another participant explained the advantages of local programming options, stating, ‘if
504 it was close, I’d probably walk with my friends. We could commute together and if our
505 parents were busy with something we could probably just go’ (Boy, G5AP non-user).
506 An alternative solution suggested by participants was providing transportation to service
507 providers ‘it would be cool to have a bus just picking you up, because my parents are
508 usually busy’ (Girl, G5AP user). Participants proposed, ‘if [service providers] could
509 maybe have a bus here ‘cause I’d like to do that instead of my mom having to drive me
510 because we live in an area that’s farther away’ (Girl, G5AP user).

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Social supports and constraints

Participants perceived their family and friends as influencers in their participation in the program. One aspect of the G5AP that facilitated program use was the plus one option. A majority of participants explained that the ability to bring a friend or family member encouraged them to use service providers, as a companion created a comfortable environment for play. One participant explained, 'you're not really going alone. Like if you don't know anyone, then you have a friend. So, say you're doing golf, then you would have a friend. Otherwise, you're just with all these strangers' (Boy, G5AP user). Likewise, another participant enjoyed having a friend ''cause a lot of times when you see people you're probably, like, too shy to introduce yourself, so it's better when you have friends with you' (Boy, G5AP user). Participants also appreciated the opportunity to spend time with friends and family. For instance, one child explained that 'my uncle and I go swimming there a lot more often, so I was like this could be actually good for me and my family' (Boy, G5AP user), with one participant expanding on this idea, describing that the G5AP 'was honestly awesome. Having my best friend with me, plus it was free. We could stay there all we want. Ahhh it was like paradise, but inside' (Boy, G5AP user). Many participants agreed that 'the thing that I liked about the ACT-i-Pass the most is that you could bring someone with you, because then it's like, great now I can go for free with my friend' (Boy, G5AP user). It was evident that participants felt that involving friends and family in activities encouraged program participation.

While boys described their positive experiences having a plus one at activities, some girls indicated that they underwent social challenges that restricted participation and access to the program. One participant explained that they were unable to participate in activities since 'I never have anyone to go with me' and '[I] don't want to be a loner' (Girl, G5AP non-user). One child expanded on this concept, explaining how

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they were unable to enjoy activities without a friend: ‘when I go alone, I'm kinda bored… but then when someone is there, you’re like “OK! Let’s do this! Let’s see who can do the best dive!”’ (Girl, G5AP user).

Family involvement in the program was also highlighted as a factor that influenced G5AP participation. Some participants felt that encouragement from parents, guardians and/or other family members improved access and use of the pass, where one participant said ‘my parents wanted me to be more active’ (Girl, G5AP user). Participants believed that their parents helped engage them in the program, with one participant explaining, ‘my friends from other schools, they were also in grade five and they got the ACT-i-Pass, and then all the parents agreed that we should all go together’ (Boy, G5AP user). Another participant talked about the benefits of their family participating in activities: ‘My friends kind of helped me when they went into it, but they didn’t really stick with it as much as I did, so I kind of had to keep myself going. My brother really helped with that and so did my dad’ (Boy, G5AP user). Another factor that participants emphasized was family members’ ability to provide or arrange transportation to service providers: ‘my parents dropped me off and when they couldn’t drop me off, I’d go with my parent’s friends’ (Boy, G5AP user).

Conversely, participants with busy families, primarily those who were unable to use the pass, described limited access to G5AP programming. Participants talked about family obligations limiting participation in the program, saying, ‘my parents take turns working late and my dad also sometimes has to stay late too, so I’m home alone with my brother and I can’t leave him there’ (Girl, G5AP non-user) or that ‘they work on the farm, so they’re always busy’ (Boy, G5AP non-user). Similarly, another participant mentioned, ‘I never have anyone to take me [to ACT-i-Pass programming]’ (Girl, G5AP non-user). One participant felt their busy siblings hindered their ability to attend

G5AP programming: ‘I would have gone except like my parents are really busy with my brothers, so my brothers were always… they have a lot of sports too and me, so they couldn’t really drive me’ (Boy, G5AP non-user).

