

**Thinking Outside the Dots:
A Professional Sport Team's Influence on Hockey Participation in a Non-Traditional
Geographic Location**

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how professional sport teams (PSTs) cultivate legitimacy within non-traditional markets by focusing on a case study of a National Hockey League (NHL) team's youth programming initiatives in Southern California. To maintain confidentiality, this organization is referred to throughout as the "Team." Although traditionally associated with colder climates and affluent, predominantly white communities, hockey has experienced rapid growth in warmer and more diverse regions. Drawing on a constructionist epistemology and Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, the study investigates how legitimacy in sport is constructed, contested, and sustained through community-centered practices and emotional resonance.

Through an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995), the research draws on 20 semi-structured interviews with parents, coaches, school and league administrators, and current and former members of the Team's Fan Development (FD) department. These interviews are complemented by document review and participant and event observation, yielding a multi-layered understanding of how the Team's efforts intersect with educational systems, cultural norms, and sport development frameworks. The Social Ecological Model (SEM) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Leisure Constraints Theory (Crawford & Godbey, 1987) provide additional analytic lenses to explore structural, relational, and psychological factors influencing youth sport engagement.

The findings are presented across three primary themes: Eliminating Barriers, Delivering Value, and Commitment to Community, which each correspond to cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural legitimacy as defined by Suchman (1995). Cognitive legitimacy is achieved through early exposure and school-based outreach that normalize hockey in the eyes of youth and parents. Pragmatic legitimacy arises from the consistent delivery of high-quality programming and responsive partnership-building with community stakeholders. Cultural legitimacy, the most complex and fragile form, is fostered through affective bonds, symbolic rituals, and community ownership, yet remains unevenly distributed across socioeconomic lines.

This study introduces a three-pronged framework for empirically identifying cultural legitimacy in youth sport: behavioral (e.g., multi-year participation and coaching transitions), discursive (e.g., language shifts that frame hockey as "our sport"), and affective (e.g., joy and pride at community events). These markers suggest that legitimacy is a matter of cultural embeddedness.

By situating sport development in the context of everyday life and community relations, this research contributes to theoretical debates around institutional legitimacy, particularly in youth sport. It advances Green's (2005) normative model of sport development by showing how legitimacy is culturally negotiated outcome. This dissertation offers actionable implications for PSTs, highlighting the need for long-term, relational investment, inclusive programming design, and a nuanced understanding of community-specific values. In doing so, it positions hockey as a sport to be introduced as well as a cultural practice to be continually co-constructed.

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Table of Contents

Examining Committee Membership	ii
Author’s Declaration	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	v
List of Figures	x
List of Tables	xi
List of Abbreviations	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Youth Sport Participation Influences	4
NHL Teams’ Role in Building a Participant Base	4
Inclusion vs. Exclusion	7
Purpose of the Dissertation Research	7
Theoretical Contribution	8
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	10
Roles & Influences of Professional Sport Teams in Communities	10
Normative Theory of Sport Development	11
Legitimacy	12
Cognitive Legitimacy	13
Pragmatic Legitimacy	14
Cultural Legitimacy	15
Stages of Legitimacy	16
Innovation	17
Local Validation	17

Diffusion	18
General Validation	18
Sport, Culture, and Cultural Hegemony	19
Sport, Gentrification and the Reproduction of Inequity	21
Levels of Influence on Sport Participation	22
Intrapersonal Level	24
Interpersonal Level	26
Organizational Level	29
Community Factors	31
Public Policy	34
Chapter 3: Method	38
Epistemology	38
Methodology	40
Study Participants	40
Participant Recruitment	42
Data Collection	43
Semi-Structured Interviews	44
Observations	45
Document Review	45
Thematic Analysis	46
Trustworthiness	49
Credibility	50
Transferability	50

Dependability	51
Confirmability	51
Integrity	52
Reflexivity	52
Chapter 4: Findings	55
Eliminating Barriers: Building Cognitive Legitimacy	56
Innovative Initiatives	56
Consistent Communication	59
Assertive Advocacy	62
Effective Education	65
Delivering Value: Establishing Pragmatic Legitimacy	71
Professional Puckwork	72
Support in Stride	76
Board-less Benevolence	79
Cultural Consent: Achieving Cultural Legitimacy	85
Commitment to Community	86
Flowing Fun	91
Small World Sticktime	98
Chapter 5: Discussion, Practical Implications, and Future Research Considerations	105
Power, Participation, and the Fine Line of Inclusion	105
Cultural Adaptation vs. Assimilation	108
Sustained Access vs. Symbolic Inclusion	111

Revisiting the Research Questions	113
Theoretical Implications	125
Practical Implications	127
Invest in Community-Led Leadership	128
Culturally Adaptive Program Design	129
Sustain Financial Accessibility Across the Developmental Spectrum	129
Resist the Commercialization Trap	129
Limitations and Reflexivity Review	130
Future Research Directions	132
Longitudinal Impact Studies	133
Comparative Market Analyses	134
Interdisciplinary Research	136
Conclusion	138
References	139
Appendix A: Interview Guide for Youth Hockey Parents	153
Appendix B: Interview Guide for Coaches & P.E. Teachers	154
Appendix C: Interview Guide for School/Community Sport Organization	
Administrators	155
Appendix D: Interview Guide for Anaheim Ducks Fan Development Employees	156

List of Figures

Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework.....	37
Figure 2: Team LTP Posters	61
Figure 3: Professionally Ran Youth Events	73
Figure 4: Team hosted STEM-based field trip	92

List of Tables

Table 1: Empirical Dimensions of Legitimacy in Youth Sport Development 128

List of Abbreviations

AAU – Amateur Athletic Union
AYSO -- American Youth Soccer Organization
CHI – College Hockey Inc.
CRM – Cause-Related Marketing
CSO – Community Sport Organization
FD – Team’s Fan Development Department
IAHT – Innovative Adult Hockey Team
IGF – NHL Industry Growth Fund
LA – Los Angeles
LCT – Leisure Constraints Theory
LTP – Learn To Play
LTPD – Long-Term Player Development
MSRHL – Team’s Middle School Roller Hockey League
NCAA – National Collegiate Athletics Association
NHL – National Hockey League
NHLPA – National Hockey League Players Association
P&R – Parks & Recreation
PBH – Pro Beach Hockey
PE – Physical Education
PSO – Professional Sports Organization
RHI – Roller Hockey International
SCAHA – Southern California Amateur Hockey Association
SEM – Social Ecological Model
SEP – Team’s Scholastic Education Program
SM – Social Marketing
STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
T-LTP – Team’s Learn To Play
TA – Thematic Analysis
TAGYHC – Team’s All-Girls Youth Hockey Club
THSHL – Team’s High School Hockey League
TIF – Team’s Ice Foundation
TYHC – Team’s Youth Hockey Club
YSO – Youth Sport Organization

Chapter 1: Introduction

Hanley stepped onto the ice rink nervously and cautiously. It was her first time stepping on ice, but she was already familiar with the sport she was about to try. She had seen other kids at her school playing hockey during the previous school year and was intrigued. She told her mom she wanted to play hockey. Her mom discovered an all-girls Learn To Play program hosted by the local NHL team and found out that the team was already partnering with Hanley's school to teach street hockey. Once a week, the team's fan development coaches came to her school. Unlike other sports, the coaches made hockey fun. They didn't yell or say that anyone was doing it wrong. Instead, they told jokes and told everyone that if they tried to hold a stick a bit differently, they could pass the ball harder to their classmates. By the time the all-girls Learn To Play program began, Hanley was fully bought in. She loved the sport and even convinced her younger sister, Jessy, to play as well. As Hanley made it to the center of the rink, her nervousness subsided when she saw a familiar classmate and one of the fun street hockey coaches on the ice. Hanley, along with her new mentor Emily, a 15u player from the all-girls youth hockey club associated with the NHL team, skated around, and joked around, eliminating any apprehension Hanley had. Her jaw dropped when she saw an actual NHL player skate out on the ice to help coach! And now, she could proudly say she was a hockey player!

While the above anecdote uses pseudonyms, the story is true and a real experience from an introductory ice hockey program provided by a Southern California National Hockey League (NHL) Franchise (Team). Thanks to the Team's various youth hockey initiatives, youth participants like Hanley, have been inspired and had an opportunity to play a sport which

historically was not traditional to the Southern California geographical area. And what can be learned from the approaches the Team has taken to influence youth participation in ice hockey?

Indeed, there has been a considerable amount of growth and interest in ice hockey in Southern California over the last 30 years, especially in the late 1980s to early 1990s. The growth coincided with the arrival of NHL superstar Wayne Gretzky to the Los Angeles Kings in 1988. *The Mighty Ducks* movie, released in 1992, combined with both youth participation rates and fan interest improving in the sport, prompted the founding of a second Southern California-based NHL team, and third in California, the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim (now the Anaheim Ducks) in 1993. During this time, the popularity of rollerblading was soaring, and youth were introduced to hockey by way of street and inline roller hockey (roller hockey). Access to the sport of hockey was no longer limited to cold-weather and indoor ice rinks and Southern California began to experience sudden growth in participation in the sport of hockey, during the 1990s.

Roller Hockey International (RHI) was a North American professional inline hockey league that operated between 1993 and 2001. Southern California was home to two RHI teams, the Anaheim Bullfrogs and Los Angeles Blades, which played their home games in the same arenas as their NHL counterparts. The Bullfrogs average attendance in 1995 was over 10,000 (McLeod, 1995). The California Street Hockey Association began operations in 1993 and is still in operation today; Wayne Gretzky's Roller Hockey Center, an outdoor inline roller hockey facility with two rinks, opened in Irvine, CA. in 1997 (now operating as The Rinks – Irvine Inline, and with three rinks); Pro Beach Hockey (PBH) (1998-2000), while only in operation for three seasons, took place on an outdoor inline roller hockey rink just steps from the ocean waves at Huntington Beach. The sudden interest in hockey and the different variations of the sport

provided youth from Southern California the opportunity to play and excel in an otherwise expensive and exclusive sport.

Although ice hockey is undoubtedly popular in Canada, that specific variation of the sport struggles to find the same success and popularity in certain parts of the United States. Traditionally, ice hockey in the United States is popular in the Northeastern and Midwestern part of the country, particularly Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and other cold climate areas. The number of registered youth players (ages 6-18) in California grew from 8,689 in 2006, to 15,055 in 2024 (USA Hockey Membership Statistics, 2024). However, it may be argued that inline hockey *is traditional* to Southern California. A Pure Hockey (*The History of Roller Hockey*, n.d.) article stated it best:

When the L.A. Kings acquired Gretzky from the Edmonton Oilers, Southern California had a new hero who inspired kids to pick up street hockey. Soon enough, the streets of sunny SoCal were humming with Rollerbladers right alongside the ubiquitous skateboarders.

Ozyurtcu (2019) stated that Southern California is ‘lifestyle’ sport-centric, with rollerblading/skating, surfing and skateboarding being the most salient. Is it possible to grow ice hockey participation rates by first introducing youth to roller hockey, or other similar variants of the sport (i.e., ball, deck, street)?

Of the four major sports leagues in the United States, the NHL ranks fourth in popularity, with only 17% of United States sports fans following hockey (Moore, 2023). A display of how unpopular the sport of hockey (both ice and inline) is in Southern California is a 2022 LA 84 Foundation study which found that 79% of Los Angeles County youth aged 6-17 participated in physical activity and sports, with swimming having the highest participation rate (22%),

followed by basketball (22%), and soccer/futsal (20%) (LA84 Foundation, 2022).

Comparatively, both ice and inline hockey, combined, had a 2% participation rate, the third lowest (LA84 Foundation, 2022).

Youth Sport Participation Influences

Substantial research has explored the factors that influence sport participation initiation, continuation, and attrition (Eime et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 2017a; Gardner et al., 2017b; Merkel, 2013), which highlight the importance of youth sport participation for the improved physical health, psychosocial development, and refining of motor skills for youth (Côté et al., 2008). While these studies highlight such benefits and intrinsic rewards (i.e., “having fun”) (Côté et al., 2003; Eime et al., 2015), and the micro- and macro-level factors which effect sport participation (Wicker et al., 2012), there is comparatively little known about the role organizations play in shaping participation in certain sports (e.g., meso-level), especially in the context of the NHL and its teams and the role they play (if any) in “growing the sport.” This context is novel in that it explores external, meso-level factors which may influence youth sport participation.

NHL Teams’ Role in Building a Participant Base

To date, the role that the NHL and all its teams play in legitimately shaping participation in hockey remains underexplored. NHL teams may be influential in their immediate community in several ways, such as the inspiration power of star athletes, or community related events. Additionally, NHL teams have financial resources and hockey expertise that could be devoted to stimulating youth participation.

The NHL and all its teams maintain community grassroots efforts and youth hockey programming designed to introduce and teach the sport of hockey to younger generations. The

“Hockey is For Everyone” initiative was implemented in 1995 by the NHL and National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA) in a joint effort to make the sport supportive and inclusive of all, and has remained the status quo programming since its inception, for all NHL teams. The initiative is the foundation which has made it possible for NHL teams to support their immediate geographical communities with “Learn To Play” (LTP) programming. LTP is a brief introduction to hockey and consists of approximately four to eight weeks of on-ice instruction for youth aged four to ten years old. LTP is available to any first-time participants. Participants are provided with “head-to-toe” gear, which is priced together as a complete package, along with ice time for the program. Pricing varies in different geographical locations, for example the Kings LTP is priced at \$275 USD, while the Buffalo Sabres LTP is priced at \$200 USD.

The Team operates their own LTP (T-LTP) program, separate from the larger NHL LTP program, which addresses the issue of affordability and access to equipment for Southern California youth by providing its T-LTP participants with free head-to-toe loaner equipment. Another key difference between the T-LTP and NHL LTP programs is that the T-LTP is provided completely free of charge to participants. To adhere to NHL and NHLPA standards, the Team provides the Little (Team’s Nickname) program (equivalent to the NHL’s LTP program), where participants are then charged \$225 USD. One apparent difference is that the Team’s programs are an attempt to address common barriers of access to the sport of ice hockey.

Complementing the T-LTP programming are several “outside of the rink” initiatives, which involve the Team working directly with schools, non-profit community organizations, and city parks and recreation departments in Southern California through the Team’s Scholastic Education Program (SEP) to introduce and teach the sport directly to students. By providing free programming and teaching the game where youth spend most of their time, in schools, the Team

has established an alternative programmatic pathway to introduce hockey to youth, and then next steps for youth to continue participating, through high school. The SEP street hockey curriculum is introduced to fourth-grade youth and is provided to any interested elementary schools in Southern California. The second program is a middle school roller hockey league (MSRHL), which works with SEP partnered schools to introduce hockey to a greater population of youth and provides a “next step” for youth in grades five through eight.

The third initiative, the Team’s High School Hockey League (THSHL), was established in 2008 as an affordable option compared to travel club hockey. National success has been achieved in the THSHL for one of its teams by way of three USA Hockey High School National Championships. With the success, several programs in the THSHL look to become a destination for players looking for competitive hockey to hone their skills and keep homegrown talent in California.

The THSHL is mainly operated under the Team’s Ice Foundation (TIF), which provides youth hockey programs in collaboration with the Team. Along with the THSHL, TIF consists of the Team’s youth hockey club (TYHC) and All-Girls youth hockey club (TAGYHC). TIF maintains teams starting at 6u through 18u (for boys) and 19u (for girls) age groups. Both TYHC and TAGYHC have been continuously recognized as Model Club Associations through USA Hockey.

While progressing through to the NHL is a very rare and perfect situation, a realistic measuring point of success for the programming would be introducing the various forms of the sport to, and developing players, to play ice hockey through high school, who would have never participated in the sport otherwise, and perhaps developing lifelong participants of ice hockey.

Inclusion vs. Exclusion

In recent decades, Southern California has undergone significant demographic shifts and experienced patterns of cultural and economic gentrification (Arellano, 2020; Lewinnek et al., 2022). In this context, attempts to grow a historically white, upper-middle-class sport like ice hockey in heavily diverse and immigrant-rich communities are not neutral acts. Rather, they must be understood through the intertwined lenses of cultural legitimacy and cultural hegemony. Efforts to “trendify” hockey risk replicating dynamics of gentrification, where inclusion is celebrated, yet deeper inequities remain unaddressed, and local expressions are often reshaped to fit dominant expectations. As such, the growth of youth hockey programming in Southern California provides a unique opportunity to examine not only participation patterns but the broader cultural politics of belonging, identity, and community transformation.

Purpose of the Dissertation Research

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the legitimacy and role the Team plays in shaping youth ice hockey participation in a non-traditional ice hockey locale of Southern California. More specifically, the following research questions will be explored:

1. Has the Team established legitimacy (cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural) in their youth ice hockey programming in Southern California?
2. What challenges does the Team encounter in attempting to achieve legitimacy with their youth hockey programming in a non-traditional market and how do they overcome those challenges?
3. Do various stakeholders (i.e., school administrators, coaches, parents) perceive the programming provided by the Team and their Fan Development (FD) staff as

- appropriate (i.e., taken-for-granted and/or providing valuable programming for youth) and therefore legitimate?
4. How has legitimacy been viewed over time by various stakeholders (i.e., school administrators, coaches, parents) for the Team's youth hockey programming?

Theoretical Contribution

This research investigates how a professional sport team constructs legitimacy for youth hockey in a non-traditional market. While the Team promotes its programming as a success in “growing the game” in Southern California, this study does not aim to evaluate those claims as objectively true or false. Rather, it explores how youth sport programming becomes viewed as legitimate by diverse community stakeholders, attend to the dynamic, context-dependent processes through which new sports gain recognition, demonstrate value, and achieve cultural resonance. Drawing on legitimacy theory, the study examines how cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural forms of legitimacy are developed and sustained through strategic organizational practices. By tracing these legitimacy-building processes, the research offers insight into how professional sport teams can facilitate sport development in regions where hockey lacks historical roots, with broader implications for similar initiatives in warm-climate or non-traditional hockey markets.

In addition to legitimacy theory, this research is also informed by the concept of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), which helps explain how activities, practices, and even sports, are normalized within a society. Cultural hegemony refers to the process by which dominant groups secure widespread acceptance of their values and practices, not through coercion, but through cultural consent and normalization. In examining how the Team builds legitimacy for youth hockey in Southern California, it is critical to consider not only how programs are delivered and

received, but also how hockey is culturally positioned and whether it is truly reshaped to reflect local identities or subtly reaffirms dominant sport norms. Introducing cultural hegemony as a lens complements legitimacy theory by recognizing that earning acceptance is not only organizational, but cultural and political.

By utilizing the Social Ecological Model and four of its five levels (intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community) and Leisure Constraints Theory, I will be looking to start from the second most proximal level to a youth participant, the interpersonal level, to determine what makes the Team's youth hockey programming legitimate and accepted. Lastly, should the Team's youth hockey programs be effective and legitimate in providing youth programming, I will look to develop potential methods which may help grow the game of ice hockey.

Additionally, this dissertation draws on Christine Green's (2005) normative theory of sport development, which emphasizes athlete recruitment and retention as central goals of effective programming. Green's framework offers a valuable sport management perspective on how organized sport initiatives can strategically foster both entry and long-term engagement. By connecting Green's (2005) recruitment-retention model with legitimacy theory, this study offers a hybrid lens through which to analyze how youth sport programming becomes accessible and visible, as well as emotionally sustainable. Cultural legitimacy, as developed in this dissertation, may serve as a complementary pathway to retention, suggesting that youth remain in sport because they come to see the sport as 'theirs'.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

While the fields of sport sociology and marketing have explored legitimacy, access, and participation independently, little research has integrated Legitimacy Theory, Leisure Constraints Theory (LCT), and the Social Ecological Model (SEM) to examine the organizational and cultural mechanisms that professional sport teams (PSTs) use to grow participation in non-traditional regions. This dissertation offers a multi-level, interdisciplinary approach to analyze the effectiveness of the youth programs the Team (a pseudonym for a Southern California-based NHL franchise) provides, and more importantly, how and why legitimacy is formed, maintained, or contested across different social levels.

