

Establishing the Instances of Empathy and Friendship among Youth Peer Groups Involved in the Four Juvenile Sports Clubs

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Abstract

Sports participation can develop the minds and bodies of young people. In this world of growing online interaction, young people can benefit from what sport gives to them and develop them into good citizens. Within this paper, the instances of empathy and friendship among youth peer groups from 11 to 18 years old involved in the four juvenile sports clubs are identified. As a result of this paper, the young sporting participants demonstrated consistent empathy, are affected by others' emotions, and are aware of their feelings. Within this article, a discussion of the results occurs to emphasise how these sporting clubs are a place for developing good human skills as well as providing obvious benefits of sports participation.

Keywords: Sports participation, youth peer groups.

1. Introduction

Many young people in Ireland partake in the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), its female equivalent of the Ladies Gaelic Football Association (LGFA), and the Camogie Association (CA). All of these organisations provide an outlet for young people to play and be involved in the team sports of hurling, camogie, and football.

This article concentrates on the perceptions of 130 adolescents from a youth population who participated in juvenile sports clubs in the west of Ireland.

All of the respondents are in four different clubs namely the Castlegar GAA clubs which includes both the hurling and camogie clubs (mainly segregated by way of featuring both male and female participants respectively) in that area and the St. James' GAA which includes young participants from both male and female clubs of Gaelic football. The initial project where the data for which this article comes from arose from a study that featured the overall members' perceptions of the friendship, social support, and empathy accessed from family and community and was

entitled ‘An exploration of the perceived friendship, social support and understanding of empathy among the membership of four Gaelic Athletic Association juvenile clubs’.

There are several comparative aspects of this study which feature participants from 11- 18 years of age. The most notable comparisons are differences between the younger age groups and the older age groups' feelings and the two different genders that were identified by the youth personally, namely the male and female genders.

As connection and belonging are key tenants when instances of empathy and friendship exist among youth peer groups involved within the four GAA therefore, Positive Youth Development (PYD) is the underpinning theory of this study. By definition, connection brings ‘two or more things, people or groups together’ (Collins, 2023) and belonging brings a ‘feeling of being happy or comfortable’ (Cambridge, 2023) and so therefore, facilitates the aforementioned traits of friendship, empathy, and social support that the data in this article originated from.

The participants of this paper are all adolescents. By definition, adolescence is a period of life when development occurs and some of those changes are biological and pubertal changes (Simons et al., 2017) which can alter a young person's hormones and behaviour. Added to this in more recent times is the research that proves the onset of puberty is arriving earlier which has clinical and educational connotations (Laube et al., 2020). As this paper focuses on non-formal education it is important to note how non-formal education can impact young people's behaviour. From the result of the study of over 50,000 young people, it was discovered that adolescents generally hang out with those that are most similar and most available to them during that vital time of development (Siennick, 2018).

Informal learning is highly influenced by peer relationships (Pereira, Fillol, and Moura, 2019). By hanging around with similar people those members are building a culture within that group and your well-being improves if the group members' individual traits are more aligned to that overall culture (Gebauer et al., 2020).

This paper measures the levels of empathy and identifies instances of friendship among youth peer groups involved within the four sports' clubs namely those from the GAA, LGFA, and Camogie clubs juvenile sports clubs. Before coming to the results of this research, quantitative data was collected after adopting the Basic Empathy Scale and observations were recorded applying the Indices of Friendship Observation Schedule. Qualitative data was also recognised as semi-structured interviews were carried out with all research participants.

2. Hypotheses:

Before embarking on this research it was hypothesised that by youth participating in GAA sports clubs in Galway city that it would lead to them having more exposure to potential friendships. Yet it was unknown if this would lead the research participants to having better friendships and an increased awareness of empathy. As this was unclear, a careful methodological framework was established which was valid and reliable to discover the reality of this initial curiosity.

3. Methods:

Following a graduate study of four Galway city sports clubs 177 young people (who were both male and female) were identified as possible research respondents to explore the perceived friendship, social support, and understanding of empathy among the members of four Gaelic Athletic Association juvenile clubs. All of these young people were Irish citizens and were given the choice to partake in the study by being invited to an information session on what would be involved in the project. As well as the young people, their parents, and guardians were invited to this evening too.