Moreover, a few participants explained that family obligations restricted their ability to attend G5AP programming, as one participant stated, ‘well, my grandpa recently had a hip surgery in the summer, and now he has no left hip, so he’s recovering most of the summer and I was visiting him, so what’s why I didn’t get to use it often’ (Boy, G5AP non-user). A handful of participants also highlighted the challenges of having separated/divorced parents, or a single caregiver, stating ‘My mom is in [another town] learning and my dad had to take care of my baby brother, so I didn’t really have time to use it’ (Girl, G5AP non-user) and ‘my dad lives in [another city], so like three times during the month I go to his house for the week.” (Boy, G5AP non-user).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore children’s experiences and perceptions of the G5AP, a free physical activity program. The program was perceived to have positively influenced participants’ physical activity levels by providing children with additional resources and enjoyable programming. Participants also highlighted program structure and implementation, spatial accessibility of programming, and social supports and constraints as factors that positively and/or negatively influenced program participation. To increase accessibility and involvement in the G5AP, participants suggested offering a greater assortment of options (i.e., locations, times, and activities), providing a form of transportation or more local physical activity opportunities, and improving program promotions and resources.

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One key finding that appeared throughout the discussions was the importance of peers and family for program participation. Previous studies have found a positive association between physical activity participation and children's perceived social connection (Ullrich-French, Mcdonough, and Smith 2012), indicating that children may not partake in sufficient amounts of physical activity when they are alone (Beets et al. 2006). Support from family and peers is linked to higher physical activity levels (Wilk et al. 2018a, 2018b), and continued participation in physical activity programs (Ullrich-French and Smith 2009). Specific examples of parental support include providing transportation to recreational venues (Welk, Wood, and Morss 2003), praising their child for being active (Beets, Cardinal, and Alderman 2010), modelling active lifestyles (Edwardson and Gorely 2010), and performing activities with their children (Beets, Cardinal, and Alderman 2010). Additionally, previous literature has shown that peer support can encourage children to engage in physical activity behaviours (Beets et al. 2006; Wilk et al. 2018b). Peers can positively influence children's physical activity levels through invitations to participate in activities, and encouragement from friends to overcome perceived barriers to recreational programming (Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald, and Aherne 2012). Consequently, programs should offer group-based activities, such as family nights, to help create an environment that supports children's physical activity.

Participants also deemed the lack of informative resources and reminders as an opportunity to improve the G5AP. Accordingly, participants recommended the use of promotions and advertisements as a strategy to alleviate this issue. Reminders and promotions, including newsletters, phone calls, and printed materials, have been associated with increased physical activity (Burke et al. 2003). For instance, Huhman et al. (2007) evaluated the VERB™ campaign, a multi-media campaign promoting physical activity to children ages 9 to 13 years, and found that children who had seen

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610 VERB™ promotions reported greater participation in physical activity outside of school
611 in comparison to children who were unaware of the campaign. Participants in our study
612 also described in-class presentations as an ideal platform for information dissemination.
613 This recommendation corresponds with previous findings that demonstrated in-class
614 presentations with children resulted in higher program uptake and participation
615 compared to promoting directly to parents via handouts (Clark et al. 2018, 2019).
616 Accordingly, active forms of recruitment like presentations can be a valuable method of
617 program promotion for children.

618 Our analysis pointed to some important gendered patterns in how children
619 experienced the program. For example, girls participating in the G5AP emphasized the
620 importance of expanding their physical activity-related skills and introducing new
621 activity options, while boys more often described using the program to supplement their
622 regular activities as they were already enrolled in sports leagues and programs.
623 Providing the opportunity to learn new activities can help develop children's activity-
624 related skills and activity competence, which can encourage greater involvement in
625 physical activity programs (Barnett et al. 2011; Harvey et al. 2018). As girls are
626 consistently reported in the literature as having lower physical activity levels compared
627 to boys (Barnes et al. 2016; Colley et al. 2017; Roberts et al. 2017), providing girls with
628 the skills and the confidence to engage in physical activity can help increase their
629 current physical activity levels, as well as create lasting positive health behaviours
630 (Smith et al. 2020).