Roles and Influences of Professional Sport Teams in Communities

Professional sport teams (PSTs) often utilize youth sport programming through Social Marketing (SM) initiatives to benefit the community and enhance corporate social responsibility (Pharr & Lough, 2012). However, internal pressures may shift these efforts toward Cause-Related Marketing (CRM), which emphasizes corporate image and product sales, sometimes leading stakeholders to view them with skepticism (Barone et al., 2007). While SM strengthens public trust, CRM risks perceptions of self-interest (Walker & Kent, 2009), making the strategic orientation of PST programs crucial for long-term legitimacy.

Another area of research which should be reviewed is how a PST could effectively partner with Community Sport Organizations (CSOs) and Youth Sport Organizations (YSOs). Misener and Doherty (2013) stated that one method for nonprofit CSOs to acquire needed deliverables (i.e., facilities, equipment), human resources (i.e., coaches, officials, volunteers), and knowledge (i.e., gameplay, rules, regulations) is by engaging in relationships and partnering with other organizations. One example of a nonprofit CSO is the YMCA. One problem which

the YMCA and other CSOs encounter is a lack of volunteer coaches who have the time to volunteer or lack knowledge and skill to coach a certain sport (Dugan, n.d.; North et al., 2020; Weiss & Hayashi, 1995). An effective interorganizational partnership between a PST and CSO could remedy this situation, as well as connect sport to a broader community (Misener & Doherty, 2012).

Normative Theory of Sport Development

While much of the literature on youth sport focuses on organizational influence and legitimacy, the normative theory on sport development (Green, 2005) provides a valuable complement by articulating how effective sport development relies on three interdependent processes: athlete recruitment, retention, and transition (Green, 2005). Recruitment refers to strategies aimed at attracting new participants, such as community outreach or introductory sport formats; retention emphasizes sustaining engagement through meaningful experiences, satisfaction, and social connections; and transition involves facilitating pathways for athletes to move from recreational to competitive or elite levels (Green, 2005). This model shifts the focus from participation metrics to a longitudinal view of athlete development and progression.

Such a structure is especially relevant in analyzing the role of PSTs, such as the Team, which function as both brand entities and development programming within their communities (Green, 2005). However, the normative theory on sport development (Green, 2005) does not directly account for the cultural dimensions of retention, which are especially critical in non-traditional sport geographies like Southern California. This study proposes an extension to Green's framework by introducing cultural legitimacy as a fourth conceptual pillar. In culturally diverse regions, sport development is not only a matter of structural access and programming quality, but also of emotional and symbolic fit. Participants must view the sport as relevant to

their identity, culture, and community norms. Without such a feeling, recruitment may be successful, but long-term retention will falter. This addition complements recent work on cultural hegemony in sport (Bairner, 2007; Carrington, 2010; Gramsci, 1972), and provides an essential link between structural development models and sociocultural legitimacy theory.

Integrating Green's (2005) model with legitimacy theory and frameworks of cultural reproduction offers a more holistic and interdisciplinary lens to examine youth sport development. It provides insight behind program delivery and into the deeper social, affective, and cultural forces that determine whether new programs are accepted.

Legitimacy

Legitimacy was previously defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Deephouse and Suchman (2008) urged that scholars stop using the term ‘desirable’ in the previous definition to avoid confusion with status and reputation. Deephouse et al. (2017) later defined, “Organizational legitimacy is the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions” (p. 32). Strittmatter et al. (2018) pointed out that, “There are many reasons to why being perceived as legitimate is beneficial for organisations, but the value of legitimacy is perhaps best illustrated by a consideration of the consequences of illegitimacy” (p. 622). Further, legitimacy has been broken into two separate distinctions, external, which is largely the focus of Suchman (1995, as cited in Wigfield & Snelgrove, 2024), and internal. Drori and Honig (2013) defined internal legitimacy as “the acceptance or normative validation of an organizational strategy through the consensus of its participants, which acts as a

tool that reinforces organizational practices and mobilizes organizational members around a common ethical, strategic or ideological vision” (p. 347).

Suchman (1995) identified moral, cognitive, and pragmatic forms of legitimacy. Moral legitimacy is constructed by an audience’s value system and reflects beliefs about the socially acceptableness of an activity (Suchman, 1995). Cognitive legitimacy deals with the acceptance of an entity based on taken-for-granted cultural reasoning (Suchman, 1995). Pragmatic legitimacy is based on the self-interests of an organization’s stakeholders, and how it may benefit the organization and its stakeholders (Thomas & Lamm, 2012). Pragmatic legitimacy can further be broken down into three categories: exchange, influential, and dispositional legitimacy. Exchange legitimacy is the support for an organizational policy based on the expected value of the policy to certain stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). Influential legitimacy occurs when stakeholders support an organization due to the organization being responsive to their larger interests (Suchman, 1995). Dispositional legitimacy occurs when stakeholders assign legitimacy to organizations which align or are compatible with the motives and values of the stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). For this research, both cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy (or whether a shift from cognitive to pragmatic legitimacy are observable) are relevant, as the research looks to determine why ice hockey may or may not be accepted as necessary due to cultural acceptance and is based on the interests of the Team and the various stakeholders in Southern California ice hockey.

Cognitive Legitimacy

“Cognitive legitimation refers to the spread of knowledge about a new venture” and can be assessed by the level of public familiarity with a new activity (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, p. 648). Organizations establish cognitive legitimacy by communicating through symbolic language (e.g.,

advertising) and behaviors (e.g., promotional events) (Shepherd & Zacharakis, 2003). As organizations become well known, their activities and new initiatives benefit from stakeholder “taken for grantedness,” where familiarity and brand recognition enhance the perceived legitimacy of both the organization and its new programs (Shepherd & Zacharakis, 2003).

Is cognitive legitimacy already in place for PSTs who develop new programming, simply because they are a *professional* sport team? Not necessarily, as they may have zero experience in developing certain programming (i.e., youth programming). How might a PST attain legitimacy with new programming? Is cognitive legitimacy apparent through the association with a well-known professional sports organization?

Pragmatic Legitimacy

Edwards and Washington (2015) explained that when an organization focuses on providing valuable information to its stakeholders, it is pragmatic legitimacy. Edwards and Washington (2015) looked to see what challenges new institutions face while establishing legitimacy in a crowded organizational field. An organization, in their case, College Hockey Inc. (CHI), looked to strategically provide information about the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) which was valuable to Canadian parents and players. “Through the information that CHI provides (its stakeholders), the evaluators are able to gain an understanding of the NCAA offerings, and their decisions may be influenced as a result” (Edwards & Washington, 2015, p. 299), which is pragmatic legitimacy.

The authors further explained how the separate forms of pragmatic legitimacy (exchange, influential, and dispositional) are met with CHI. Exchange legitimacy occurred when CHI shaped their NCAA recruitment message around educational opportunities that the NCAA provides, which is a valuable offering to both parents and players, thus an exchange of value

occurs between parents and players with CHI (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Influential legitimacy occurred through the usage of NCAA alumni turned NHL players, being supportive and promoting NCAA hockey on the CHI website (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Suchman (1995) stated that with influential legitimacy, organizations may recruit credible individuals to the key constituents, which NHL players are. Lastly, dispositional legitimacy was established by CHI when the organization connected the values and opportunities of the NCAA with the values of potential players and their parents (Edwards & Washington, 2015).

Cultural Legitimacy

Ice hockey has maintained strong legitimacy in regions such as Canada, where it has been recognized as the national sport by the National Sports of Canada Act in 1994, and Minnesota, where it holds official sport status at the state level as of 2009. However, in Southern California, ice hockey has followed a distinct and less traditional pathway toward legitimacy. Rather than providing a detailed historical review, this research focuses on current examples that illustrate how legitimacy is being constructed in this non-traditional hockey market.

Legitimacy is important in that stakeholders will often only engage with legitimate organizations (Deephouse et al., 2017). Internal and external stakeholders (referred to as ‘sources’) make legitimacy evaluations by comparing organizations to a particular set of standards (Ruef & Scott, 1998, as cited in Deephouse et al., 2017). “Cultural legitimacy denotes the quality of being in conformity with the accepted principles or rules and standards of a particular culture” (Kaime, 2014, p. 6). This concept captures the ways activities, practices, or affiliations “fit in” with the norms and values of a community (Villanueva, in press). However, while cultural legitimacy addresses visible alignment, cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971)

provides a deeper lens for understanding how such norms become internalized and felt as “natural” rather than imposed.

Cultural legitimacy can be visible and measured, while cultural hegemony is often invisible, felt, and internalized. For youth hockey in Southern California, legitimacy might start with community-level support, but hegemony is achieved when hockey feels just as *normal* as “traditional Southern California sports” such as basketball or soccer, in schoolyards and neighborhoods.

Importantly, cultural legitimacy is more than a matter of community adoption. Cultural legitimacy must also be situated within broader processes of cultural reproduction. According to Gramsci’s (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, dominant cultural practices, including sport preferences, often come to feel *natural* through gradual consent rather than over enforcement. Thus, even as new sports are introduced into a region, their acceptance is mediated by existing hegemonic cultural values. In Southern California, the dominance of lifestyle sports like basketball, surfing, and soccer represents an existing cultural hegemony, making the insertion of hockey a contest over symbolic and cultural space. Building legitimacy, therefore, requires not only expanding access but also negotiating and transforming localized cultural meanings.

Stages of Legitimacy

Johnson et al. (2006) developed four stages of legitimation of new social objects (i.e., sport programming): innovation, local validation, diffusion, and general validation. Deephouse et al. (2017) proposed that there are four outcomes of legitimacy evaluations: accepted, proper, debated, and illegitimate. ‘Accepted’ legitimacy is a passive form, in which the legitimacy has not been questioned or actively evaluated, but still deemed as legitimate. In other words, ‘accepted’ reflects a taken-for-grantedness (Deephouse et al., 2017). ‘Proper’ should be used for

recently evaluated organizations. ‘Debated’ reflects active disagreement within the social system, often among stakeholders and the organization (Deephouse et al., 2017). ‘Illegitimate’ reflects that the organization is inappropriate and that it should be radically reformed or cease to exist (Deephouse et al., 2017).

Innovation

A social innovation addresses the needs, purposes, or goals of actors at a local level (Johnson et al., 2006). New social objects may be created to address structural conditions, such as limited access which creates interest (Johnson et al., 2006). For example, the Play Equity Fund, established by the LA84 Foundation, looks to bring sport, and play to all Los Angeles (LA) area youth, due to the lack of equal access to sports for youth in the area, what they deem as the ‘Play Equity Gap’ (LA84 Foundation, 2022). The Play Equity Fund provides effective programming, including school-based sports, coaching education, and infrastructure development (LA84 Foundation, 2022). The Play Equity Fund addresses the Play Equity Gap that many LA youth encounter in their efforts to play sports.

Local Validation

For an innovation to be accepted locally, local actors must construe the innovation as consistent with and a link to existing local beliefs, norms, and values (Walker, 2004, as cited in Johnson et al., 2006). Using the previous example of the Play Equity Fund, LA84 describes the Play Equity Gap as an LA community crisis where youth sports, and the life benefits connected with them, are not as available as they once were. According to and LA84 survey (LA84 Foundation, 2022), the 2022 Los Angeles County Youth Sports Participation Survey for the Play Equity Fund found that LA County youth have a lower sport participation rate than prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic and are experiencing a lack of equal access to sport in greater numbers

than similar studies in 2020. The Play Equity Fund addresses the need for greater access to youth sport in LA and ties the Play Equity Fund directly to research which identifies the local need for such an innovation.

Diffusion

Once the social object is validated locally, it may then be spread, or diffused, to other new local situations (Johnson et al., 2006). Due to the innovation seemingly being successful, or a “social fact” (Johnson et al., 2006), it can be adopted in other local contexts easier. As the innovation starts to spread, it becomes useful in making sense of how things are done (Johnson et al., 2006). One program which has seemingly skipped the local validation stage and jumped from innovation to diffusion is the NHL Street youth hockey program. While LA84 has identified the Play Equity Gap in the LA area, NHL Street has not supplied any research or described any ‘need’ that it is addressing with its NHL Street program. This has resulted in only two NHL Street programs within 100 miles of Orange County, neither of which are active as of writing this dissertation. Nationally, there are 57 NHL Street league operators, 17 Canadian and 42 United States based leagues (NHL Street, 2024). Could it be that because NHL Street has not been relatively successful in smaller localized areas and was pushed out to a national audience without any direction or guidance, it has been struggling to find legitimacy.

General Validation

The fourth stage equates to the status quo, as the social object has been validated by more than one local situation (Johnson et al., 2006). As the social object spreads and diffuses, the adoption of the object needs less explicit justification than it needed in the first local context (Johnson et al., 2006). Once actors believe that an innovation is acceptable, the social object acquires widespread acceptance (Johnson et al., 2006). Contrary to NHL Street and its forced

diffusion across Canada and the United States, is the sport of pickleball. Pickleball is the fastest-growing sport across the Americas, with ambassadors working to spread the sport globally (IntoPickleball, 2024). Pickleball participation in the United States increased 15% from 2023 to 2024 (USA Pickleball, 2024). The large diffusion and general validation are attributed to several factors, including ease of play, low cost of entry, social aspects, multi-generational appeal, and a vast network of more than 2,100 volunteer ambassadors who promote the sport in their local area in the United States (Larkin, 2024, USA Pickleball, 2024).

Sport, Culture, and Cultural Hegemony

While the stages of legitimacy (Johnson et al., 2006) help illustrate how new practices or programming become normalized within local and broader contexts, a crucial question remains: how do these practices come to feel *natural* or even inevitable? Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony offers a compelling lens for understanding this deeper layer of cultural acceptance. For Gramsci (1971), dominant ideas or practices become "common sense" not through coercion, but through a gradual process of alignment with local institutions, values, and lived experience. Hegemony is achieved when people consent to norms because they feel appropriate, familiar, and expected, not because they are enforced. In other words, general validation is not only about widespread implementation, but also cultural acceptance.

Such a perspective is helpful when examining the rise of hockey in a non-traditional region like Southern California. In such contexts, the path to legitimacy is not inevitable, but dependent on consistent efforts by PSTs to infuse their programming with local meaning, emotional resonance, and joyful engagement. These effective and cultural elements are what elevate an initiative from basic recognition to legitimacy that is *felt*. Cultural hegemony helps

explain not just how hockey programming and interest spread, but why they remain, and become embedded into the cultural background of Southern California.

Sport, as scholars have argued, is one of the primary domains where cultural reproduction occurs. According to Carrington (2010), sport serves as, “a key site for the reproduction of cultural values and social relations” (p. 8), particularly as it intersects with institutions such as schools, families, and media. Giulanotti (2005) further added that sports are powerful spaces where identity and community are constantly affirmed, contested, and remade. More recently, Bairner (2007) and Hargreaves (2014) applied Gramscian frameworks to show how sport not only reflects but also reinforces dominant cultural norms, often under the guise of “natural” athletic hierarchies.

Building on this tradition, Gruneau (1999) emphasized that the spread and naturalization of certain sports over others is rarely apolitical or coincidental, but rather it reflects deeper cultural negotiations and power dynamics. Firca and Bonacin (2013) similarly demonstrated that sports like hockey often serve as subtle instruments of cultural dominance, depending on how they are promoted and positioned within local societies. This helps conceptualize why sports such as basketball, soccer, or football are seen as “natural fits” in Southern California, while hockey must engage in a more intensive process of cultural legitimation. The challenge is not only one of access or awareness, it is one of cultural resonance. At the center is cultural consent: the moment when a sport is no longer seen as *theirs* (i.e., foreign, niche, imported), but as *ours* (i.e., familiar, local, expected).

In the case of youth hockey in Southern California, this research argues that cultural consent is the final and most enduring form of legitimacy. It marks the stage where ice hockey is no longer perceived as a cold-climate, Canadian, or elite activity, but as a practice that takes

place in schoolyards, communities, and family life. Legitimacy is not just organizational or transactional, but it is affective, symbolic, and deeply cultural.

While cultural hegemony offers insight into how sports like hockey become embedded within community norms, it is also important to recognize that broader structural forces, particularly gentrification, can shape which cultural practices are elevated, marginalized, or reinterpreted. Understanding the intersection of sport, gentrification, and cultural legitimacy reveals deeper complexities in how participation opportunities are expanded or constrained across diverse urban landscapes.

Sport, Gentrification, and the Reproduction of Inequity

Recent research has emphasized that sports initiatives are increasingly intertwined with processes of urban gentrification and socio-spatial transformation. Hölsgens (2024) demonstrated how skateboarding culture in Seoul was initially marginalized but later reframed by urban elites as a tool for neighborhood revitalization, leading to the cultural erasure and exclusion of original practitioners. Similarly, Amalric and Tusell (2024) examined how sports-driven urban redevelopment projects in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, particularly around mega-events like the Olympics, masked racialized displacement under the guise of promoting youth physical activity and beautifying spaces. These studies reveal that sport is not a neutral or universally inclusive domain but rather can serve as a soft instrument of gentrification and cultural hegemony, reinforcing existing social hierarchies while appearing to expand access.

In the context of Southern California, efforts to “trendify” ice hockey in heavily diverse and immigrant-rich communities must be scrutinized. Without crucial attention to the cultural and structural dynamics at play, such programming risks reinforcing the very inequities it seeks to dismantle, offering participation without genuine empowerment or ownership. Thus, the

intersection of sport, cultural hegemony, and gentrification provides an essential critical lens for understanding the legitimacy of youth hockey initiatives in non-traditional markets.

Levels of Influence on Sport Participation

There are multiple levels of influence on sport participation. A major framework that has been used to understand the multiple levels of influence on sport and physical activity participation is the Social Ecological Model (SEM). The SEM is a framework that recognizes the multi-faceted influence of intrapersonal, interpersonal, environmental, and public policy factors that interact and influence participation (Stokols, 1996). Social ecology, at its basis, examines human internal thoughts and beliefs, their relationships with other humans, and the environment (Bocarro et al., 2008). Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), a social ecological model suggests that behavior is affected by, and effecting, multiple levels of influence, including micro- and macro- systems, as well as meso-, exo-, and chrono- systems (Hess & Schultz, 2008). The meso-system captures the idea that individuals develop by their interrelation and interaction with others within various settings in their microsystem (Hess & Schultz, 2008). The exo-system deals with the decision-making authority and legislative policy making that affects human lives (Hess & Schultz, 2008).

SEM is a variation of Bronfenbrenner's expanded model. What Bronfenbrenner (1979) terms as systems, SEM develops a bit further into five separate factors, developing outwards from an individual level to the broader public policy level. The five levels correspond to a similar system that was developed by Bronfenbrenner. The micro-system corresponds with intrapersonal factors; macro-systems are referred to as institutional factors; meso-system corresponds to interpersonal processes, as well as a second level in SEM, community factors; lastly, the exo-system becomes the fifth level in SEM, public policy (McLeroy et al., 1988). It is

important to note that conceptually, SEM is affected through a trickle-down from higher levels (i.e., public policy and community) to lower levels (i.e., intrapersonal and interpersonal) (Langille & Rodgers, 2010). In alignment with the first principle proposed by Sallis et al (2015), that multiple levels of factors influence health behaviors, SEM effectively utilizes the multiple levels of intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy, which influence health behaviors.

A second major framework that has been used to study participation in sport and physical activity is leisure constraints theory. This theory recognizes constraining effects at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels. Leisure Constraints Theory (LCT) has been the basis for a significant amount of research in leisure studies since it was introduced by Crawford and Godbey in 1987 (Godbey et al., 2010). Leisure constraints are elements that either inhibit or prohibit participation in leisure activities and consists of three types of constraint which are similar to a few of the levels of SEM: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991, as cited in White, 2008), would later present their hierarchical model of leisure constraints, which posited that both intra- and interpersonal constraints affect one's leisure preferences and structural constraints intervene between formed preferences and actual participation. Youth sport participation, much like leisure participation, is dependent on the negotiation through constraints to participation (Jackson et al., 1993). LCT suggests that the successful negotiation of all three constraints is vital for prolonged sport participation (Crane & Temple, 2015). Each constraint, ordered from intrapersonal to structural, is progressively less proximal and powerful. For youth participation in hockey, intrapersonal constraints might include fears about learning to ice skate, on top of other skills that hockey requires; interpersonal constraints could involve a lack of peers also participating in

hockey due to other sport participation or lack of interest; structural constraints might include the absence of affordable league opportunities or a venue to play hockey. Because these constraints align closely with the nested, multi-level approach of the SEM, this dissertation integrates LCT with SEM to provide a more holistic framework for analyzing youth sport participation barriers.