Before any individual or collective research is carried out, the researcher had to go through a rigorous ethical procedure before working with young people. Their letters of invitation, information sheets, and consent forms were sent to both the young people and their parents and guardians.

From this process, 130 young people decided to partake in the study and these young people came from the four previously mentioned sports clubs.

Following this, all 130 respondents completed the Basic Empathy Scale and 64 of them were then observed in their sporting environment. These observations were done using the Indices of Friendship Observation Schedule. All of this research provided quantitative data to analyse. After that was completed qualitative semi-structured interviews of 20 young people from all of the sports clubs occurred, with 5 young people from each club taking part in these interviews.

To measure levels of empathy and identify instances of friendship among youth peer groups involved within the four juvenile sports clubs, quantitative data were collected using the Basic Empathy Scale. The Basic Empathy Scale was created by Jolliffe and Farrington in 2006. It was used for this study as it best aligned with how the researcher wanted to measure the research respondents regarding their opinions on empathy within their clubs. To attain deeper levels of friendship the Indices of Friendship Observation Schedule was adopted by the author. Finally, semi-structured interviews provided a qualitative balance to the research outcomes.

(i) Table 1 Showing The Total Of People Who Participated In This Research Study

Total of Participants:	Number Research	Survey: (Comprising of the Social Network Questionnaire, the Social Provision Scale and the Basic Empathy Scale)	Observations: (the Indices of Friendship Observation Schedule created by Tony Attwood, 1999)	Interviews: (Semi-Structured)
130 (n=130)		130 (n=130)	64	20

3. Results:

When measuring the levels of empathy within the graduate study, there is a continuous demonstration of this trait by the majority of research respondents. More specifically, when the respondents were asked within the Basic Empathy Scale about how their friends' emotions

affected them, nearly half of them (45%, $n=59$) became affected by the emotions of their friends. On the other side of things, only a fifth (21.5%, $n=28$) were not affected in this way.

Throughout the empathy scale, the respondents were asked if other people's feelings bothered them and the results showed that more than fifty percent of respondents either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. This was broken down with 35.4% ($n=46$) of the young people strongly disagreeing that others' feelings bothered them and 18.5% ($n=24$) feeling that they 'disagreed' with this question.

It was clear from the research that the young people had a strong awareness of the term 'empathy'. As the subject of Social Political and Health Education (SPHE) is on the primary school curriculum in Ireland (NCCA, 2023), and all of these respondents had attended primary school in Ireland and explained how they were aware of the term empathy.

Whether or not the young people could 'adapt to the character of others' was queried of them throughout the research and 68.8% ($n=44$) of the young people reported that they had this skill. An even higher percentage of respondents (81.3%, $n=52$) were observed in compromising with their club mates. Other notable outcomes of the research showed that the young people are affected by their friends' emotions, can contribute to a common goal, are able to help a teammate, and can understand when their friends are happy. These perceptions were all evident when observed by the researcher and this contributed to his understanding how the young people empathised with others.

4. Discussion:

The main outcomes of the graduate study that pertain to this paper are in general that the respondents perceive that empathy is important within the realms of friendship. It also shows that within their sporting environments, the young people clearly expressed empathy. Allied with this, in the main, the young people perceive they can compromise with others and add to a common goal. Of interest also, is that the young people perceive that by them watching movies and television, and using some of their time in viewing screens it does not affect their feelings of sadness or fear.

With that in mind, these results have notable meaning for GAA, LGFA, and Camogie clubs, organisations, and agencies that facilitate young people in general. Although the main sporting organisation that was researched within the graduate study (the GAA), has produced a 'Give Respect, Get Respect' policy document (GAA, 2023) and attempted to make this phrase a common mantra for GAA participants, none of the respondents recalled this or referred to it when relating to their answers on empathy. The GAA, the LGFA, the Camogie Association, and other sporting bodies and organisations and agencies for young people need to constantly promote their education and awareness of empathy and all forms of what they deem as being respectful of their members within the correct channels to educate and improve the behaviour of their young people.

Although most of the respondents are aware of the term empathy and showed active empathy in action they are not aware of how empathy should be correctly defined and have difficulties in

explaining what their definition of the term is exactly. As a result, there needs to be more explicit education on empathy and how it can help others in sporting, youth, and educational contexts. From there, young people will be able to reflect on how it can be used in other areas of life and for the advantage of everyone involved.