631 There was also a slight nuance between boys' and girls' perceptions of the social
632 environment at recreational facilities. Girls more often discussed the social environment
633 from a more negative perspective, conveying that they were unable to fully participate
634 in activities without a friend and were concerned about being viewed as alone or

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635 friendless. Alternatively, boys often used a more positive tone. They described that the
636 G5AP provided them with the opportunity to play with friends, experiencing a sense of
637 comfort when they had a friend attend activities with them. This finding, in part, may be
638 attributed to the gendered interactions between boys and girls in physical activity
639 spaces. For instance, Vu et al. (2006) found that encouragement from boys, such as
640 inviting girls to join games and celebrating their successes, prompted girls ages 11 to 15
641 years to engage in activities. The findings also indicated that teasing from boys when an
642 activity is performed incorrectly or questioning girls' proficiency in a sport could
643 motivate girls to join activities as they wanted to prove that they are strong and capable.
644 Conversely, in a study by Oliver and Hamzeh (2010), fifth-grade girls explained that
645 they tended to not engage in activities during recess time because the boys labelled
646 them as not good enough or athletic enough to play and did not allow them to
647 participate in games. It is possible that encouragement or exclusion experienced during
648 physical activities may have a greater influence on girls' physical activity engagement
649 compared to boys, which may explain some slight differences in responses in our study.
650 The gendered nature of physical activities and physical activity environments may have
651 also affected boys' and girls' responses. For instance, the masculine stereotype towards
652 physical activity participation may have influenced boys' responses, as disclosing
653 negative feelings towards being lonely or not having friends during activities may be at
654 odds with certain dominant masculine norms (MacArthur and Shields 2015). Girls'
655 negative perception may be attributed to the importance of engaging in activities with
656 peers on physical activity engagement and the greater number of perceived social
657 barriers they encounter when accessing physical activity opportunities (Coen et al.
658 2019; Patnode et al. 2010). It would be important for a future evaluation of the G5AP to
659 probe these micro-gendered dynamics in more detail by, for example, employing single-

gender rather than mixed focus groups. This format might also allow for further exploration of how wider gendered norms and expectations (e.g., masculine risk-taking, or girls as caregivers) intersect with children's physical activity uptake and engagement in this context.

In terms of income, there were differences between income groups when children referred to the physical accessibility of the G5AP programming. Participants who attended schools in low-income areas of the city reported spatial accessibility as a barrier to recreational spaces due to the distance between their homes and the recreational facilities, as well as the cost of transportation. Compared to different subgroups within the population, previous research indicates that lower-socioeconomic groups are particularly vulnerable to environmental factors, such as the transportation infrastructure and the location of recreational spaces (Yen and Kaplan 1998), as lower-income families are more likely to have nonstandard work schedules and lack of vehicle ownership in comparison to higher-income families (Kumanyika and Grier 2006). Therefore, children who reside in low-income neighbourhoods are more dependent on local physical activity opportunities (Humbert et al. 2006). Participants who attended schools in higher-income neighbourhoods did report spatial accessibility as a barrier; however, their challenges were due to activity and service provider preferences, as well as their parents' availability to drive to G5AP programming. To encourage participation in programming, program coordinators need to improve access to recreational opportunities, such as organizing forms of transportation (Sallis, Prochaska, and Taylor 2000). Also, providing popular activities in various areas of the city can help improve participation in G5AP programming. Alternative solutions offered by participants included hosting outdoor unstructured activities in public parks, such as water balloon fights or tobogganing, in neighbourhoods that lack specific recreational facilities.

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Outdoor environments, such as playgrounds, trails, and green spaces, provide children with the opportunity to develop their self-efficacy, cultivate their creativity, and develop their problem-solving and social skills (Tremblay et al. 2015), as well as positively contribute to their emotional well-being (Tillmann et al., 2018). Providing children outdoor spaces for play in close proximity to their homes offers them an accessible physical activity opportunity that has been associated with greater amounts of daily MVPA among children ages 9 to 14 (Coen et al. 2019; Mitchell, Clark and Gilliland 2016).