Intrapersonal Level

The characteristics that an individual maintains, such as age, attitudes, beliefs, behavior, knowledge, and skills, make up the intrapersonal factors. In addition, there are behavioral based individual factors, such as attitudes, knowledge, motivation, and perceived competence. Youth motivation has been explored by researching different motivational factors, such as sport participation being fun, and competition from other interests (Craike et al, 2009). Such research has seemingly been validated and legitimized by school physical education (PE) programs, which argue that PE programs are needed for positive youth learning and growth (Laker, 2012). Others have argued that reorienting sport participation and physical activity as a fun activity rather than a means to an end, would likely lead to higher participation rates (Craike et al, 2009). As youth get older, alternative interests outside of sport, and academic and social commitments begin to compete for attention from youth. The perceived competence that an individual has for a sporting activity is positively related to the value that individual has for the sport (Boiché & Sarrazin, 2009) and may lead to retention in participation, while conversely, a lack of competence is a leading factor for dropping out of sport participation (Salguero et al, 2003).

Intrapersonal constraints are internal states and attributes that are detrimental to participation in leisure activity, and examples include stress, depression, anxiety, lack of enjoyment, low perception of physical competence and perceived self-skill (Crane & Temple, 2015; Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Crane and Temple (2015) found that with youth who dropped

out of organized sport, there was common intrapersonal constraints of ‘lack of enjoyment’ and low perceptions of physical competence. While ‘lack of enjoyment’ was found to be a common intrapersonal constraint, it is important to note that youth who lack interest for one area of a sport activity, may have interest and enjoyment in a different activity (Godbey et al., 2010).

For youth interested in hockey, a barrier they might face is the skill of ice skating. Jeong Jun Kim, a neuroscience graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, found that ice skating movements are not easy to emulate and are unfamiliar (Kim, 2022). Couple the highly unique skill of ice skating with stick handling and shooting a puck, and there a multitude of new and foreign skills that youth are tasked with learning, just to play ice hockey. An innovative method which addresses the high degree of learning ice hockey may be developed which could eliminate ice skating (and roller skating), thus enabling youth to utilize a movement they are familiar with, running. Youth can then learn stickhandling and shooting without having to learn a new complicated movement. Street/deck hockey may be a suitable alternative form of hockey which avoids skating.

To drive change at the intrapersonal level, interventions should be aimed at modifying an individual’s knowledge, attitudes, behavior, or other internal concepts (McLeroy et al., 1988). Similarly, Hu et al. (2021) suggested that strategies should be focused on both the intrapersonal level for children and adolescents and with the key stakeholders (e.g., family, friends, coaches, teachers, and school administrators). For Southern California youth who are not familiar with ice hockey, the question remains: how can the sport be innovatively introduced to generate and sustain interest, and possibly spread to other areas?

Interpersonal Level

Interpersonal influences are social factors that affect leisure preferences and are the result of interpersonal interactions with others (Crane & Temple, 2015; Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Family members, friends, teammates, coaches, and classmates all play a significant influence on individuals. Each of the interpersonal relationships may further validate youth programming and fill a need for youth. This level is the first step towards local validation as an innovation looks to begin spreading.

McLeroy et al (1988) stated that “Social relationships are essential aspects of social identity” (p. 357). Such relationships provide resources including support, information, and access to more and/or other social circles and groups. These types of resources provide the social support which is vital in mediating stress (Wills, 1985). Because people do not form attitudes and beliefs in direct response to their attributes but acquire norms and information through their social network, altering the social norms and influences that an individual experiences could ultimately alter the individual (McLeroy et al., 1988). The two closest interpersonal relationships youth maintain, with family and friends, may enable sport participation by providing incentives that encourage participation (Ball, 2006).

Parental support is an important facilitator at the interpersonal level, for youth sport participation. For youth, parents provide tangible support, which includes financial support, transportation, and permission to participate (Basterfield et al, 2016; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Parental support is imperative for youth, as children may be too young to travel alone, do not have their own money, and cannot provide their own means of travel (Basterfield et al, 2016; Vella et al, 2014). Youth that are disadvantaged socioeconomically encounter a greater number

of barriers to sport participation, as well as lower levels of parental support and investment (Dollman & Lewis, 2010).

A lower investment and lower support from parents may also be associated with a lack of time. Youth whose parents are not native English speakers and are not originally from the United States also encounter language and cultural barriers. For example, when youth hockey players register to play in leagues, some cultural minority parents might not be comfortable with the registration process, leaving youth without a means of participation. Other parents cannot find time to drive their children to practices and games or even afford to pay for registration. There is a great deal of sacrifice for parents to have their children play sports.

Wolfenden and Holt (2005) found that there are different types of support that parents should provide their sport participating children; tangible support (i.e., financial, transportation) and emotional. It is important for parents to provide the appropriate amount and type of support to their youth, as the wrong type of support may be viewed by youth as detrimental. Parental attempts at providing sport-specific advice to their children were viewed negatively by youth, and parental over-involvement may cause tension between parents and their children (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Nevertheless, navigating parental interpersonal constraints may be hindered by environmental and cultural factors (Garst et al., 2020). More specifically, engaging and teaching parents who are also new to hockey could help improve parental constraints stemming from a lack of knowledge of the sport (Thrower et al., 2016), or the perceived value (or lack thereof) of a sport (Diacin & DeSensi, 2013).

A second interpersonal factor in youth sport participation is the role that peers (e.g., classmates, teammates) play in influencing youth. Hu et al. (2021) found that friend influence factors into youth sport participation. For adolescents, peers provide a considerable amount of

influence on youth physical activity (Beets et al, 2006). Friends, classmates, and teammates that foster a positive and caring environment may create a fun environment for an individual. Fry and Gano-Overway (2010) found that young athletes who perceived a caring climate from their teammates, had a higher enjoyment and positive attitude towards their teammates and coaches, a greater commitment towards the sport they played, and reciprocated caring behaviors towards their teammates and coaches. Youth who look to explore participation in a less popular sport, such as hockey in Southern California, may be more likely to face interpersonal constraints.

As children mature into adolescence, coaches begin to play a more important role in their continued participation (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). As previously mentioned, to avoid potential tension between parents and youth, and parental over-involvement, it is vital for parents to take a step back and let coaches take the role of teaching sport specific skills. For some sports and geographical locations (e.g., hockey in Southern California), coaches are scarce, due to funding, lack of the required skill set, and time available to coach. An often-encountered interpersonal barrier that cultural minority youth hockey players have encountered in Southern California is they often feel isolated and alone on teams, due to differences in cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The cultural differences take the form of different languages, looking different, and not having any teammates that youth are familiar with.

For youth in school, having a champion who creates change and prioritizes physical activity may be a major driver of change for higher level policies (Langille & Rodgers, 2010). Champions also may help spread an innovation, especially at schools and school districts, as well as further spreading the innovation further to aid in local validation, diffusion, and generalized validation. The champion may vary from school to school, and the higher level the champion is, typically school principals, the more influence they may have, as they are perceived to be the

leaders in their schools (Langille & Rodgers, 2010). Skilled PE teachers may also be qualified champions as they drive passion for a sport and youth participation in each sport. However, some schools do not have trained PE teachers (Langille & Rodgers). Further, in schools which do not have trained PE teachers, often a generalist teacher would deliver physical activity for youth, which the generalist teacher would lack knowledge, skill, and comfort (Langille & Rodgers). When youth are not taught a sport, nor supported by a skilled champion, the interpersonal benefits of support, and information would not be met. It is imperative for schools and school districts to maintain a champion to advocate for hockey growth in schools and to support and encourage youth development in hockey. Due to the unique skillset for hockey, skilled and trained individuals are not readily available, especially in non-traditional geographical locations. The question remains, how do programs like the Team's in-school youth programs address interpersonal factors in an effort to stimulate participation?

Organizational Level

The first of the macro level factors which influence youth sport participation is organizational factors. It is at this level that individuals spend between a third to half of their lives (McLeroy et al., 1988). In terms of sport participation, this could include youth sports teams and leagues, and school classes. Because of the amount of time spent within an organization, organizational structures may have a substantial influence on youth sport participants. For example, schools and PE programming could positively influence youth sport participation. Bocarro et al (2008) argued that PE curriculums should integrate intramural sport programs to help children learn life skills and facilitate active living.

A considerable portion of time for most youth is spent in school, with 98.2% of youth aged 7 to 13 years of age attending public or private schools in 2016 (Snyder, 2018). Schools

may provide ‘formal’ types of competitive sports, such as interscholastic and intramural competitions, and other opportunities, such as lunchtime playground sport opportunities (Craike et al, 2009). Schools play a vital role in keeping youth physically active and participating in sport, as reducing opportunities for sport and physical activity in school is a key driver in the reduction in sport and physical activity for youth (Craike et al, 2009).

Most literature and research on the organizational level and youth sport participation deals primarily with schools, and research on the organizational factors in relation to youth sport participation outside of a school setting is limited. However, for hockey specifically, one study looked at early sport specialization before the age of 12, and the role that youth sport organizations play in that early specialization. Pelletier and Lemoyne (2020) found that a diversifying of active behaviors at a young age benefits young people more so than focusing and specializing on one sport (i.e., ice hockey).

Public parks and recreation (P&R) departments have historically provided youth with options for sport participation, but have since been dwindling in numbers, or have a limited number of sports available for youth to participate in. Seemingly, cultural legitimacy tends to end at the diffusion stage for this YSO. For example, in Long Beach, California, youth aged 9-14 can play indoor soccer, flag football, volleyball, and basketball through the city’s P&R department. The website for the city of Long Beach’s Parks and Recreation Department displays a picture and section for youth roller hockey but then states that the program is not currently operating. For the city of Tustin, California, no youth sports are provided by the P&R department. The lack of general validation, and lack of youth options may be due to the lack of volunteer coaching, as city P&R departments are reliant on volunteer coaches (Silverberg et al, 2000), and such coaching roles are difficult to fill (Cuskelly et al, 2006). With the difficulty in finding proper

coaching in P&R departments, these departments have outsourced youth sports to CSOs (e.g., Boys & Girls Club, YMCA).

CSOs historically have provided many options for youth sport participation. The YMCA was one of the first volunteer community organizations in the United States which supported competitive youth sport programming (Albrecht & Strand, 2010). How are such organizations continually able to provide volunteer coaches, while P&R departments are not? Could it be due to such CSOs being previously deemed “proper and appropriate” (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 35)? Such groups attain acceptance and maintain low scrutiny (Deephouse et al., 2017). Previous research has focused on retention of volunteer coaches based on the motivations of volunteer coaches (Busser & Carruthers, 2010; Cuskelly et al, 2006). With partnerships between the Team and CSOs and schools, both CSOs and schools are willing to have their staff members undergo training to learn how to coach the SEP curriculum effectively or at least have the Team’s SEP staff coach in their place. P&R departments that the Team has attempted to partner with are not willing and able to provide volunteer coaches and have stated that they would like SEP staff to do so. With the limited number of hours available to the SEP staff, who already assist with CSOs and schools, as well as working at the Team’s NHL games and other events held by the Team, being fully available to coach in P&R departments is not feasible, nor sustainable. This may be remedied with funding provided by the NHL’s Industry Growth Fund (IGF), which is a major source of funding for SEP but is it sustainable should IGF funding be discontinued for such programming?

Community Factors

McLeroy et al. (1988) defined community factors in three ways: 1) an individual’s face-to-face primary groups, 2) relationships between organizations and groups within a certain

geographic area, and 3) geographical and political areas. Face-to-face primary groups may include direct family members, classmates, teammates, and coaches, who are all directly related to sport participation as a complete (sub)culture, more than just the interpersonal interactions that one of these stakeholders has on a youth participant. For example, in Southern California, the phrase ‘it’s a small world’ describes the hockey community. Many parents and families know many other parents and families throughout the area and are familiar with different coaches and teams. There are currently only 21 hockey clubs throughout the Southern California Amateur Hockey Association (SCAHA). The youth hockey culture in Southern California pales in comparison to other youth sport communities in the area, such as boys’ basketball, (currently 451 Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) associated boys’ basketball programs within a 100-mile radius of the Team’s home arena), volleyball (currently 224 AAU programs), baseball (currently 184 AAU programs), and tackle football (currently 70 AAU programs) (AAU, 2024). Similarly, there are more than 100 American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) regions within a 50-mile radius of the Team’s home arena (AYSO, 2024). What differentiates these sports from hockey? How does the Southern California culture and lifestyle differentiate from the hockey culture? Does this sub-culture minimize the potential to develop from diffusion to general validation outside of Southern California? These patterns illustrate not only patterns of participation, but also processes of cultural hegemony, where certain sports are seen as more *natural* community activities due to decades of normalized preference. Introducing hockey into such a cultural environment requires the challenging of these ingrained sport hierarchies, and not just fitting in.

It is argued that Southern California is ‘lifestyle’ sport-centric, with rollerblading/skating, surfing, and skateboarding being the most salient (Ozyurtcu, 2019). The reasoning for this is beyond the scope of this research, but it is relevant to better understanding of the cultural

significance of certain sports in Southern California. When thinking of Southern California, many people think of a sunny and warm climate the area is renowned for. Many of the sports that are popular in the region (i.e., basketball, volleyball, baseball, football, soccer, surfing, and skateboarding) can all take place outside, with minimal constraint or barriers of access.

It is important to also take ethnic culture into account. One's ethnic culture may influence the sports and interests one might have. For example, for Mexicans, soccer is a way of life and an essential part of Mexican culture and identity (Navarro, 2023). In Orange County households, 34% of the population reported being Hispanic or Latino on the most recent 2020 United States Census; in neighboring Los Angeles County, the percentage is nearly half of reporting residents at 49% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Stodolska and Tainsky (2015) examined the role of soccer spectatorship in identity development among Latino immigrants.

Watching soccer not only provided the fans with excitement and entertainment associated with a sporting competition, but also reminded them of who they were, their roots and their culture, as well as made them feel closer to home, their people, and their heritage (p. 149).

Hockey, therefore, is a foreign sport among Hispanic and Latin communities which make up a large portion of Southern California households.

Relationships between organizations could build influence in awareness, local policies, and resource expenditures (McLeroy et al., 1988). For example, to improve awareness and utilize sport for social justice, 12 professional sports organizations in Los Angeles County and Orange County joined together to form "The Alliance: Los Angeles" (The Alliance). In addition to improving awareness for social justice issues, The Alliance develops educational opportunities

and has partnered with the “Play Equity Fund” to better drive social change across communities through sport.

While CSOs are organizational, community factors also include when organizations partner with other organizations within a community. For example, schools may attempt to expose students to more opportunities in sports and physical activity by both providing school facilities as well as partnering with nearby facilities, such as public swimming pools, CSOs, and P&R departments (Craike et al, 2009). A prime example of this is the Team partnering with schools, school districts, and CSOs to educate teachers and coaches about the sport to better train youth in schools, and form youth hockey leagues in various communities.

Community level constraints are external intervening factors between leisure preference and participation, such as accessibility or availability of opportunity, location, and transportation (Crane & Temple, 2015; Crawford & Godbey, 1987). These types of constraint have been the most widely studied of the constraints (Jackson, 2000). For youth who are interested in playing hockey, and have navigated through intra- (i.e., they want to play and are not held back from playing by being “shy”) and interpersonal (i.e., their family and friends support them) constraints, they would then encounter a community level constraint of no league being in place for them to play a structured hockey game.

Public Policy

Regulatory policies, procedures, and laws make up the fifth level of SEM: public policy. Public policies are general validations, often reaching nationwide acceptance. Policies may affect access to programs through establishment of eligibility criteria and restrictions on how resources may be used (McLeroy et al., 1988). One such piece of legislation which has affected sport participation is Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits sexual

discrimination in federally assisted educational programs in the United States. Such legislation and public policy have improved sport participation for women in United States based schools. Title IX has helped improve participation rates of female athletes playing college sports from 16,000 in 1968 to over 200,000 in 2014, potentially due to increased media coverage, improved awareness, and successful lawsuits associated with Title IX (Acosta & Carpenter, 2014).

At the policy level, Title IX is a broad social policy imposed by the United States government, which was intended to positively effect women's equality in education. At the community level, Title IX is a school-based intervention, as it specifically mandates gender equity in education. Schools that receive federal aid must adhere to Title IX. As stated in the Community level, youth spend a large portion of their time in schools, therefore, school-based interventions and policies to increase physical activity are viewed as a way to prevent childhood health problems, and improve fundamental motor skills, and lifelong healthy physical activity patterns (Kaestner & Xu, 2010). As a policy implemented in schools, stakeholders in youth sport (i.e., youth participants, parents, and coaches) have seen the benefits of Title IX. Youth sport policy stakeholders need to appreciate from the start what a policy is intended to do (Stylianou et al, 2019). Interpersonally, women were provided a means to be equal with their male counterparts. Lastly, at the intrapersonal level, by ending the overt practices in place which placed women at a disadvantage in education, Sandler (2007) stated that, "Title IX increased the confidence and self-esteem and ambitions of millions of women and girls" (p. 486).

Another policy which looked to change organizational values in Ontario youth soccer, was a Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) plan. The LTPD plan looked to create an environment that increased player enjoyment, skill development, and age-appropriate playing environments (Ontario Soccer Association, 2014). Such a policy change needed to appeal to

multiple stakeholder groups while also managing their concerns (Legg et al, 2016). Legg et al (2016) found that the LTPD plan implemented by the Ontario Soccer Association (OSA) (community level), was similar to the LTPD plan outlined by the larger, national organization, Canada Soccer (policy level). By having 21 district representatives convey the new LTPD goals to members at their local clubs (Legg et al, 2016), the organizational level was integrated. Parents and coaches, part of the interpersonal level, were the next level which needed to be made aware of the changing LTPD policy. Parents found out about the LTPD through coaching staffs (Legg et al, 2016). The process of having a national policy trickle down to lower SEM levels, affirms the trickle-down effect from policy to lower levels (Langille & Rodgers, 2010).

SEM is a framework which captures all the levels of influence on sport participation and allows for the integration of legitimacy and LCT within the model. Throughout the various levels, legitimacy and LCT may be integrated in each. For new youth programming to be accepted, it should have cognitive legitimacy, and in the intra- and interpersonal levels, are youth participants willing to participate because the organization providing the programming is well-known and taken-for-granted? Interpersonally, will parents and coaches want to be part of the same type of legitimate programming? Providing cognitively legitimate programming, coupled with LCT practices may alleviate such barriers, and help advance programming to pragmatic legitimacy, and the organizational level of SEM, where the organization provides its stakeholders a value. As an organization, a professional sports organization may partner with other organizations which do not have the resources or skills to provide value to the partner organization and its stakeholders. At the community level of SEM, and perhaps the public policy level (which is beyond the scope of this research), cultural legitimacy could become vital in the acceptance of programming on a larger scale.

Taken together, legitimacy theory, SEM, and LCT provide a multi-level framework to examine the ways PSTs influence youth sport participation in culturally non-traditional contexts. This chapter has outlined the necessary theoretical scaffolding to evaluate the legitimacy of the Team’s programming and understand how hockey might shift from novelty to norm in Southern California. The following chapter will describe the methods used to explore this phenomenon.