A notable outcome from this research shows that many young people although conscious of what 'sympathy' referred to were unclear as to its relationship with that of 'empathy'. By the GAA, LGFA, and Camogie Association leaders understanding this, they can build greater social awareness of these teams and the differences between each which will improve their off-field activities. In turn, this will inspire more thoughtful administrators in their sporting bodies.

Educators, adults, coaches, mentors, youth workers, and facilitators of services to young people need to be educated on empathy and its benefits for young people and for all. They also need to speak about its importance with the young people under their care and debate the importance of active empathy within their organisations and agencies also so as to make empathy a core element in the daily running of services for youth.

Following the study, it became apparent that there are a lot of caring young people in these four sporting clubs. However, all of the sporting clubs involved and their governing bodies must be aware that showing a caring and compassionate culture for all and around the leadership of young people it will cradle their positive development and breed more empathetic leaders in the future. As a result, this will improve human skills within all clubs and organisations concerned with the management of youth.

Before this study took place it was envisaged that those that would be researched would be over 13 years of age. As the study was concerned with the socialisation of young people and two of the most prominent social media apps that these young people use are Instagram and Facebook yet these companies have not designed with apps to be used by children below the age of 13 Diwanji (2023), it initially seemed logical to research young people over the age of 13 years of age. However, upon reflection and considering that the research stated that many young people hang around with people in their locality and those who are of similar interests it was decided that all juvenile members of these four clubs involved in the study would be offered to take part in the research. As a result, some of the respondents were as young as 11 years of age.

By allowing younger people to be researched for the study, the researcher was also leading the study and showing active empathy to the young people in all four clubs. By leading with active empathy all of the sports bodies involved and the other organisations and agencies in formal and informal education of young people can lead from the front. This may require changing of some rules but it will reap benefits in the long run when their young members become more empathetic in the future.

Research from Goroshit and Hen (2016) stated that peer behaviour which is positive employs a culture of education that has empathy at its core. It will teach youth to be better moral characters. For sporting bodies and educational organisations to adopt this culture a deeper moral culture will become ignited.

The human brain benefits from showing empathy not least because to survive later in life parents are required to raise their children with a certain level of care (De Waal, 2008). By sporting and out-of-school organisations targeting empathy to be activated in their young people, they are engaging in pro-social behaviour.

Although the young people researched negated to perceive that television, watching movies, and screen time were detrimental to their feelings of sadness or fear, it's clear that increased screen time for young people feeds into feelings of lower self-esteem (Tang et al., 2021). Considering this, spending organised time participating in physical fitness and socialisation is positive for participants self-esteem. Therefore, sporting bodies and non-formal educational facilities need to create intentional times for national socialisation to occur away from the playing of the games themselves. By these organisations and agencies organising movie nights and open discussions with leading adults after the movies they will create areas of learning and growth for empathy. This can be done more in the off-season when playing games and sports do not dominate the schedule and when youth leaders have access to their young people. It will improve teamwork and inter-club and organisational communication also.

5. Conclusion:

In conclusion, this paper attempted to measure the levels of empathy and identify instances of friendship among youth peer groups involved within the four juvenile sports clubs. As the young respondents perceived empathy as being relevant in their world and related to friendship in their lives as well as having shown empathy in action, it has verified that the young people referred to within this article are proponents of empathetic friendship and established that instances of empathy were indeed evident in this initial graduate study. However, for future researchers, it is important to remember that a larger-scale research site visited to discover further and deeper benefits of these human traits also.

Declarations:

Ethics approval:

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of University of Galway, Ireland. (9th of July 2023)

Consent to participate:

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Informed consent was obtained from legal guardians.

Written informed consent was obtained from the parents.

Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to the interview.

Consent to publish:

Additional informed consent was obtained from all individual participants for whom identifying information is included in this article.

Data Availability Statement:

Data cannot be shared openly but are available on request from authors:

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author Conor Hogan, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under an earlier doctoral study and so are not publicly available. As all of the research participants were children or adolescents their data cannot be shared openly, and is protected and private. The data are, however, available from the author upon reasonable request and with the permission of the National University of Ireland, Galway and its guidelines herein. Example from: <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/data-protection/gdpr/universityobligations/>

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