Participants highlighted the importance of free recreational programming for low-income households. While participants enjoyed that the G5AP increased activity options during their leisure time, these child participants recognized that free programming provided the greatest opportunity to children in low-income households. Lower socioeconomic status is associated with lower physical activity levels, and one determinant that differs between high-income and low-income neighbourhoods is the availability of affordable programming (Brodersen et al. 2007). Previous studies have found that low-, medium- and high-income neighbourhoods contained a similar number of pay-to-use recreational opportunities; however, low-income neighbourhoods have been identified as lacking free programming needed by residents (Estabrooks, Lee, and Gyurcsik 2003; Mckenzie et al. 2013). Due to a lack of free programming in areas where financial support is required, programs like the G5AP are beneficial as they offer affordable programming that may be lacking in low-income neighbourhoods.

Limitations and future directions

There are several limitations to this study that warrant consideration. First, schools were selected as the setting for the G5AP focus groups to provide a familiar

space for the participants. However, adding moderators from the research team into the school environment may have influenced participants' behaviour and/or their interactions with their peers, as participants could have viewed the adult moderators as authority figures; this could shape the focus group dialogue in terms of how open children felt they could be as they may be focused on providing 'correct' responses and might not be comfortable describing their genuine experiences. Additionally, participants were classified as G5AP users or non-users based on a survey completed by their parent or guardian; however, a few participants stated they belonged to a different program user group. As a result, if participants were classified into the wrong user status, they would not have had the experiences necessary to answer certain questions. Moreover, the choices for gender on the survey were limited to binary gender options, and did not include a field to indicate gender-diverse identities (e.g., trans, non-binary)—a limitation which will be addressed in future evaluations. As a result, this study does not capture the experiences of LGBTQ+ and non-binary children at recreational facilities. Also, the use of mixed-gender focus groups may have influenced the responses received from the participants, and the gendered experiences described in this study may have differed if gender-specific focus groups were conducted. Finally, this study did not consider how ethnicity, recent immigration, or other family characteristics influenced children's perceptions of the G5AP, although previous evaluations have associated some sociodemographic characteristics with varying levels of G5AP participation (Clark et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2020).

Although the current study provides insight into perceptions of one specific community-based physical activity initiative, additional research is needed to fill existing gaps in the literature. For instance, future studies should evaluate the experiences of other sociodemographic groups associated with lower physical activity

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levels, such as immigrant status (Tremblay et al. 2006), Indigenous status (Norman et al. 2018), and disability status (Barg et al. 2010), to help recognize the unique experiences of sub-populations within the community. Finding strategies that can engage these groups in local physical activity opportunities can help reverse the declining physical activity levels reported in the literature. Future research should also evaluate the impact of the key recommendations provided by participants on program participation and physical activity levels, such as improving the accessibility of program information, using technological platforms to encourage participation, providing outdoor recreational opportunities, and/or offering free transportation to venues. Social interactions appeared to be a strong influence on physical activity participation; therefore, further qualitative research into the social determinants that influence participation in physical activity and community-based programs will provide a greater understanding of how and why interactions with others impact physical activity behaviours. Future research should also investigate the experiences of LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse children.

Conclusion

In sum, children's descriptions of the G5AP indicated that community-based physical activity programs can improve children's overall quality of life through engagement in physical activity. The five themes identified in the current study provide context into the aspects of community-based programs that may encourage program participation and increase children's physical activity levels. Public health officials, program co-ordinators and policymakers should consider the following factors when implementing community-based programs: (1) provide a variety of programming options to fit a diversity of children's interests and families' schedules; (2) offer free,

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local programming and informative resources in multiple neighbourhoods to improve children's accessibility to physical activity opportunities; and (3) encourage children to engage in activities with family and friends to support their participation in recreational programming. With most Canadian children not achieving the recommended level of daily physical activity, it is critical that we continually evaluate and improve available programs to encourage and support children to engage in opportunities that can improve their overall health and quality of life.

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Declaration of interest

The authors do not have any competing interests to declare.

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Figure 1. Code map from the conventional content analysis of G5AP focus groups.