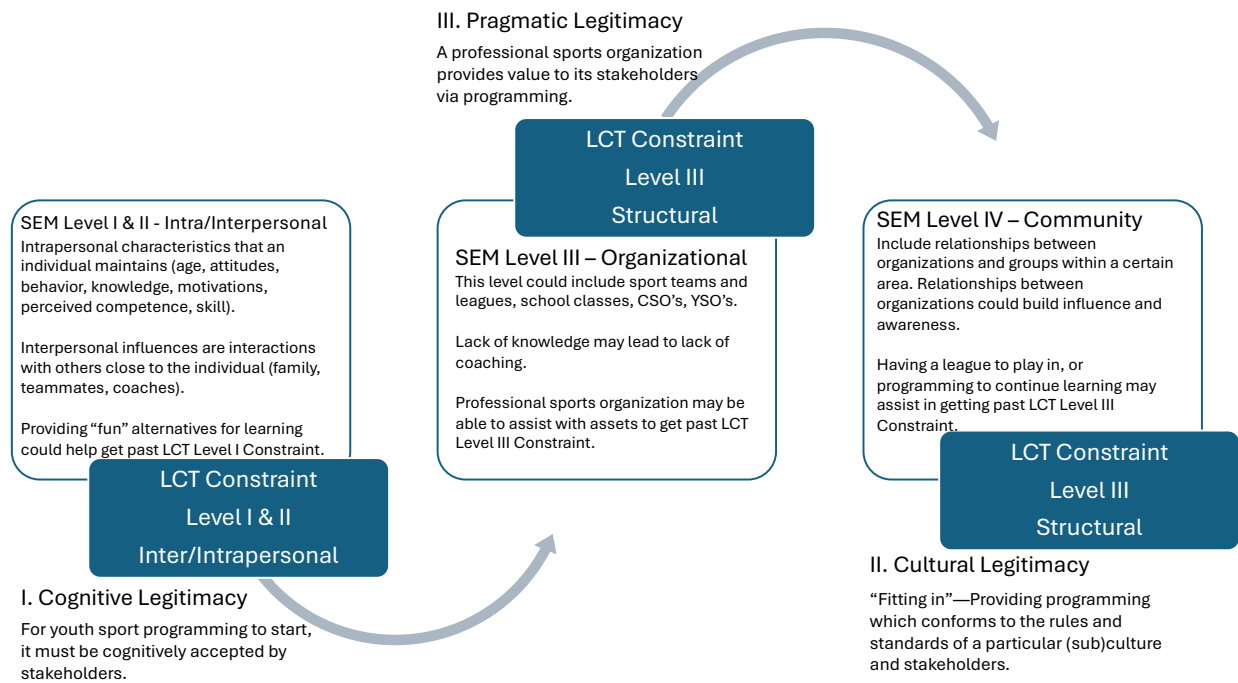


Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework Linking Legitimacy Theory, the Social Ecological Model, and Leisure Constraints Theory in Youth Sport Development

Chapter 3: Methods

Epistemology

Epistemology, as Crotty (1998) defined it, addresses “*how we know what we know*” (p. 8, emphasis in original). It provides the foundational orientation for one’s methodology and research design. Among the commonly used epistemological frameworks (objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism) this study is grounded in constructionism. While objectivism assumes that meaning exists independently of human consciousness, and subjectivism holds that meaning is imposed by the individual, constructionism posits that knowledge and meaning are created through human interaction with the world, rather than existing independently (Crotty, 1998). As Crotty (1998) explained, “*All knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context*” (p. 42, emphasis in original). This perspective frames research as an exploration of socially constructed and culturally negotiated meanings, rather than a search for objective truths.

These constructions are shaped by culture, history, and institutional power. Social Constructionism draws attention to how certain meanings persist, and how they come to be seen as “natural.” As Crotty (1998) further observed, “social constructionism emphasizes the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things... and gives us a quite definite view of the world” (p. 58).

This constructionist perspective is complemented by Gramsci’s (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, which emphasizes how dominant cultural meanings become naturalized through consent rather than coercion. This lens is particularly useful for analyzing institutional narratives around youth sport legitimacy. Ice hockey in Southern California provides a compelling case of

this dynamic. Although historically marginalized within hockey culture, the region has experienced steady growth in participation. This study explores how ice hockey, a sport often associated with northern, predominantly white contexts, has had its legitimacy constructed, reproduced, and occasionally reinterpreted in a culturally distinct, nontraditional setting such as Southern California.

Building on this epistemological stance, I adopted the SEM as a sensitizing framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeroy et al., 1988) to guide the inquiry into how legitimacy operates across multiple layers: individual, interpersonal, organizational, and community. This approach allowed for the examination of both micro- and macro-level influences shaping participation and perceived value in PST-affiliated youth hockey programming. Furthermore, legitimacy theory and related sport scholarship informed the analysis of qualitative data gathered throughout the study.

One distinguishing feature of this research is my positionality as an insider and former organizational practitioner within the Team and its FD department. As Corley and Gioia (2011) argued, the relationship between researchers and practitioners should not be unidirectional. Rather, scholarly contribution should emerge from mutual exchange, where academic inquiry is informed by practice and vice versa. “(T)he idea of contribution rests largely on the ability to provide *original insight* into a phenomenon by advancing knowledge in a way that is deemed to have *utility* or usefulness for some purpose” (Corley & Gioia, 2011, p. 15, emphasis in original). With youth hockey participation in the United States steadily increasing (Whyno, 2024), this research sought to offer insights that are not only theoretically meaningful but also “actionable” (Corley & Gioia, 2011), providing practical implications for growing the game in non-traditional markets.

Methodology

This study employed an instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995) to explore how a PST influenced youth participation in a sport within a non-traditional market. An instrumental case study is not focused solely on the case itself but is designed to provide insight into a broader phenomenon, in this case, the processes by which legitimacy was constructed and sustained through sport programming in a region historically marginalized within hockey culture. As Baxter and Jack (2008) noted, instrumental case studies aim to facilitate deeper understanding of issues beyond the immediate context, with the potential for transferable insights that inform both practice and theory across similar settings.

Southern California, with its warm climate and cultural distance from traditional ice hockey strongholds, presents a compelling setting to examine how a PST constructs and sustains sport legitimacy in a non-traditional market. The Team served as the focal organization due to its longstanding involvement in youth hockey development and sustained presence in the region's sport ecosystem. By focusing on the Team's initiatives, this study generated practical and conceptual insights for PSTs aiming to grow participation beyond traditional regional strongholds.

Study Participants

To better understand how the Team influences youth participation across the various SEM levels, participants were selected from stakeholder groups at the interpersonal, organizational, and community levels. At the interpersonal level, parents and coaches play a central role in shaping youth participation and experiences. Parents often serve as gatekeepers to sport access, either removing barriers (Crane & Temple, 2015) or, at times, lacking the familiarity needed to guide their child's sporting journey. Coaches help facilitate early sport

development and may be instrumental in guiding participants along the Team's programmatic pathway.

At the organizational level, the study includes the Team's Fan Development (FD) department. The FD department plays a central role in designing and delivering youth programming in Southern California. Historically, the department has employed up to 10 full-time and 18 part-time staff members; at the time of this study, it included six full-time and 12 part-time employees. FD staff often have backgrounds in playing, coaching, or teaching hockey, and are responsible for engaging youth participants, coordinating with CSOs and schools, and sustaining partnerships across the region.

Operating under the marketing division of the Team, the FD department has delivered youth programming since 2005, with the expressed goal of "growing the game" and cultivating new fans. Each year, the department introduces new initiatives targeting both sport development and educational engagement. These include large-scale events such as a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) curriculum-based field trip which transforms the Team's home arena into a classroom for over 13,000 middle school students once a year, and a program which brings approximately 1,500 fifth-grade students to the arena to complete California's state-mandated physical education fitness assessments. Through this combined slate of sport and educational programming, FD reaches over 65,000 Southern California youth each year, positioning itself as a key institutional actor in the youth sport and education ecosystem.

At the community level, several of the Team's youth programs involve direct partnerships with local school districts. For example, the Team's all-girls LTP program includes busing participants from partner schools to Team affiliated ice rinks. These programs are made possible through ongoing collaboration between the Team and school district administrators.

Further, one school district has created their own ball hockey leagues and tournaments modeled after the Team's flagship 4th Grade Street Hockey Tournament, demonstrating a growing institutional investment in hockey as a cultural and physical education opportunity.

School champions, who are individual staff members within schools who advocate for hockey programming, play a crucial role in sustaining long-term interest. These champions often assist with coordination, attend Team events, and serve as informal ambassadors within their schools. Similarly, the Team partners with local CSOs to deliver street hockey leagues. These partnerships involve constant collaboration between the Team and administrative staffs. The community level also includes administrators from external leagues such as the THSHL, as well as staff at the Team's affiliated ice rinks. These administrators possess in-depth knowledge of league operations and help deliver programming aligned with the Team's development goals.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in youth hockey, either as a parent, coach, administrator, or current or former FD employee. These individuals were identified as appropriate for this study due to their potential to contribute rich, experience-based insights relevant to legitimacy and the multi-level influence of PSTs aligned with the SEM framing this research. Participants were recruited through email lists associated with the following organizations: The Team's FD department (past and present employees); a Southern California School District (administrative staff, and teachers); the Team's youth hockey programming mailing list (private school coaches and administrative personnel).

Recruitment followed a snowball or chain sampling approach (Creswell, 2016), utilizing the professional networks of FD staff and existing community partners within school districts and youth sport settings. Creswell (2016) described this method as the process of identifying

participants through referral by others familiar with the research context and potential contributors. This approach is particularly appropriate given the community-embedded nature of youth hockey and the interconnectedness of stakeholders involved in its programming. Additionally, coaches served as intermediaries in identifying and contacting parents whose children were involved in their teams or school-based programs. This allowed for purposeful access to a key stakeholder group of parents, while maintaining ethical boundaries and minimizing researcher intrusion.

The recruitment goal of 20 participants was met, including: five current and/or former FD employees (organizational level), five school/league/program administrators (community level), five coaches (interpersonal level), and five parents/guardians (interpersonal level). This sample size is designed to support pattern recognition, category formation, and thematic saturation in line with qualitative case study methodology (Petty et al., 2012). Efforts to ensure demographic and cultural diversity among participants to reflect the broader social landscape of Southern California youth sport contexts were met.

Data Collection

The primary form of data collection employed for this study was semi-structured interviews. According to Creswell (2016), a qualitative researcher should engage in a series of activities in the cyclical process of data collection. The process began prior to formal data collection, as the research site was identified and types of participants were determined (Creswell, 2016). The second step, gaining access and building rapport (Creswell, 2016), was also initiated prior to data collection during my association as an insider with the Team. Such prolonged access and engagement enabled access to secondary and tertiary form of data: observation and document review. These three complementary approaches facilitated

methodological triangulation, increasing confidence in data interpretation, and helping to “illuminate or nullify some extraneous influences” (Stake, 1995, p. 114).

It is important to acknowledge the unique context of this research, which focused on my workplace (former department). Creswell (2016) warned of potential ethical complications when conducting research within in one’s own organization, particularly regarding power imbalances. However, I was no longer employed by the FD department at the time of data collection, thereby reducing the likelihood of coercion or hierarchical influence. While familiarity with participants may have facilitated rapport, it also required heightened reflexivity regarding potential bias. All participants were informed of their rights, consented to participation, and were eponymized to protect their privacy. One-on-one interviews were recorded using the Otter app on an iPhone, auto transcribed, and then manually reviewed and corrected for accuracy. The final transcripts were uploaded into NVivo for coding and thematic analysis.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured were conducted using a blend of closed- and open-ended questions that allowed flexibility and depth. These interviews generally began with exploratory “what,” “how,” and “why” questions (Adams, 2015; Creswell, 2016). Following Adams’ (2015) guidance, participants were selected from two of three key stakeholder groups: (1) interested parties (e.g., parents, coaches), and (2) administrative representatives (e.g., FD employees, TRF employees school/district officials). An interview guide was developed and piloted in advance to assess timing, flow, and question clarity (see Appendix A-E). The pilot process enabled refinement of the guide based on participant feedback and early observations.

Observations

Observational data enriched the research by offering direct insight into the everyday functioning of FD programming. As a former Youth Hockey Coordinator with FD, and an active volunteer at Team youth events, I had a deep familiarity with both the “behind the scenes” planning and the real-time execution of events. Over the course of my involvement, I recorded detailed notes and reflections from these observations. Creswell (2016) discussed the value and challenge of navigating the role of participant-observer, particularly when transitioning from outsider to insider. In this case, most adult participants were aware of my role as an insider, limiting my ability to conduct new outsider observations. However, earlier observations made during the first six months of employment, when my outsider status was still intact, were recorded as fieldnotes and used to inform both the interview guide and data analysis.

Document Review

Document review (or analysis) is a systematic procedure for evaluating and reviewing printed and electronic materials. “Document analysis yields excerpts, quotations, or entire passages from records, correspondence, official reports and open-ended surveys” which are then “organized into *themes*, *categories* and *case examples* through content analysis” (Labuschagne, 2003, p. 101, emphasis in original). Document review, in combination with semi-structured interviews, allowed me to appropriately gain a proper and rich understanding of how the Team attained legitimacy in their programming, and how/if they intended to legitimately grow the game in Southern California.

Various documents were gathered and reviewed for data collection. These documents included newspaper and magazine articles about the Team’s youth programming, emails from the FD department to various stakeholder groups, annual reports provided by the FD department

to the NHL IGF department, and informational flyers and one-sheets about the Team's youth programming. Documents dating back to 2010 through January 2025 were saved and stored in the FD Microsoft SharePoint collaborative platform, which I was granted full access by the FD department. The documents include information about previous FD programming (including now defunct programs, as well as programming still in place); various emails to partner schools (i.e., partner newsletter), coaches and athletic directors, and to CSOs (i.e., YMCA and city P&R departments); previous interviews and news articles regarding all FD programming. The purpose for reviewing such documents was to form a timeline of FD programming and seeking the effectiveness over such a timeline of the various programs. Second, participation rates over time and in various programming were available in such documents. Participation rates are important to determine the potential (in)effectiveness of FD programming. Previous interviews and news articles contained quotes from youth, parents, coaches, administrators, and FD staff, which may align with data collected from the semi-structured interviews.

Thematic Analysis

Guided by a social constructionist epistemology, data analysis was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006; 2019). Reflexive TA involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across a data set, emphasizing the active role of the researcher in theme development rather than treating themes as emerging passively from the data. An inductive, data-driven approach was employed. Rather than applying a pre-existing coding frame, themes were generated directly from the raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive orientation allowed for unexpected insights to surface, particularly around issues of cultural adaptation, power dynamics, and perceptions of legitimacy. To enhance the richness and authenticity of the coding process, in vivo coding strategies were

incorporated, as outlined by Saldaña (2016). In vivo coding uses participants' own language, capturing exact words or phrases from transcripts as initial codes. This approach grounded the analysis in the participants' lived realities and allowed key emic concepts (those meaningful within the participants' own social world) to surface without researcher pre-interpretation.

All semi-structured interview transcripts were imported into NVivo and analyzed as the primary dataset using reflexive thematic analysis. Observational fieldnotes and reviewed documents were examined separately and used as supplementary sources to support, contrast, or contextualize emerging codes and themes. While the interview data formed the core of the analytics process, insights from field observations and program-related documents provided critical triangulation points, enriching the understanding of organizational practices and participant experiences. The multi-source approach allowed for both thematic depth and contextual breadth while preserving the distinct contributions of each data type.

The coding process unfolded through a series of iterative stages. First, familiarization with the data was achieved by repeatedly reading interview transcripts and observational notes, accompanied by analytic memo writing to document early impressions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the initial cycle of coding, in vivo codes were applied to maintain close alignment with participant language and meanings. In vivo coding, particularly appropriate for research involving culturally diverse participants, preserves the emic perspectives essential for understanding community-specific realities (Saldaña, 2016).

In the second cycle, similar in vivo codes were clustered into broader pattern codes, identifying higher-level conceptual categories that reflected the emerging structure of the data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) guidance, candidate themes were developed by moving back and forth between coded segments, full transcripts, and analytic memos. Candidate

themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure coherence, internal consistency, and analytic depth. Thematic development remained flexible and reflexive, continuously interrogating whether the themes captured meaningful patterns across the dataset.

Ultimately, three major themes were identified, each aligned with one form of legitimacy targeted by the Team's programming initiatives. The first theme, *Eliminating Barriers*, captured efforts to establish cognitive legitimacy by demystifying hockey, making it visible and accessible in the broader non-traditional setting of Southern California, and ensuring early positive encounters with the sport. The second theme, *Delivering Value*, reflected how the Team achieved pragmatic legitimacy through consistent professionalism, relational trust-building, and responsive support for schools and community organizations. The third theme, *Commitment to Community*, demonstrated the embedding of hockey into local cultural identities, evidencing cultural legitimacy through long-term relational investments, community celebration, and co-created ownership of hockey spaces.

NVivo qualitative analysis software was utilized to systematically organize codes, cluster thematic relationships, and facilitate cross-data comparisons. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the interpretive nature of theme development was acknowledged. Themes were understood not as objectively discovered entities, but as constructed representations of patterned meaning across the dataset, shaped by my positionality, professional experience, and critical engagement with the Southern California youth hockey environment.

The integration of Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach, combined with Saldaña's (2016) in vivo coding techniques allowed for a rich, grounded, and contextually sensitive analysis of how the Team cultivated, negotiated, and sometimes contested legitimacy across cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural domains.

To ensure analytic rigor, thematic saturation was carefully monitored throughout the coding process. Saturation, as conceptualized in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Saldaña, 2016), refers to the point at which no new substantive codes or thematic patterns emerge from additional data analysis. During the iterative coding and theme development stages, consistent cross-referencing between new data and existing codes confirmed that the primary themes (*Eliminating Barriers*, *Delivering Value*, and *Commitment to Community*) accounted comprehensively for the major patterns of meaning across the data set. As additional interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed, no novel codes emerged that substantially challenged or expanded the existing thematic framework. This indicated that thematic sufficiency, if not complete saturation, had been reasonably achieved, strengthening the credibility, trustworthiness, and coherence of the final analytic interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Trustworthiness

The establishment of trustworthiness was guided by the evaluative criteria set by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Wallendorf and Belk (1989). The authors asserted that positivist inquiry had developed a set of criteria that fit with its ontological and epistemological assumptions, but such criteria is not appropriate when participant-observation is employed as a methodology (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Due to the inconsistencies between positivist research methods and postpositivist philosophy, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested four substitute criteria to evaluate the worth of: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A fifth criterion, integrity, was suggested by Wallendorf and Belk (1989). Each of the criterion will be described below, and the context each holds for this study.

Credibility

Credibility essentially is the exhibiting of confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several techniques were described by Wallendorf and Belk (1989), including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation across sources and methods. As the former FD Youth Hockey Coordinator, and still currently involved (to a lesser extent) in FD programming, I have maintained frequent contact with FD employees, and various stakeholders involved in the school-partnered programming for more than three years.

Wallendorf and Belk (1989) cautioned that there is a danger of being too familiar with phenomena. Over the last 24-months, I took a new role outside of FD, which allowed a more distanced naivete towards what FD has done during that time span.

Triangulation across various methods and sources is a second means of trustworthiness (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). As stated earlier, semi-structured interviews, observations, and document review allowed for methodological triangulation, which increased confidence in the interpretation of data (Stake, 1995). Wallendorf and Belk (1989) further explained that triangulation across methods requires the researcher to test their interpretation of collected data using different methods.

Transferability

The ability to show that findings have applicability to other contexts is transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because this study is very particular in subject and geographic location (i.e., hockey in Southern California), to facilitate transferability to other non-traditional hockey geographic locations, a demographically and culturally diverse group of interview participants were sought out. This allowed for me to understand more than just a single demographic or

cultural group. With a more diverse group of participants, findings may be transferable to other geographic locations.

Dependability

Like transferability, dependability demonstrates that findings are consistent and may be replicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Wallendorf and Belk (1989) recommended that a longitudinal approach would allow for a neutralizing of cross-sectional bias which is a characteristic of social science research. Participants were asked questions which focused on the past, present, and future state of the Team's partnerships and programming in Southern California, and their experience with hockey. For example, a parent who has multiple youth involved in FD and SEP programming may have felt differently when they were first introduced to Team's hockey partnerships. Similarly, an FD employee who has been employed for five years may be able to provide insight on challenges which existed pre-Covid and challenges which now exist post-Covid.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent of which findings are shaped by respondents and not the researcher or the researchers bias or motivations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggested that triangulation over data collection methods would be useful in establishing confirmability. Having all the semi-structured interviews recorded and transcribed, allowed for a check on what was said and if any inflection was placed on a certain word or sentence. Both qualitative and quantitative measures and results were gathered through the various data collection methods (i.e., semi-structured interviews, observation, and document review), and provided a proper and insightful model, which others might be able to follow (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989).

Integrity

Wallendorf and Belk (1989) posited that a lack of integrity may arise from the potential conflict between researcher and participants. For example, participants may try to alter their answers to sound experienced or knowledgeable, when they may not be. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggested several different methods, in addition to triangulation across sources and methods, to increase the integrity while conducting research: building rapport and trust, proper interviewing technique, and anonymizing participant identity.

I was previously able to build rapport and trust with FD employees, as well as several stakeholders involved directly with the Team's partnerships and programming while I was an FD employee. I have learned about the character of potential participants and have hopefully cultivated a sense of familiarity with all participants. Interviews were conducted in a professional manner, starting broadly and non-threatening (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). As questioning continued, more detailed and probing questions were asked to explore possible superficial ideas covered earlier in the interview. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) suggested self-revelation as a useful interview technique as it makes the interview more natural and less threatening to informants. All participants were given pseudonyms to uphold participant anonymity. Participants were reminded that they would be eonymized prior to all interviews.

Reflexivity

Thinking critically about how one's own assumptions, beliefs, and judgement systems influence the research process is what Jamieson et al. (2023) term as reflexivity. Berger (2015) explained that "Because reflexivity is a major strategy for quality control in qualitative research, understanding how it may be impacted by the characteristics and experiences of the researcher is of paramount importance" (p. 1). Berger (2015) further stated that reflexivity statements are first-

person, detailed, and transparent reports of researchers' decisions and rationale. For this research, I maintain two types of positioning: shared experience with study participants and moving from the position of an outsider to the position of an insider during the span of the study (Berger, 2015). I will detail each case below.

As a native of Southern California, I was introduced to hockey at the age of four, just before Wayne Gretzky was traded to the Kings in 1988. I soon began participating in ice hockey after becoming the beneficiary of free loaner equipment and ice time, which enabled me to be formally introduced to the game. The equipment was loaned to me by a local hockey pro shop owner who also was a youth hockey coach at the ice arena next door to his pro shop. He doubled as my first coach and taught me how to skate, all free of charge. This is the same experience that the Team, FD, and the team's rinks look to provide Southern California youth today, nearly 40 years later. Essentially, I am an 'insider' with shared experience that youth participants of this research have.

As a former FD employee that worked in the department for 18 months, I have extensive first-hand knowledge on how the department operates. While employed in the department, I established several professional relationships with various youth hockey stakeholders within the Southern California area. I still volunteer for FD events, including the 4th grade street hockey tournament, STEM field trip, and THSHL all-star games, MSRHL league, and maintain professional relationships with youth hockey stakeholders. This has enabled me to maintain a strong rapport with FD and stakeholders after being away from direct FD work. Several of the current FD employees actively seek out my insight and opinions on active and future programming.

Being that I have the shared experience with participants in this study positions me as an ‘insider’ and allows me to have knowledge about the topic and a better understanding of the reactions that participants may have (Berger, 2015; Kacen & Chaitin, 2006). Because I am an ‘insider’ in this topic and maintain strong professional relationships with different stakeholder groups, I hope to have greater and easier access to recruiting participants. If I had not been a full-time FD employee, I would have had trouble accessing stakeholders and would not have been able to build many of the professional relationships I have.

As an insider, it will be vital for my research for me to be aware of and reflect on how I may shape interviews due to my knowledge on certain topics, and understand that while I do have shared experience, everyone has a different experience overall. Doing so will allow me to be aware of any imposition of my beliefs and perceptions and understanding that what I experienced as a youth hockey player or FD employee is not the same experience a current youth hockey player or FD employee may have today.

Chapter 4: Findings

Stakeholders typically engage with organizations they perceive to be legitimate (Deephouse et al., 2017). For PSTs entering or expanding into non-traditional markets or developing new programming, pathways to legitimacy are essential for gaining credibility, access, and long-term community engagement. This case study investigates how one NHL team has earned, performed, and sustained legitimacy through its youth hockey programming in Southern California, with a particular focus on its partnerships with CSOs.

Findings suggest that the FD established legitimacy through a progression aligned with Suchman's (1995) framework: from cognitive legitimacy (i.e., making hockey recognizable and culturally intelligible), to pragmatic legitimacy (i.e., delivering demonstrable value), to cultural legitimacy (i.e., embedding the organization as a taken-for-granted presence). This progression also aligns with Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, which emphasizes how dominant institutions reproduce their values by securing consensual community participation.

Through sustained programming, strategic partnerships, and cultural embedding, the Team gradually constructed legitimacy across three stages: cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural. These developments are captured in three primary themes: *Eliminating Barriers* (cognitive legitimacy), *Delivering Value* (pragmatic legitimacy), and *Commitment to Community* (cultural legitimacy). While presented as discrete themes, they overlap and interact, reinforcing a broader legitimation of the Team's youth programming. While both the Team's Fan Development (FD) department and the Team's affiliated nonprofit, the Team's Ice Foundation (TIF), operate under the same organizational ownership, findings suggest they enact slightly different but with complementary approaches toward legitimacy-building. These targeted strategies unfold in the themes, with the FD department typically emphasizing direct stakeholder engagement and

programming delivery, and TIF focusing more on broad-based public messaging and resource amplification. The sections below examine each theme, its corresponding form of legitimacy, and relevant subthemes drawn from participant data.

Eliminating Barriers: Building Cognitive Legitimacy

A central aim of the Team's FD department has been to "grow the game" of ice hockey in a region historically distanced from the sport. Recognizing barriers such as high equipment costs, limited rink access, and general unfamiliarity, the Team implemented several strategies to reduce these challenges and cultivate cognitive legitimacy. These efforts made ice hockey understandable, accessible, and appropriate for youth in Southern California. To cultivate cognitive legitimacy, the Team strategically addressed barriers of entry, mainly financial, logistical, and cultural, through four key subthemes: (1) *innovative initiatives* that integrate hockey into school systems, (2) *consistent communication* with stakeholders, (3) *supportive advocacy* from community partners, and (4) *effective education* designed to align with academic norms. Each sub-theme is reflective of the Team's efforts to make ice hockey culturally understandable and institutionally acceptable, marking early steps toward broader legitimation.

Innovative Initiatives

The Team's initial efforts to introduce hockey into schools focused on making the sport *feel* familiar by embedding it within already existing educational systems. These efforts were primarily led by FD, with later support from the TIF. The start of the program began in 2005, when FD partnered with local schools to develop a street hockey curriculum aligned with California state standards for physical education. In doing so, they avoided positioning hockey as a niche extracurricular and instead reframed it as a core educational opportunity. Brad, a former FD employee, explained:

The reason why it's worked is because the [Team has] taken the time to create academic or curricular resources that make it easier for teachers to adopt a street hockey curriculum as part of their academic instruction unit. [The Team] aligned their street hockey curriculum and resources with California state standards for physical education.

Such positioning was more than just strategic as it was foundational to gaining legitimacy in schools. Public educational institutions often face structural constraints and accountability demands, particularly regarding curriculum adoption. By ensuring that their programming met pre-existing academic criteria, such as motor skill development, teamwork, and health literacy, the Team presented hockey as educationally valuable, not just recreational. Jonathan, a current FD employee, added:

We offer [the street hockey curriculum] as part of an in-school program, so as not to be something you have to opt into, which would then lead to only students who have either disposable time or a way to get to the places that they need to be. The people before me have made it so that this program intentionally meets the students where they already will be during school... Everyone gets to do it during school.

By utilizing this approach, the Team strategy exemplifies what Johnson et al. (2006) described as innovation followed by local validation, which is a critical step in cognitive legitimacy-building. FD programming entered through the “front door” of public education, bypassing common barriers like cost, transport, and unfamiliarity. Over time, hockey came to be viewed as a standard PE offering.

Traditionally, public school PE curricula favor low-cost, high familiarity sports like basketball or soccer, often sidelining hockey due to its high equipment costs and perceived cultural distance from Southern California norms (Green, 2005; Spaaij, 2012). In response, the

Team, through its Fan Development (FD) department, embedded street hockey into the school calendar and aligned it with California state PE standards, reframing the sport as accessible and legitimate academic activity. The strategic alignment allowed the sport to be introduced without requiring families or schools to absorb additional costs. Marie, a former FD employee, in referring to a “stick and ball” program that the Team provided students, explained, “Students could sign up to receive a free ball and stick so they could play hockey at home.” This program made hockey more accessible and redefined its place in the educational and cultural fabric of Southern California.

What started as curricular alignment, quickly evolved into deeper partnerships. As schools began to see FD staff as co-educators and community allies, the program transitioned from being an “add-on” to a recurring, often expected component of the school year. Such a growing trust enabled FD to further innovate and expand. As described on the Team’s Scholastic Education Program website (Team SEP, 2025), between 2005 and 2010, the Team partnered with over 150 public schools, reaching more than 65,000 students annually. According to an internal program report (Team Internal Document, 2023), many of these schools are designated Title I, a federal designation given to schools with high percentages of students from low-income households, indicating a higher need for supplemental academic and extracurricular resources (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). By providing a no-cost, standards-aligned program, the Team created an accessible, inclusive introduction to a sport historically known for its exclusivity.

In 2010, the Team, in collaboration with TIF, launched the Team’s Learn To Play (T-LTP) program, offering on-ice hockey instruction and full equipment loaner packages at no cost to families. Unlike other NHL teams who implemented LTP programs with a modest fee, the

Team made a deliberate choice to keep T-LTP free, rooted in the principle of accessibility. Tara, a TIF administrative employee, recalled:

Our Learn To Play... launched in 2010... A few years after that, the NHL came in and said there are several clubs who are running their own kind of grassroots programming. They came and they met with us because we were running a free program... They met with [several other NHL teams] who were running a low-cost version of the program... and said, 'This is what we're going to launch across all 30 clubs,' at the time... So now, every NHL team runs a low-cost equipment included program to get kids playing hockey, which is really cool for us, that means we never abandoned the free version.

Programs like T-LTP, including its later all-girls version, represent innovation not only in delivery but in design. The Team broadens the reach of hockey by targeting youth who might otherwise be excluded from ice sports, either due to financial limitations or cultural unfamiliarity. In this way, the Team both introduced new sport programming and redefined what it means to participate in hockey in Southern California.

Consistent Communication

Building legitimacy also required a strategic, sustained communication infrastructure to engage schools and community partners. Participants consistently highlighted FD responsiveness and clarity, particularly compared to CSOs. Brandon, a PE teacher, said:

I'd say with communication from [CSOs]... I feel like that's always a struggle, and as a coach that wants to do things well and be organized, I need to be a lot more proactive, and still can't always get answers for things. It's kind of wait and see. And so, with the [FD team], I feel like they're on top of communication and really proactive to give me

the information and resources that I need, and then are also available to support with questions.

Consistent communication helped reduce confusion, ensured program delivery, and made it easier for school staff to support youth participation. Ryan, a school district administrator, emphasized, “We are very closely integrated, where there’s light dialog and communication continuously to make the programming more effective, to continue to grow it and to continue to make it implemented deeper.” Effective communication also extended to smaller CSOs who were also newer partners, a strategy that ensured equitable access and prevented larger and more established partners from monopolizing Team resources. Kyle, an administrator with a local youth-CSO, explained:

You know, we’re [a CSO], so we’re a smaller organization from the standpoint of operating size and whatnot. But that, I don’t think that’s an important matter, from the perspective that I can reach out and our staff can reach out [to the Team] and we get immediate traction.

By making themselves accessible across organizational scales, the Team not only spread awareness but created channels for buy-in that reinforced cognitive legitimacy among a broader range of stakeholders.

As programming expanded, TIF took an increasingly central role in outward-facing communication efforts, leveraging the Team’s broader branding reach. TIF utilized the Team’s website, which is hosted through the official NHL platform, as a central hub for distributing branded flyers, event information, and registration materials. As shown in Figure 2, LTP promotional

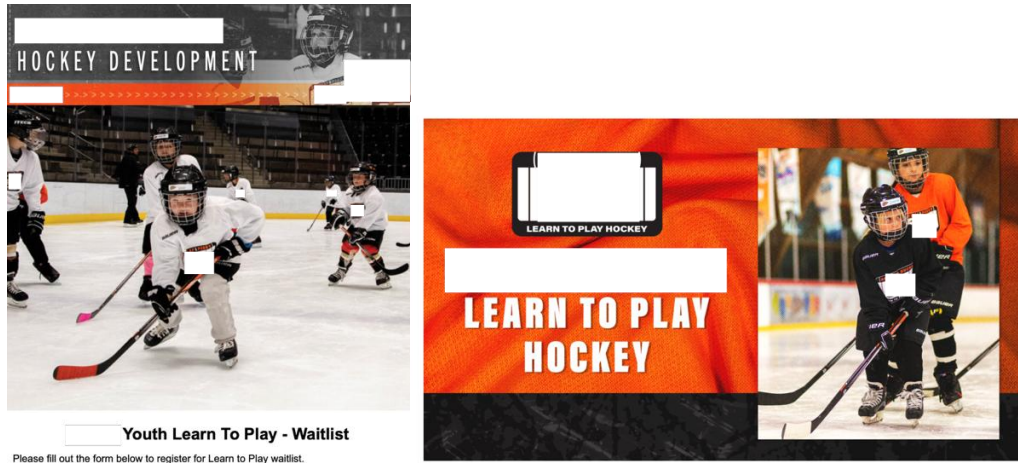


Figure 2: Team LTP Flyers Posted on the Team Website Tied to the NHL Between 2020-2025
materials prominently feature the Team’s logos, colors, and NHL affiliation.

These flyers not only advertised free programming, but also framed hockey participation as a natural and institutionally supported activity, subtly reinforcing legitimacy through visual repetition and brand association. This type of branding strategy reflects what Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe as the social construction of reality where repeated cues and institutional signals create a sense of normalcy. Over time, the presence of the Team’s branding across school flyers, emails, and web pages contributes to the perception that hockey is simply part of the local sport environment, despite its cultural and geographic distance from traditional hockey norms.

Tara emphasized the importance of this strategy, particularly in reinforcing the free, accessible nature of the programming:

You can’t just go outside and sign up for hockey at the park or in the park league like you do with baseball or soccer. So, by creating something that competes with that a little bit and giving it an easy entry point has allowed us to grow our programming and the number of players in those programs significantly since and it’s been 15 years or so now,

of the Learn To Play program itself, the free version. So, we've seen programs grow substantially.

In this way, consistent public messaging from TIF and the Team served dual purposes: raising awareness (a core function of cognitive legitimacy) and reinforcing the accessibility and inclusivity narrative, which helps secure local validation and builds toward pragmatic legitimacy (discussed later).

This layered communication strategy, from direct school outreach to NHL-branded marketing materials, demonstrates how institutional legitimacy is not only explained but performed. Through repeated exposure and value-aligned messaging, TIF helped embed the Team's programming into the cultural and logistical routines of local youth sport.

Assertive Advocacy

With innovative programming in place that was locally validated through consistent communication, further legitimacy was cemented by advocates embedded within the community, including school champions and TIF employees. These individuals did more than support programming, they acted as cultural translators that helped embed the Team's initiatives within local institutional and social contexts. Supportive advocacy helps build strong relationships and shape positive narratives about the sport, making it easier for people to understand and accept hockey in new or unfamiliar communities. In this case, advocates not only supported the programming but actively worked to normalize it within their respective networks, reinforcing its value and making it feel less novelty or risky. Brad explained how school-based advocacy fueled the curriculum's expansion:

Once you establish yourself in those schools and you start growing a little bit, word of mouth gets around, especially within the education community... So, I think initially we

went to places where we had advocates. And if you want to say it contributed to the success of the program, we went where we had friends or people that wanted to participate.

Nearly all interviewed FD employees identified internal advocates as essential to the long-term success of the school-based street hockey curriculum. Notably, these advocates were often referred to as *friends*, a framing that suggests deeper relational investment rather than mere transactional cooperation. These friendships were intentionally cultivated, as FD strategically partnered with individuals whose values aligned with the Team’s mission to grow hockey in spaces where the sport was previously unfamiliar or absent. Ryan, a school district administrator, shared, “We had a passionate staff who found connection with the [Team] to bring in and create an organic program.” A former FD employee, Marie, furthered, “Having advocates within those [school] spaces that are going to be able to continue to carry out the programming is really important.”

To further foster these relationships and increase program familiarity, the Team invited teachers to events and created opportunities for direct sport engagement. One example was an innovative adult hockey team (IAHT) composed of teachers and coaches from SEP participating schools. A current FD employee, Noah, explained:

We create ambassador programs, like our [teacher adult] hockey team, *fully funded*, to allow teachers of our community to go out and try hockey. 90% of that roster [aren’t] like Minnesota transplants that grew up playing hockey. These are people that grew up in California, they’ve never played hockey before, and now get a chance to really enjoy the sport and play and have fun with it.

The IAHT not only introduced the sport to new audiences, but deepened advocates' connection to the Team, strengthening their ability to relay authentic enthusiasm to students. Jane detailed:

I feel like I'm part of the team, right? It's crazy going [to] a game and thinking, 'Oh, I played on that ice,' it just makes it so much more familiar... Just to be out there on the ice and to understand how hard of a game [it is]. So, it's a whole new appreciation for the players and what they're capable of doing, and then just being a part of it, it makes you feel like you are part of the [Team's] family.

Once these relationships were established, FD enabled advocates to take ownership. Brandon, a youth hockey coach and teacher, shared:

The [Team]... put me in the spotlight, and were like, 'Why don't you talk for it?', like 'Yes, we'll be there, and we'll hold up the jersey, and [the Team's mascot] will be there, and we'll get the media, but the kids want to hear from you.' And so, I feel like that's been a cool model that I've loved about the [Team]. [They] have their hands and grasp on everything, but it's kind of an open hand of like, 'Okay, here it is, but you go make it happen.'

TIF also plays a key role in cultivating advocacy to grow the sport. While some advocates are employees, others operate as external consultants or partners. Both forms of advocacy are essential, not just for expanding program reach, but for reinforcing legitimacy through trusted, human connection. Tara entered the organization without a background in hockey but evolved into a deeply committed advocate over her 15-year tenure. She reflected:

It takes a special kind of person to put all of your energy into making every program and event and customer facing experience that you're in charge of or involved in, to be a one of a kind first class experience. I don't think there's anyone on our team across the board

who would ever be like, ‘You know, I just don’t really feel like giving that the attention it deserves. I don’t really feel like giving that my full effort.’ Because we all care!

Sometimes we all care too much, and we don’t sleep for days to make sure that it’s exactly what we picture it to be, because our expectations are so high, and it’s never a detriment because the customer is going to get a great experience.

Her description highlights how passionate, behind-the-scenes labor helps transform unfamiliar programming into trusted, valued experiences, which are a key aspect of building cognitive legitimacy.

Other TIF advocates, such as Richard, work in a consulting-type of role. As a youth hockey administrator affiliated with the THSHL, he sees his advocacy as mission-driven:

My goal is to collectively grow the [THSHL] and the sport in Southern California. It’s as simple as that, really... They put me in charge... to make [the league] run, but when you see the success that’s on the ice and the student athletes enjoying themselves... that’s the best.

Together, these advocates demonstrate how relational trust, emotional investment, and long-term commitment are foundational in making a PSTs programming feel credible, familiar, and ultimately belonging, even in nontraditional markets. In short, the Team did not just grow programs, they grew people who could carry their story forward.

Effective Education

Knowing that Southern California is largely unfamiliar with ice hockey, the Team recognized that growing the sport required more than visibility and access, it required education. This education spanned multiple domains and delivery systems. On one hand, FD focused on grassroots, school-based programming, building cognitive legitimacy by embedding hockey into

classroom settings and aligning with educational norms (Team SEP, 2025). On the other hand, TIF took the lead on more competitive, performance-driven programs, emphasizing structured coaching, club development, and elite-level player progression. The Team’s Youth Hockey Club (TYHC) website (Team Youth Hockey Club, n.d.) states:

Extending this strong foundation, our Tier I “AAA” teams gain the highest possible developmental and competitive learning experience by playing at state, regional and national levels. At the top level, our AAA teams develop elite players who are capable of attaining their future hockey goals. Since 2014, more than 50 players who have skated for [TIF] teams have made NCAA Division I and III college commitments. In addition, three alumni have been selected in the NHL Entry Draft since 2018.

These parallel approaches reflect distinct logics of development: one prioritizing accessibility and cultural familiarity, the other emphasizing advanced skill cultivation and competitive excellence.

This sub-theme of *effective education* begins with the educational contributions of the FD department, particularly within schools and then transitions into the more specialized developmental efforts aligned with TIF. Together, these strategies reflect the Team’s broader goal of cultivating legitimacy not only by increasing visibility but by embedding hockey within the educational and developmental ecosystems of youth sport in Southern California.

For FD, the education was not limited to teaching the rules of the game, but also involved translating ice hockey into instructional and cultural frameworks that felt familiar to local schools in Southern California. These efforts reduced cognitive barriers to entry by embedding the sport into the daily experiences of students, educators, and administrators. By designing programming aligned with school standards and developmental goals, the Team shifted hockey

from “foreign” to “familiar,” laying the groundwork for long-term legitimacy. Brandon explained:

The [Team] also recognize not all the schools in Southern California have dedicated PE teachers, so they have ways that they get [part time FD staff] to come into those schools and are able to provide instruction and are able to work with classroom teachers so that they can help coach.

Importantly, education was not a one-way street. Teachers, coaches, and school administrators played active roles in shaping FDs school curriculum. They offered feedback on instructional techniques, adapting for diverse student populations (i.e., special needs, different cultural backgrounds), and helped align programming with California State PE standards. In many cases, educators became co-creators, training FD staff just as much as they were being trained themselves. This reciprocal dynamic grounded the curriculum in real classroom experience. Lisa, a youth hockey coach and STEM teacher, recalled:

I’ve been on the ground floor with them, helping them. I mean [Jake] and [Mike] [two former FD employees] used to come and pick my brain, ‘Is that what works? What doesn’t?’ They ran things by me... and then it was always the three of them, [Jake], [Mike], and [Jared] [another early FD employee], they would come to my school, and they would try out the drills with my kids and things like that.”

Rather than functioning as outside experts, FD staff became embedded collaborators, learning as much as they taught and evolving alongside the schools they partnered with. Denise, a former school district youth hockey administrator, concurred, “[They] not only take the advice of the teachers for the curriculum, because we’ve done some of that, but [they] also have amazing educationally based programs that [they] provide to us.” By providing more than a street hockey

curriculum, FD was accepted as legitimate by schools and teachers, allowing FD to help grow the street hockey curriculum, as well as providing other educational programs (i.e., STEM based lesson plans tied to hockey) to more schools. Lisa furthered:

As an educator, I just think that the way they tie different aspects, as far as physics, or... the science of hockey. They tie science and they tie [hockey] together. So, we have the STEM-program, and it just builds interest with the other teachers, too. I think that gets them hooked.

While classroom and PE instruction helped introduce hockey to young students and educators, the Team also recognized that long-term growth relied on building capable, confident leaders within the sport to best coach players already playing the sport. In collaboration with TIF, the Team developed initiatives focused on coaching standards, player development, and organizational alignment. These efforts were developed in accordance with USA Hockey coaching and youth hockey standards, and were intended to do more than skill development, but also foster continuity, ensuring that as youth advanced through different age groups, they encountered consistent values, coaching styles, and programmatic structure. All coaches of the Team's youth hockey club (TYHC) and all-girl youth hockey club (TAGYHC) are required to complete the USA Hockey Coaching Education Program, including age-specific certification modules. Just as teachers were essential to legitimizing hockey in schools, coaches became central to sustaining its presence in the broader youth hockey community.

While the Team's educational efforts were clearly visible in schools and coaching development, their impact was equally significant within the broader ecosystem of youth hockey pathways. As programming expanded, a notable distinction emerged between two parallel tracks: in-house recreational hockey and competitive club travel hockey. This divide, though largely

developmental in nature, also reflected broader educational implications in how the sport was taught, experienced, and sustained across different communities.

In-house leagues, such as those offered at Team-affiliated rinks, emphasized inclusive, development-focused experiences. These programs were designed with accessibility in mind, and a next step following T-LTP programming. There is entry-level instruction, minimal financial burden, and a strong emphasis on fun and learning. Coaches are often parent volunteers or newer instructors who prioritized foundational skills and player enjoyment over competitive results. The in-house model aligns closely with the Team's education-first philosophy, reinforcing the value of sport as a social and developmental tool rather than a performance-driven proving ground.

By contrast, travel hockey required a different kind of educational structure, one that centered on performance, progression, and elite specialized development. Participation in travel programs necessitated higher financial investment, more time-intensive commitments, and increased exposure to specialized coaching. While travel hockey offered pathways to higher-level competition, including junior hockey leagues and collegiate play, it also introduced a more exclusionary environment. As Adam, a former TYHC parent and coach, explained:

When I first started, it was [primarily] dad coaches... If you had experience or if you didn't have experience, [TYHC] needed coaches. It appears now that it's gone towards professional coaches or ex pros becoming coaches. Many of the coaches that you're seeing... at the higher level, are ex-pro players, or very skilled players... and at the house league level, it's the dads that are coaching.

Coaching at the competitive club level increasingly shifted toward former professionals and highly skilled instructors, signaling a move toward elite performance models and away from the

fun and developmental centered ethos of recreational play. This elite level of coaching has been a major draw for youth and their parents who can afford such level of play. Drew, a current TYHC parent, detailed:

You can look at some of the teams [TYHC] that are 15u, 16u, and look at what's going on nationally. [TYHC] can consistently win. They just won regionals for 15u and 16u. They have the best coaching, [Joey Lam]. It's always been a [club] that I've loved... I don't want to say that other [youth hockey] programs aren't credible, because there's great coaches everywhere. But I think in terms of how hockey works, there's a funnel... Players will drop out as they get older, just because the burnout... but it seems to be the trend for most players to play eventually for [TYHC] and for coaches like [Joey Lam]. Those are very important years for people that are deciding what to do with their hockey career. So, in terms of what [TYHC] offer, the coaching at the older [youth] ages is renowned and some of the best in the world... At the end of the day, the coaching is renowned here at [TYHC] and it's well known and respected... I think that makes it credible for the parents initially... Once [parents] are saturated into the system, [they] know who the good coaches are. The coaches stick to the programs that are good. It's not always the NHL coaches, who might have a good name and they have a good presence, but it's really the coaches that stick around, it's continuity. Coaches like [Joey Lam] have been here forever. That's what I really respect. It's kind of like looking at a company, why are the employees leaving, right? The employees here aren't leaving.

Educationally, these two systems operate with divergent assumptions: one prioritizes accessibility and holistic development, and the other prioritizes performance and competitive advancement. Both are valid, but the latter risks marginalizing youth who cannot afford the

financial costs of entry. While the Team's efforts to build a strong educational foundation have succeeded in normalizing hockey in schools and recreational programs, the travel hockey tier reveals ongoing tensions around access, equity, and sustainability. These contrasting models raise important questions about the kind of education hockey offers, and to whom.

Delivering Value: Establishing Pragmatic Legitimacy

While cognitive legitimacy enabled the Team to introduce hockey in a way that made it culturally recognizable to new audiences, long-term acceptance required reliability, utility, and performance. In Suchman's (1995) framework, this next phase is known as pragmatic legitimacy: the perception that an organization serves stakeholders' practical interests and delivers concrete benefits. For the Team and its affiliates, including their partner CSOs and YSOs, and TIF, this legitimacy was earned not just through visibility, but through professional execution, consistent support, and an unwavering commitment to operational excellence.

Participants consistently emphasized the Team's responsiveness, reliability, and generosity in executing programs, and doing so with care, flexibility, and a shared sense of purpose. With both FD and CSOs and PSTs, and TIF, such requirements were met and fostered the ability for pragmatic legitimacy to take place. *Delivering Value* is reflected in three subthemes that illustrate the Team's pragmatic appeal to stakeholders: (1) *Professional Puckwork*, emphasizing operational precision and long-term planning that built institutional trust; (2) *Support in Stride*, reflecting the Team's relational flexibility and capacity to meet emergent needs; and (3) *Board-less Benevolence*, highlighting the material generosity and resource-sharing that sustained interorganizational partnerships and enhanced perceived value. Each subtheme reflects how the Team translated their intentions into actionable value, helping to

embed their presence as not just accepted, but *needed* in the local youth sport ecosystem (and eventually becoming culturally legitimate).

Professional Puckwork

“I made a lot of friends there [as a coach and parent] and had a lot of fun there... The [TYHC] is the most professional program in Southern California, by far,” explained Adam, a former youth hockey parent and coach. This simple reflection captures a recurring sentiment with participants: the Team’s youth hockey ecosystem, spanning FDs school-based outreach and TIF’s youth hockey programs, constructed a sense of legitimacy through professionalism, reliability, and consistency. Partnerships may have felt personal and informal, but the delivery of programming conveyed institutional caliber, competence, and purpose. From local tournaments to large-scale league support, the Team consistently delivered high-quality, detail-oriented experiences that made hockey feel worthy of recognition and respect. These efforts collectively supported the cultivation of pragmatic legitimacy, showing stakeholders that the Team’s youth hockey initiatives delivered both value and accountability. As partnerships deepened, teachers and administrators described FD staff as not only collaborators, but as *friends* and legitimate educational allies, mirroring how FD participants described teachers and administrators. These reciprocal relationships were not taken for granted and they were sustained through the reliability, competence, and relational trust continuously demonstrated by the Team.

As shown in Figure 3, these events, while grounded in community settings, were executed at a professional standard. The Team’s efforts emulated NHL-level delivery, creating moments of institutional mimicry that further legitimized hockey in a region where the sport had not traditionally been embedded.



Figure 3: Professionally Ran Youth Events Delivered by the Team (Left to Right): THSHL All-Star Game, 4th Grade Street Hockey Tournament)

Denise, describing the 4th grade street hockey tournament, highlighted how the Team's intentional delivery practices reinforced legitimacy at every level:

We learned a lot. The coaching was amazing, the referees that were there would come out and go, 'I'm sorry you can't do that, but let's try this again.' And so, it's just so gently done and so well organized that [they] continue to grow that.

By integrating professionalism with approachability, the Team reduced barriers while also enhancing perceptions of legitimacy, making hockey both emotionally resonant and procedurally sound.

The Team's support of the THSHL All-Star Game, a high school hockey event hosted at the Team's NHL arena, was cited as a particularly impactful experience. Kary, a THSHL parent, reflected:

On the front end, just lending their name is huge. But then there's a lot of other components, which is sending out people to talk about it. Sponsorships are huge. The opportunities to get to go to the [Team's] games, the opportunities that get given for [THSHL] all-star games, just all those extras that make it feel like, yes, this is worthwhile hockey... So, it's an experience that everybody can take part of... A really big impact for both [of my boys who played in the THSHL] was going on the ice at the [Team's home

arena] for [THSHL] all-star games, and back then, they even skated out with the [Team's] players. And you can't be immune to that [type of overwhelming] experience. These moments were not only memorable, but they conferred legitimacy and were instrumental in demonstrating the Team's value to the communities they served. By delivering programming that stakeholders found valuable, relevant, and emotionally resonant, the Team enacted pragmatic legitimacy. Hockey was positioned as a credible, meaningful offering that schools, communities, and families could tangibly benefit from. Through high-quality delivery and visible investment, the Team demonstrated that its presence produced both symbolic and functional returns.

Participants consistently emphasized that this sense of legitimacy was reinforced by the consistent, competent, and relational delivery of programming by FD staff. Kyle shared, "The way they conduct themselves, in that mannerism, the professionalism they got, there's charisma in it... I've watched a number of the sessions happen, [and] I've always been very impressed with their delivery." Ryan echoed this assessment, linking legitimacy to perceived innovation and expertise:

They're nice people, they're masters of their content. In this case, it's knowledge of hockey, how to spread hockey, how to program hockey. And they're also innovators, so they're trying to innovate ways... and I know their actual organization puts a lot of effort and money, so therefore the people have those skill sets, which is, they're not looking to just take [programming] and spread it, it's take, innovate, personalize, to then make a program happen.

Notably, even part-time FD staff were viewed as powerful agents of legitimacy, serving as role models and representatives of hockey's relevance. Brad, a former FD employee, reflected:

[They] obviously represented, no matter what level of skill they had, what a hockey player was, right? And we saw this because, you know, kids would ask them for their autographs at the end [of the sessions], like, that's who [the kids] idea of a hockey player was. We'd be at these schools, and they would ask female members of our staff, like, 'What position do you play for the Ducks?' Because [the kids] knew nothing about the sport. They [didn't know] that [the NHL] was an all-male league, you know, all these kind of things... it was kind of a really cool connection that they were making, and an impactful one, right? They're looking at these members of our [part time FD staff] as models for what a hockey player is. So, we had this awesome opportunity through the people we hired and sent out the community to represent us and the sport in general.

Jane offered a similar reflection, directly connecting staff presence to legitimacy outcomes:

When the [part time FD staff] comes to teach the kids, the kids truly think those guys are like actual NHL hockey players. So, I think the fact that they're a professional team definitely adds [legitimacy] to it... It seems like everybody that I talk to that comes out and teaches the kids, they all play, and I know Fan Development plays, like everybody is on a team. And I wonder sometimes, do you have to know hockey to get hired... I think a huge part of the success of the [Team's] hockey in Southern California is the people that have been working in Fan Development. I think whoever is doing the hiring knows what they're doing, because they hire people that are just energetic and easy to be around, and they bring you in. And I think if you have people like that, I think you could [expand] anywhere.

Taken together, these reflections illustrate that pragmatic legitimacy was constructed through the people who delivered FD programming. By cultivating a professional presence that

felt authentic, energetic, and emotionally engaging, the Team exceeded stakeholder expectations and established hockey as a credible, desirable, and achievable sport in a non-traditional market. FD staff enacted legitimacy through their presence, performance, and relational connection through their sessions.

Support in Stride

While professional execution established an initial sense of credibility, it was the Team's ongoing responsiveness, hands-on involvement, and problem-solving orientation that solidified pragmatic legitimacy among school, league, and community partners. The Team invested in the sustainability and adaptive growth of each initiative. Marie, a former FD employee, explained:

The [Team] helps sustain growth. So sometimes it's hard if a [youth] team or a program doesn't necessarily have the resources, maybe there's interest in creating that team or there's players that want to play, but there's not sustained support, and so a few years later, the team or program might collapse, but through continued support and a relationship with the [Team], these [youth] teams are able to continue to grow and develop and introduce more kids to the sport.

This subtheme, *support in stride*, captures how the Team earned stakeholder trust by consistently showing up when barriers emerged. Legitimacy was earned through action-oriented reliability, embedded into the everyday operations of youth hockey programming. As Marie added, "I feel strongly that the [Team does] everything they can to remove barriers [of] entry to the sport, and that includes introducing different forms of the sport to youth in the community."

The sense of relational reliability was evident across nearly all levels of programming, from elementary school to high school leagues. In the THSHL, the Team's formal sponsorship enhanced the league's perceived standing. Richard, a THSHL administrator, reflected:

I think it makes us legitimate in that we have a well-known title sponsor [in the Team]. I think it makes us legitimate in that they [the Team] want to grow the game and the league and sport here in Southern California... Whenever we need to go someplace or do something with a school within our league, [the school mentions] the league name and it seems to throw some weight around.

Yet legitimacy extended beyond branding. Participants emphasized the Team's relational accessibility and embedded commitment. Denise, a former youth hockey administrator, explained:

We didn't get one stop from anybody at the [Team] and they're always 'problem and solution', problem-solution, problem-solution, solution, solution, solution. 'I'll come to your district; I'll talk to your people.' Once that was established, it made it easy... Once the growth began, and the willingness to work with our teams and things like our legal teams, everything... the door is opened on both sides.

Kyle, a CSO administrator, echoed, "[The Team] don't only want to sign up and say, 'Hey, we want to be a partner.' It's a great partnership on paper, but I think they help drive actions. They drive, they look for great outcomes."

Such responsiveness translated into targeted action. When players in the middle school roller hockey league (MSRHL) could not afford post-league fees, FD and TIF collaborated to fund and organize a 'carryover' session, ensuring continued access. Such adaptability demonstrated that organizational commitment was not just to programs, but to people.

Participants also repeatedly cited the credibility and relatability of FD staff as key sources to legitimacy. Mitch, a teacher and coach, remarked, "I mean, [Morgan, a former National Team Hockey Player and FD employee] used to come out... a few times doing presentations, or

even... meeting with the kids after, and just kind of be... that celebrity... You know, the kids really respond to that.” FD staff brought years of high-level hockey experience, depth and continuity. Noah, a current FD employee, had previously worked for another NHL team’s FD department, coached for more than 30 years, and played professionally in RHI and PBHA in the 1990s. Jonathan, another current FD employee, played professional roller hockey in Europe. Their accumulated experience signaled expertise and authenticity, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Team’s community programming. As Brandon, a teacher and coach, described:

[The Team’s] desire is really to support teachers and ultimately to support students so they can have this experience [of playing hockey]. And I think it’s beautiful how it builds this interest and knowledge for students. Like I said, it’s all shaped around the [Team] and their involvement...

Denise added:

Just watching this program grow and watching the level of play grow, and watching more girls getting involved and kids that didn’t have the opportunity or felt like they couldn’t participate because... they couldn’t get a ride after school or whatever... There was always a solution to a problem and the [Team] provided a lot of those solutions.

This commitment extended through TIF, where proactive administrative work and consistent presence reinforce the Team’s legitimacy in less traditional markets. In non-traditional hockey communities, where ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions of belonging are absent, TIF staff filled the gap by building trust through presence and persistence. Tara, a TIF administrator, explained:

Yeah, [the NHL] is going to give [other teams] gear and [say], ‘You can run these programs,’ but [the other teams may] not be so hands on. And I think that’s the part that

actually differentiates [the Team and TIF] from a lot of clubs across the league. We're doing the work. We're the ones going to the last day and answering questions and helping families sign up. We're communicating with those people. We're the face that they see every week of the program.

Through these everyday interactions, the Team cultivated legitimacy by earning it through claiming space. Their presence demonstrated consistent value to communities, reinforcing trust, competence, and responsiveness, which are the three pillars of pragmatic legitimacy. Anthony, a former FD employee, summarized this clearly:

None of this is possible unless it took the 15-plus years of Fan Development, and the [Team] as well, being part of the community that legitimizes [hockey]... legitimizes everything that they're doing. It's not a night where they're promoting it for ticket sales. It's a celebration of culture that they're able to do.

Indeed, the Team's goal was never just visibility, it was embedded support, cultural presence, and legitimacy through community investment. They succeeded by quietly becoming indispensable to the everyday functioning and growth of hockey in Southern California. This was not done by broadcasting their presence, but by showing up, in stride, for the communities they served.

Board-less Benevolence

If pragmatic legitimacy is earned by visibly delivering value and sustaining trust over time, its most resonant expression emerges when organizations extend support with no transactional expectations. For the Team, such commitment materializes most clearly in their efforts to eliminate financial barriers and expanding access, particularly in communities traditionally excluded from hockey. This ethos, frequently described by participants as the Team

“going above and beyond,” is captured here as *Board-less Benevolence*: a form of unbounded, equity-driven action that functions outside rigid institutional norms or commercial reciprocity.

Where traditional hockey environments are bounded by rink fees, cost of gear, and exclusivity, the Team reimagined hockey as something without walls, accessible to all. Through free gear initiatives, subsidized league entry, school-based transportation, community-first partnerships, and resource-rich school partnerships, the Team and TIF constructed pragmatic legitimacy by demonstrating a visible and authentic commitment to public good. Denise provided detail:

That’s the goal from the beginning... we have been provided so much support from the [Team] and so much... donations, equipment, anything we need, literally anything we’ve ever needed or asked, whether it’s bussing help for certain students, mentor-to-mentee, coaches, broadcasters, anything that would support our programs. It was open arms, and it made it so easy for us... I think this is the only partnership we’ve ever had that is a true partnership, literally a true partner.

Much of this financial flexibility stems from the Team Foundation (TF), the Team’s philanthropic arm (note this is not TIF, Team Ice Foundation). TF’s mission is to support programs that foster educational opportunities, promote health and wellness, and broaden access to hockey for families and children across the Southern California region. Noah, a current FD employee, emphasized the values-driven foundation of these efforts:

Through the [TF] which [existed] before the [NHL Industry Growth Fund, or IGF] was even created, our ownership group... was already investing in those grassroots programs before the rest of the league even decided that that was an important thing for [the league] to do... We’re very fortunate, because we have an ownership group that believes in us

creating deep roots within the community and supporting the community... Our primary goal is to reduce barriers to entry, so whether that's on the ice side, which is definitely a challenge, or... a street hockey element... We're there to serve the community, where we don't try and take information from people to sell tickets. We don't even talk about tickets, our department is about finding [future hockey fans]... So I think a big part in that connection to the community is to come in saying, 'Hey, we have resources and we can provide support. Where do you need help?' And it's really a listen... listen to where they need help, and not make it about, 'Well, we want to get you to come to a Ducks game.' That's the furthest thing from our objective, which is to help Title I schools, and schools and communities. And there's a misnomer, people don't think there's a need in [Southern California], they think of it as a very wealthy area, [but] we... have schools and districts that are well below the poverty line that we can come in and support and try and help.

FD's outreach frequently centers on Title I schools, which are public schools eligible for federal funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to support students from low-income families. In Southern California, these schools serve diverse and often under-resourced communities, making them key partners in the Team's mission to expand access and opportunity through youth hockey programming. Brad, a former FD employee, expanded on the idea that the Team does not focus on ticket sales with its youth programming:

Thanks to our ownership, we didn't have that existential pressure from them to make sure that these programs turned into tickets sales, which I cannot understate how massive that is, not to have that concern that you can go out and invest and create these programs and

do the most 'good' with the funds we're given without the expectation that we are going to immediately sell tickets.

This benevolent intent and clarity of purpose was visible to external partners as well. Ryan, a school district administrator, articulated the relational credibility established through presence and planning:

The [Team's] youth program is effective because, when we say partnership, it's not just giving resources or it's not just giving money and time... It's being invested to do it together for full implementation. And that's, I think, a very key element of a partnership. So, a lot of times, people partner and do it, and then there's all these things, but the level of effectiveness is because the programming, first of all, is solid with a great curriculum, and the support for the curriculum, for staff to be able to know it and implement it, is already solid. And then it's the extra give of all the other resources to support, like if they [the kids] need sticks, they need gloves, they need pucks, [the Team is] ready to have that so that all roadblocks are thought of and eliminated. So, I think that's why the program is very effective, because not just giving but then preemptively thinking about roadblocks, to remove roadblocks, and then to be right along the side, so that it really does get implemented effectively.

FD and TIF's efforts frequently focused on Title I schools. In such a setting, legitimacy was earned through material impact and removing barriers, supplying gear, covering league costs, and ensuring students could engage without financial strain. Marie, a former FD employee, described the same ideal within the middle school roller hockey league:

The [Team] provides not only equipment, but jerseys, and they cover the cost of rink fees, officials, all of the things that are required to play the sport. But honestly... without

the support of the [Team], I don't think that program would be able to sustain itself if it were up to the schools alone to cover those costs.

Parents consistently reinforced the meaningful difference such interventions made. Rafael, a MSRHL parent, reflected:

One keyword is accessible. Yeah... socioeconomic situations that don't allow minorities who participate because of the amount of gear you got to buy. We got roller blades, we get a stick, helmet [all from the Team]... It's a very good entry point into the sport, and I wish other sports had that.

Ruby, another parent, shared a similar experience: "When [my son] first enrolled in the program, I did have concerns about cost, right? Because I did hear from a friend that hockey is very costly, so I did have those reservations." The cost of hockey would have kept Ruby's son out of the sport, instead the Team stepped in and provided an alleviation from that barrier, "But then [my son's teacher] shared that there was, like the voucher program [provided by TIF]. And then I said, 'Okay, let me look into that,' ... [The TIF voucher] helped put... our foot in the door." This benevolence extends even to full team sponsorships. Mitch, a teacher and roller hockey coach at a Title I school, explained:

With the [Team] paying for the league, paying for the kids individual fees at the rink, if we had told every kid [that wanted to play] that \$40 [was the fee], it just wouldn't happen... That's a big part of breaking that barrier. It's just saying, 'Look, there are no barriers to entry here. Come do this with your friends.' And that's been massive, So \$40 a kid, and then the league fee? There's no way for the school to come up with that and they would just cancel it.

TIF's structural alignment with the Team's ownership group made this vision sustainable. Tara explained, "We're... fortunate to have leadership that sees the value in community... and sees that hockey is expensive... giving us the opportunity to offer an avenue for kids to try [hockey] at a very minimal or no cost is incredibly effective." This legitimacy-through-giving also extended to programming decisions. Noah described resisting league pressure to monetize entry-level offerings:

We had our Learn To Play program, and then the [NHL] came in and wanted at least to have some sort of, at that point of entry, to have some sort of financial element to it. [The Team and TIF] didn't want to do that, so we created a separate Learn To Play element that's different than the rest of the [NHL]. Our comparison is called [Little Team Mascots], which measures out with the rest of the [NHL], where there is a financial component to it, although like every other [NHL] team, it's highly subsidized. But our version of Learn To Play is still free of charge. The rest of the [NHL], or a majority of the [NHL], I think there might be one or two other clubs that do something similar to what we do, but they'll have them be as Try Hockey for Free days... and then have them jump into their Learn To Play program. Ours is different, we do hold Try Hockey for Free events, however, most of our energy and financial element is put into our Learn To Play program, which is still a free program.

By separating youth programming from commercial intent and focusing on reducing systemic exclusion, the Team redefined hockey as something shared, rather than sold. The generosity extended removed financial barriers and signaled belonging, repositioning hockey as an inclusive cultural practice rather than an elite recreational product. In doing so, the Team progressed from pragmatic to cultural legitimacy by aligning with community values, identities,

and aspirations. Their efforts reframed hockey from a niche, outsider sport in Southern California, into one that belongs in Southern California schools, homes, and everyday lives of diverse Southern Californian youth.

Cultural Consent: Achieving Cultural Legitimacy

Having established cognitive legitimacy, by making hockey visible and intelligible, and pragmatic legitimacy, by demonstrating value and responsiveness, the final stage in the Team's legitimacy-building process involved embedding hockey into the cultural fabric of Southern California. This form of cultural legitimacy, as articulated by Suchman (1995), arises when an activity is perceived as appropriate, natural, and aligned with prevailing cultural norms. At this point, a once-novel sport transitions into an accepted and expected part of everyday life.

This phase of legitimation can also be interpreted through Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, where dominant ideas are not imposed but internalized, and gain traction through consent rather than coercion. Within this framework, hockey's transformation from an outsider sport to a localized, accepted activity represents the securing of cultural consent. That is, hockey became *common sense*: something that "belongs" within the rhythms of Southern California schools, parks, and communities. The Team's long-standing presence, relational investments, and alignment with local educational and cultural values enabled this form of legitimacy to take root. Their programming gained access and earned belonging, moving from "fitting in" to "being of" the community. As Brad, a former FD employee, described:

That's how you build a lifelong fan, it's not through coercion or guilt, it's through the feelings we created between that student, that teacher, and the Team that are long lasting... Why [do] our bonds and our feelings about picking our teams or our sports, is so strong? But we know that once you establish those, they tend to be long lasting, and

they tend to be meaningful, right? And so that's why spots has, I feel, this opportunity to affect change in that way, I think you really have to speak to the needs and bandwidth of your community.

Through this lens, legitimacy is not a fixed status but a layered and negotiated process. Essentially, it deepens over time through shared rituals, positive associations, and community-driven affirmation. While FD staff led the on-the-ground execution of youth programming, it was the collective work of FD, TIF, and the Team Foundation (TF) that made hockey increasingly feel like *ours*, rather than *theirs*, and became a local culturally identified sport.

The following three subthemes (*Commitment to Community*, *Flowing Fun*, and *Small World Sticktime*) illustrate how the Team moved beyond visibility and value to cultivate cultural belonging. These narratives underscore how hockey was woven into the identity and memory of schools, families, and youth in ways that reflected and respected Southern California's diverse cultural realities.

Commitment to Community

The Team and TIF cultivated cultural legitimacy by embedding hockey within the rhythms and identities of Southern California communities. This meant building enduring infrastructure, nurturing emotional attachments, and aligning with existing community values. By investing in facilities, coaching pipelines, and youth access, the Team helped reframe hockey from a niche or foreign sport into a culturally viable practice. Kyle, a community sport organization (CSO) administrator and former youth hockey player from British Columbia, Canada, reflected on the unique trajectory of the game in Southern California:

The pendulum has swung now with facilities, especially here in Southern California, when you look at the number of ice arenas that are available. The retired [NHL] players

[in the area that are coaching], not only players from the [local teams], but former [East Coast NHL] players, because [Southern California] is a special place... So, I think access, its expertise, its facilities has... created an interesting dynamic on how youth hockey is here in... Southern California compared to maybe some other areas... I think there's a very strong appetite to play the game [here]... I've attended some THSHL games, I've gone to some [TYHC] games. A good friend of mine's son plays in the British Columbia Junior Hockey League, and he's a product of the [TYHC]. So yeah, I think the level, the quality, has come a long way, if you were to ask me that same question maybe 25 years ago, I would say I have a different answer for you.

Such long-term transformation reflects a shift in what Gramsci (1971) would refer to as cultural common sense, the process by which a formerly unfamiliar practice becomes not only accepted but expected. The presence of retired NHL players as local coaches, increased rink availability, and high-level competition through TYHC, TAGYHC, and THSHL, suggests that hockey is no longer a peripheral activity, but that is now part of the local sport identity.

Drew, a youth hockey parent and former elite player, described how the proximity to the NHL team and the quality of the Team's youth programs forged a new hockey culture:

The [Team's] organization recently have really provided a great venue for [culture] to transpire and provide... just a culture that really pushes hockey, the Learn To Play program that was put on... is a great avenue for these kids. I've watched a lot of kids go through that program and stick with the sport, kids that you wouldn't think would play hockey traditionally... [Sustainability] is much stickier down here [compared to Northern California]. I think one reason is just because of the locations of the rinks are a bit closer. There's more attention to it. There's a more competitive [youth] program... There's a

great culture, and it's really driven... by the focus on... providing the best avenue for the kids... The affiliation with [the Team's associated ice rinks] and the [Team] provides kind of this avenue for the kids to see what's possible with hockey, because they're closer to the NHL. They're closer to the players. They see the players, they see [the Team's mascot] coming on the ice, so they really get... a good grasp of what's possible with this work... [And now] there's more rinks, there's more players, there's more interest in the NHL... It's a growing sport, and it's growing, there's more players, if there's more players, there's more demand, and then there's more supply.

These reflections illustrate a feedback loop of cultural legitimacy where visibility generates interest, interest generates participation, and participation fosters emotional and symbolic attachment.

While the sport is still growing in Southern California, and not as prevalent as other parts of North America (i.e., Canada and Midwestern & Northeastern United States), the work that the Team is providing is inherently growing the game in Southern California and establishing a culture. Marie, a former FD employee, compared hockey's taken-for-granted status in the Midwestern United States with its growing presence in Southern California:

I would say that the sport is just a little bit more accessible in the Midwest versus Southern California. Just the ice fees, because there are fewer rinks in Southern California... the cost of renting ice was significantly higher in Southern California... In the Midwest, it's kind of just part of the culture, so even if you don't consider yourself a hockey player or from a hockey family, most folks have had experience skating and playing the game in some way, shape or form. Whereas... in California, a lot of folks had never even heard of hockey. So, that's why I feel like the work that the [Team] is doing is

so important in introducing the game to youth in the community... The hockey culture in Southern California is growing, which is really exciting. And I think the [THSHL] is a testament to that, starting with one team [15 years] ago to now, growing to that it is today, with multiple different divisions and numerous new teams. And so that's a testament to the culture, especially also with the growth of youth hockey programs, the various clubs that are throughout Southern California. It's a growing culture... I think my perception of hockey in Southern California has certainly shifted from my time before living in California to [after], and even now that I've moved away... I'm still ingrained in the hockey culture there.

Marie's comment highlights a key aspect of cultural legitimacy, it is not simply about increasing access, but about transforming how the sport is perceived, valued, and internalized across time and distance. The Team's programs are not just interventions, they are cultural formations, creating new norms and expectations around youth sport participation.

In this way, the Team is not just growing interest, they are building a cultural infrastructure around the sport through spaces, routines, expectations, and identity. Rafael, a youth hockey parent, shared how accessible programming created an emotional connection and future fan loyalty, "I'm going to bring back the word accessible, because [my son] has an interest [for hockey] in him, and... we've been to a couple of [the Team's] games... If it wasn't for the program, exposing us to the sport, [that doesn't happen]." Such moments represent more than individual impact and are an illustration of the culmination of cultural legitimacy. What begins with external programming evolves into internalized identification. In Gramscian terms, the Team did not impose hockey upon communities, they cultivated a shared investment, earning consent by meeting communities on their terms and in their contexts. This is the final and most

enduring layer of legitimacy: when hockey is no longer viewed as “their sport,” but as “our sport.” The Team is reshaping what is culturally imaginable and attainable through sport in Southern California.

While participants widely praised the Team’s consistency and presence in local schools, particularly Title I campuses, not all partnerships operated under equal conditions. Educators from under-resourced schools occasionally noted logistical constraints (i.e., limited staffing, transportation challenges, difficulty retaining consistent participation) despite strong enthusiasm from students. These uneven experiences signal that while the Team has achieved a degree of pragmatic legitimacy (being seen as valuable and effective), the stability of that legitimacy can be fragile when it relies on external factors to fill institutional gaps. As Chapter 5 will explore, community-based programming may unintentionally become a form of symbolic inclusion when structural dependencies are not addressed. Mitch, a Title I school coach and teacher, noted:

We’re the only school in [a densely Latina/o populated area] that participates [in the MSRHL]. We had another school that participated for a couple years, and last year, the new principal at that school would not support the coaches. So, I basically started out [coaching] basically for free... It started out as a labor of love, and it continues to be.

These disparities did not diminish the value of the Team’s outreach, but they do reveal how structural inequalities can shape community programming gets experienced. In some cases, the Team’s support functioned more as a lifeline than a supplement, especially for schools like Mitch’s or the now-disbanded team whose league fees were covered by the Team. As chapter 5 explores, even the most community-oriented initiatives must confront the broader landscape of uneven institutional capacity.

Flowing Fun

With hockey increasingly woven in the cultural fabric of Southern California, the Team appears to have achieved a form of cultural legitimacy, an intuitive alignment with community life and emotional resonance. However, as Gramsci (1971) emphasized, hegemony must be continually reproduced through everyday practices that feel affirming, yet this reproduction is neither universal nor uncontested. The joyful framing of hockey, while central to the Team's strategy, may also obscure disparities in who experiences this emotional bond, which will be explored in Chapter 5. In particular, questions remain about who gets to define what "fun" looks like, and whose joy is structurally prioritized. Noah, an FD staff member, emphasized the goal of cultivating an emotional, rather than transactional, bond:

My approach is to try and ignite a passion and a joy for the game. It's not necessary to develop NHL players, [and] that's never been my kind of approach or my goal, it's always been about injecting and introducing the game. And I've shifted more towards grassroots levels, which is what we do here with FD as well, introducing the sport to kids and kind of igniting that passion that I felt growing up and playing.

This emphasis on joy is not incidental and is a central mechanism by which the Team sustains cultural legitimacy. Participants consistently described how FD expanded hockey's appeal through playful, innovative programming that connected sport with education, imagination, and wonder. As Lisa, a teacher and youth hockey coach, described:

That field trip to [the Team's] arena, that is fantastic because they get the [local] colleges involved, and they have different things for the kids to do so that they visually see how math and science work together, and that it's just with an interesting subject [tied to hockey] and getting the kids interested and having fun... And then to hear professional

hockey players and getting to see them [at the field trip], this is their first time to see hockey, or even stepping into hockey.

The STEM-based field trip should not elicit loud cheers, as the lessons cycle between such topics as kinetic energy and physics. Yet the Team's arena is filled with 14,000 screaming students, many experiencing an ice rink for the first time. Figure 4 depicts the scene of the field trip.

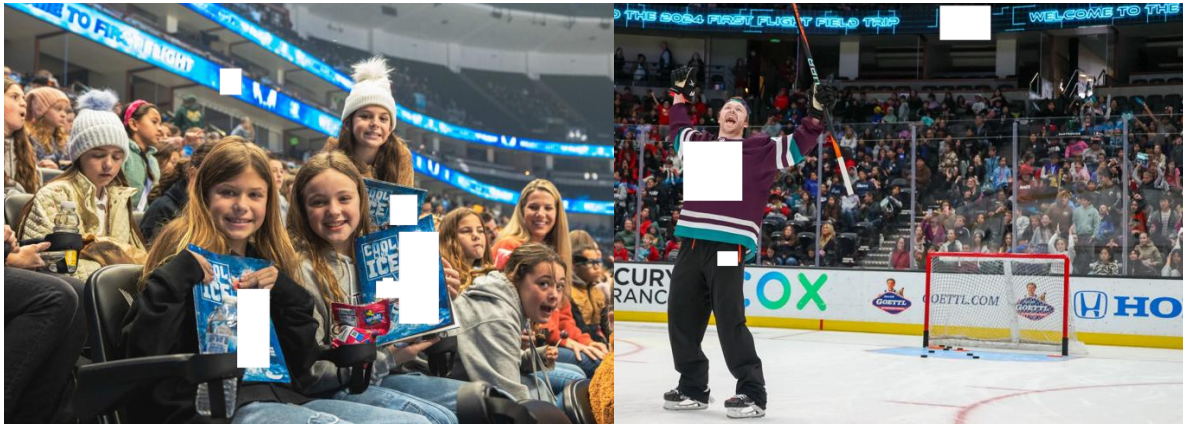


Figure 4: Team hosted STEM-based field trip for up to 14,000 students.

Photos used with permission from and are by the Team's Marketing Department

These outside-the-rink experiences complement the on-rink programming, broadening hockey's reach while making it emotionally resonant.

Teachers and youth coaches echoed the sense of belonging fostered by FD's nontraditional, inclusive approach. Jane, for example, recalled the impact of participating in the Team's adult teacher hockey team, "It's crazy going to a game and thinking, 'Oh, I played on that ice.' It just makes is so much more familiar."

Keeping the sport fun and free of overly competitive pressures, was a recurring theme among participants. For youth who might be apprehensive at trying a new sport, FD created a non-intimidating environment where youth could learn alongside their friends, free from judgement or rigid expectations. Marie, a former FD employee explained:

Being a nontraditional market for folks who aren't super familiar with hockey, [hockey] can be a little intimidating. Street hockey and inline hockey make it a little less intimidating... [and] that's why I appreciate everything the [Team is] doing to make the sport as inclusive [and fun] as possible and provide different avenues for kids to play.

Crucially, this affective connection was sustained by resisting the hyper-competitive culture often associated with elite youth hockey. Brandon, a teacher and coach, highlighted the importance of FD's protective culture:

There's even been some guarding with that culture of, 'Why is that teacher running up the score?' That's not what this is about, this is about making it fun for kids and doing the right thing. I feel like that's what youth sports should be about, and what youth sports gets a bad name for, isn't a part of the [Team's] program. The [Team] is the good stuff and has that community that is really supportive.

In this manner, fun operated as a norm-defining mechanism, redefining what hockey should feel like, especially in youth development spaces. This is consistent with research in youth sport, which finds that joy and relational engagement (not specialization or competition) are key to long-term participation (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Holt et al., 2017). As youth progress and programs grow more competitive, many youth leave the sport altogether. Noah noted the importance of joy over performance:

I think it's a real challenge for hockey specifically. You've got a segment that we're losing kids as they get older, and the stats show this. The data shows that as kids get a little bit older, especially girls, and they get to that 12-, 13-, 14-year-old age range, they're quitting. They're not playing. And my personal belief is if you're not an upper-level player where you can continue to go and continue to play, it's not *fun*.

Parents often compared the Team’s fun-forward model with more rigid, high-pressure club programs. Kary, a youth hockey parent, shared, “One of [my son’s] did play club for a year, and I hated it. I just hated the whole vibe of it. It was just a nasty place to be.” Adam, a former youth hockey parent described how switching to the Team’s youth hockey club (TYHC) saved his son’s love for the sport:

[TYHC] only went up to double-A [when my son was that age] and it felt a little bit more that the experience of hockey and making it fun felt more important, whereas at [this other youth club hockey organization], it felt like [it] was very serious and it was more than just a club experience... [For my son to enjoy hockey], hockey still had to be fun, [especially for him] to excel. When hockey lost its fun and became just a business or a job, he didn’t enjoy it all... But I alleviated the problem by stepping away from [that other club] and going somewhere else, and the best move I ever made [for us] was to go to the [TYHC]. [We] made a lot of friends there, had a lot of fun there... The [TYHC] was just fun and the most professional program in Southern California, by far... [My son] had fun with the [TYHC] because the coaches just knew how to make it, ‘Yeah, we’re this [club program], we got to do this right, but we got to make it fun, too.’

These comparisons underscore how the Team constructed an alternative youth hockey culture, rooted in joy, not pressure, and designed to be sustainable rather than extractive.

Drew, former youth hockey player and now parent, observed how youth hockey has shifted toward overtraining and specialization:

[When I was younger], I was probably on the ice twice a week, if I was lucky. The kids now are on the ice like five times a week, maybe for two to three hours at a time. It’s a totally different landscape. Hockey in general has just gotten more modernized and all

these other [youth] players have so much more opportunity to play and get better. And I think just in general, the sport's gotten more [specialized].

Both Noah and Drew pointed to the risks of overtraining and specialization, which tend to exclude less elite players and dampen enthusiasm. Noah further framed the trend as a systemic issue:

Specialization is a real problem in this sense of 'I need to play hockey year-round'... and that model doesn't match the development of the youth, they're not congruent, and that's a problem... It's so specialized [now], and my son feels like he has to be on the ice all the time in order to keep up with what everybody else is doing, and I think that's a real problem... If you're not at an upper level where you can continue to go and continue to play, it's not fun, because 'I'm not good enough, and I can't make the top level team' and the teams get fewer and fewer because it becomes so specialized and so high level. That's not just about fun, right?

For the Team, the challenge was not just getting kids into hockey, it was keeping them there. The Team responded by centering delight in everything from coaching to curriculum. In the all-girls Learn To Play program (the source of the anecdote that opens this dissertation), fun was made tangible. Staff like Noah and Jonathan regularly used playful, engaging methods in their instruction: from magic tricks to make sticks lift off the ice, to interactive repeat-after-me games, to ending each practice session with a coach skating around holding a bubble machine while kids laughed and chased behind. Such tactics transformed hockey into a celebratory experience.

Having fun carried over into FD's school curriculum and the Team's Learn To Play programming, developed in collaboration with TIF. Tara, a TIF administrator, connected this joy to brand attachment and community presence:

Whether you try it at the ice rink, you try it at inline, you try it at school, like now you have a jersey or a t-shirt, and it's got the [Team] logo on it. Now you have [the Team's mascot] coming to your assemblies. Now you've seen the mascot. Now you have [the Team's] alumni coming to your skates, and you might not know who those alumni are, but your parents do. And then it all connects back. And I think... the whole of it is that we've never been a 'Give us your money, here's your hockey.' [It's], 'Hey, did you have fun today? Did you like trying hockey?'

These playful, relational experiences reveal that legitimacy is not only earned through structure or support, it is sustained through joy. From repeat-after-me drills and magic-stick tricks to alumni skate-ins and bubble chases, the Team and TIF have built a hockey environment that felt alive, accessible, and emotionally magnetic. Participants were not just learning the sport, they were laughing with it, forming memories that tied hockey to celebration, not stress. In doing so, the Team ensured that hockey in Southern California was not merely tolerated or adopted but welcomed. An affective layer of delight, pride and smiles are what deepens cultural consent and solidifies community belonging.

While many participants described Team-led events and practices as fun and engaging, this experience was not uniformly distributed across all communities. Much of the enthusiasm stemmed from youth at schools already familiar with Team-affiliated programs or with prior exposure to hockey through family or peer networks. In contrast, several Title I designated schools had noticeably lower visibility in event outcomes and participation. Notably, one private school with a long-standing tradition of hockey involvement has consistently dominated both the 4th Grade Street Hockey Tournament and the MSRHL, suggesting that competitive success may not solely reflect athletic talent but also access to structural advantages. These observations

indicate that while fun and inclusion are central narratives, they are not universally or equally experienced across the broader participant population.

These findings also align with Green's (2005) normative theory of sport development, which frames effective youth sport initiatives around the dual necessities of athlete recruitment and retention. The Team's expansive school-based outreach functions as a recruitment mechanism, the initial exposure spark, while its fun-forward, emotionally rich programming facilitates retention by nurturing enduring affective ties. Green's (2005) model is especially relevant because it allows a way to see how participation is sustained through both structural access and experiences that feel personally meaningful and socially reinforced. Extending Green's (2005) model through a lens of cultural legitimacy reveals that youth stay in hockey because it becomes embedded in their identity, relationships, and local narrative.

Sustaining cultural legitimacy requires more than initial excitement, it demands a deep sense of belonging, where hockey is not just an option but integrated into community identity. In Gramscian terms, cultural hegemony is strengthened when everyday practices, memories, and relationships make an activity seem natural, inevitable, and joyful. For the Team, long-term cultural consent was nurtured by creating spaces where hockey became more than just a sport and became a shared way of life. The next section will explore how the Team's efforts helped foster a tight-knit, cross-generational ecosystem, where players, families, coaches, and fans continually intersect, building relational webs that keep hockey rooted in Southern California's cultural landscape. As Brandon reflected:

When I started out here, not that many people knew about hockey or paid that much attention to it, and to see, especially the investment the [Team] makes, and start that

[programming] with kids, and the impact that's had with families. Then as kids are like, 'Hey mom, dad, Ducks-Ducks-Ducks!', and 'I want to do street hockey at school!'

Small World Sticktime

The emergence of a tightly knit, relationally bonded community signals that the Team has cultivated a form of pragmatic and cultural legitimacy, appearing deeply embedded within the local social fabric. Participants frequently referred to this dynamic as a “small world,” capturing the interconnectedness of players, coaches, parents, and programs. In other words, hockey is no longer something played somewhere else, it is a sport that many either play themselves or know someone who plays or is a fan. Such a network of relational proximity, familiarity, and emotional investment is the final layer in securing what Suchman (1995) describes as cultural legitimacy. However, as will be explored in Chapter 5, the very cohesion that reinforces belonging for some, may simultaneously narrow entry points for others. What feels like naturalized inclusion for insiders may function as implicit exclusion for newcomers, raising questions about whether relational legitimacy can unintentionally become performative or self-reinforcing.

Participants consistently referenced a “small world” in ways that exhibited nostalgia and pride. To continue a quote from Brandon, a PE teacher and coach, reflected on how his former students “grew up and became fans of the Team” and now continue to play in youth leagues themselves:

... Seeing that [impact] turn into having a few kids that play ice hockey now, and families that go to games, and kids that are excited to come see me and talk about that. So, I feel like the [Team's] involvement in the community has built hockey as a sport and the reputation of it in a market that isn't the State of hockey, and kids aren't born with

skates on... You have those opportunities, and it's everywhere, just part of the culture, part of what's normal.

Such a transformation from unfamiliarity to fanhood and hockey participant, is not accidental. It is the product of years of deliberate and layered youth programming designed to embed hockey into the everyday lives of Southern California youth. By meeting children in schools, offering free LTP programming, and sustaining accessible experiences through street hockey rinks at schools, and various youth hockey leagues, the Team created consistent touchpoints for early and meaningful exposure. These touchpoints were not just about learning hockey, they were about forming relationships with the Team, with the community, and with the identity of hockey itself.

As Brandon's statement above reflected, his students began to associate their hockey experience to more than just a PE class, they associated the Team's branding to local pride and belonging. What began as a PE class, or LTP event, has evolved into families attending NHL games, watching the Team play or seeing their highlights on social media, and following the careers of players on the Team, or even better, following the career of one participant who participated in the Team's 4th grade street hockey tournament and has progressed all the way to the NHL. This aligns with the theory of fan socialization, which emphasizes the importance of early, affective experiences in the development of long-term fan identities (Funk & James, 2001). Through repeated, positive associations, children begin to internalize a team as *theirs*. Over time, emotional proximity matures into identification. They are not just playing hockey, but they are cultivating a lifelong identification with the NHL and its values, reinforcing the cyclical durability of sport-based fandom. Adam, a former youth hockey parent, described his son's fandom:

[My son] started with the TYHC... and then played [competitively] all the way through [college]... but he became a huge [Colorado] Avalanche fan, Patrick Roy and Joe Sakic were his two people, so he would watch a video of the Avalanche when they won their first Stanley Cup... and he just fell in love with hockey from that point on, and would play in the driveway nonstop.

Tara also pointed out the significance that TIF places on growing a community of hockey fans instead of just fans of the Team:

At the end of the day, hockey is hockey, and whatever team you pick is the team you pick, and you're still watching. You're still becoming a fan, you still found your way in. I think that's the true end-goal, you found your way into the sport, and you found a spot for yourself.

Even more poignantly, Mitch, a Title I school teacher and hockey coach detailed several instances of how the Team provided the potential to grow the sport at his school:

Picking [hockey] over other sports, that's not normal around here, and in the community I teach in, it's really pretty rare... but I do see kids who choose hockey over other sports [here at my school]... Kids that were successful athletes and... they get the bug to start playing hockey... A dad... who's a soccer guy [told me], 'Okay, I'm finally over the fact that my son isn't playing soccer anymore,'... and [they] moved to a new school this year, but [he drives his son] every day after school to our practice. [Another] father [told me that hockey] changed his [sons] life. He didn't have any real direction or passion [before hockey]. From the day he put skates on... everything changed, and he just was on skates all the time... Hockey changed his life. Period... Now more than ever, [we have] parents... come cheer us on, and [they] take care of so much... and they encourage each

other to donate... for tape and the sticks and the stuff that we don't have money for. All that stuff makes it more of a community... which is amazing!

These personal testimonies are not just anecdotes, but they function as social proof of how hockey becomes embedded in the regional culture and when a sport shifts from being “theirs” to “ours.” What makes the transformation even more compelling is the cycle is repetitive. Most of the Team’s current FD staff are themselves products of these same community-based programs. They played roller and ice hockey at the various Team affiliated rinks, attended the Team’s STEM based field trip, or learned to play hockey in the early iterations of T-LTP programming. Now, they are returning as instructors, mentors, and program designers. Their presence reinforces the authenticity of the programming and offers visible, relatable role models for today’s youth. Jonathon, a current FD employee, shared the STEM based field trip notebook he received at the field trip he went to in 2003 and joked, “How crazy is it that I have this still, and now I’m part of the team that provides this?” Denise, a youth hockey administrator, expanded, “[Jonathan] went to school with my daughter, and he [grew up playing] roller hockey... and [those kids] get opportunities, and [hockey interest] grows.”

The circular legitimacy, where a PST creates fans who later become contributors, cements the Team’s position as not just a PST, but a cultural pillar. It mirrors what Jarvie (2006) and Misener & Doherty (2014) describe as community sport ecosystems, where stakeholders continually rotate through roles as learners, leaders, and advocates. These roles are fluid but deeply interconnected, producing resilience, sustainability, and a shared sense of ownership.

To further the “small world” subtheme, participants consistently mentioned how the hockey community in Southern California was a unique and small subculture within Southern California. Kary, a former youth hockey parent stated:

How could you not know [hockey] exists? It's everywhere, Inland Empire, Orange County... Out where I am, there's a kid that plays in the [THSHL] and his brother works with us [at the rinks], so like there's this whole connection that happens, but that happens in hockey all the time... It's definitely a small world, right? And I think it's a lot more accessible, and I think it's... geared towards everyone and not just certain kids.

The Team has helped build the subculture of hockey in Southern California for not just youth whose families can afford the high cost of hockey, but those who cannot, often including Title I schools, which aligns with what Kary mentioning "geared towards everyone and not just certain kids." To further the idea of a small subculture of hockey in Southern California, Jonathan explained:

There is [a culture of hockey]... it is more localized to the specific zones that it occupies, and not zones in a geographical sense, but more like the community groups... for example... located around like Orange County, and Riverside County... it's a very tight community, and when there are community events like tournaments and stuff like that, you see a lot of the same people, and you really feel a sense of community with that... The hockey world is a small world when you get into it... like you don't see a culture of hockey in everyone, but if you look for it, you can find it in a vibrant way... The [Southern California hockey] culture is... like skateboarding or beach [lifestyle], a laid back community... maybe less focused on fandom, and more just focused on enjoying the game.

Because Southern California has a rich history with inline/roller hockey, that variation of the sport has become ingrained as a natural subculture in Southern California, going together with the Southern California beach culture associated with the laidback surfer and skateboarder

subcultures. By the Team providing youth roller hockey programming, they are growing the roller hockey subculture. Noah, a current FD employee, explained:

We don't make a distinction between ice or roller or street or air hockey... If it's hockey, it's hockey, and that's how we want to utilize that lens to create, not just a STEM based science [curriculum] through the lens of hockey, or through PE, through our street hockey programs that we teach in school during school hours.

In summation, the Team's legitimacy in Southern California's youth hockey landscape has been strategically constructed through a layered, relational, and sustained approach. By eliminating structural barriers, delivering consistently valued programming, and embedding hockey into the everyday practices and emotional life of local communities, the Team moved through the full arc of Suchman's (1995) legitimation process: establishing cognitive, pragmatic, and ultimately cultural legitimacy.

While participants often celebrated the familiarity and cohesion within the youth hockey ecosystem, this tight-knit nature may also present limits to broader inclusion. Interviews frequently referenced recurring families, coaches, and schools that formed an enduring, self-reinforcing network. While this continuity deepens relationships, it can also unintentionally narrow the sport's reach by relying on established social pathways. Newcomer families, particularly those without prior exposure to hockey or ties to existing clubs, may find it more difficult to enter or remain within these overlapping circles. In this sense, what strengthens community bonds for some may inadvertently create barriers for others.

In this way, the Team's long-standing presence in the lives of young players echoes Green's (2005) emphasis on retention as a critical component of sport development. While initial recruitment may be achieved through school outreach or entry-level programs, retention (e.g.,

staying power) is cultivated when participants internalize the sport as part of their social world. From field trips and LTP events to eventually coaching, spectating, or working in the sport ecosystem, youth grow within hockey. These overlapping relationships and generational continuities reflect Green's (2005) model in action. Moreover, adding a cultural legitimacy dimension to Green's (2005) framework deepens the understanding of retention: youth remain in the sport because they see themselves reflected in it and find a sense of belonging within it.

The Team's success reflects the consolidation of cultural hegemony, transforming hockey from an outsider's sport into a naturalized, "common sense" component of Southern California's youth culture. The shift was not incidental, but the product of deliberate, sustained action across schools, community partnerships, and local ecosystems. The findings presented here set the stage for a critical examination of these dynamics in the next chapter, where questions of equity, sustainability, and the politics of cultural ownership are explored in greater depth.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Strategic Implications, and Future Research

This dissertation has demonstrated that the Team has successfully cultivated cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural legitimacy within Southern California's youth hockey landscape. However, following Gramsci's (1971) theory of cultural hegemony, cultural legitimacy can be understood as a dynamic process, where legitimacy is not simply achieved but must be continually maintained through the negotiation of consent and the embedding of practices into the common sense of everyday life. A closer examination of participation patterns, stakeholder narratives, and community practices reveals critical gaps: legitimacy is not a stable endpoint, but a dynamic, conflictual process shaped by socio-economic inequalities, cultural acceptance, and institutional structures.

Chapter 5 interrogates the complexities underlying the Team's youth hockey expansion efforts. Rather than treating legitimacy as a fixed achievement, it should be reframed as a fragile process that is continually contested, unevenly experienced, and strategically presented. Specifically, the chapter critically revisits the findings through three overlapping tensions: (1) *Power and Participation*, examining who gets to play and under what conditions; (2) *Cultural Adaptation vs. Assimilation*, considering whether communities are reshaping hockey or being reshaped by it; (3) *Sustained Access vs. Symbolic Inclusion*, questioning whether barriers are truly dismantled or momentarily disguised. Together, these tensions reveal how legitimacy operates as both a cultural project and a political struggle in non-traditional hockey markets like Southern California.

Power, Participation, and the Fine Line of Inclusion

At the core of any legitimacy process lies the question of whose values are recognized, who gets to participate in shaping them, and under what terms. Legitimacy, particularly in

institutional and cultural forms, is not a static label but a negotiated status constructed through relationships, access, and symbolic alignment with dominant forms (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995). The Team's programming earned legitimacy by prioritizing more than just visibility and performance metrics; it emphasized inclusive practices that invited meaningful participation from historically marginalized communities, avoiding tokenism and ensuring genuine engagement.

While the Team's youth programming has been widely praised for expanding access, a deeper analysis reveals a stratified reality, one where opportunity is unevenly distributed along lines of socioeconomic status, cultural proximity, and institutional power. Legitimacy is never simply granted, it is secured through ongoing negotiations between dominant institutions and marginalized communities, shaped by the dynamics of consent, coercion, and access.

Participation in the Team's youth hockey programs, such as the 4th grade street hockey tournament, Middle School Roller Hockey League (MSRHL), and the Team High School Hockey League (THSHL), has been dominated by highly funded and affluent public and private schools. These programs often benefit from structural advantages, including greater access to financial resources, organized parent networks, and pre-existing familiarity with hockey. In these settings, legitimacy builds cumulatively, with early exposure leading to deeper engagement and competitive success. As a result, only a few well-resourced schools have consistently won the 4th grade street hockey tournament, due to a combination of pure athletic excellence and systemic privilege. What appears as organic success is, in fact, entangled with broader inequalities.

Similar disparity appears in the MSRHL and THSHL. While both leagues are framed as inclusive and open-entry, schools with robust financial backing, easier rink access, and stronger overall support succeed at a much higher rate. Middle schools in lower-income areas, many

designated as Title I, often struggle with transportation, coaching access, roster retention, and affording new gear. Without the Team's financial and administrative support, many of these programs would likely dissolve, as has occurred with at least one Title I team in the MSRHL. Although the Team's involvement helps alleviate some of the burden, the underlying instability of these programs highlights how systemic inequality persists even within supposedly equitable initiatives.

The stratification extends beyond schools. For example, among Asian American communities, participation patterns reveal a complex disparity. In wealthier Korean and Mandarin-speaking households, hockey has been embraced as a form of cultural capital, reinforcing aspirations for upward mobility through educational and extracurricular success. These families have successfully entered competitive club pipelines like the Team Youth Hockey Club (TYHC) and the Team All-Girls Youth Hockey Club (TAGYHC), as well as other premier hockey clubs across Southern California. Yet, among less affluent Asian immigrant communities, barriers persist which inhibit a deeper engagement with the sport, such as language gaps, unfamiliarity with hockey culture, and a perceived cultural dissonance. Consequently, outreach efforts may end up favoring those already familiar with traditional hockey norms and replicating the patterns of stratified inclusion rather than challenging them.

In contrast, Latina/o communities demonstrate a powerful example of cultural reimagination. Rather than assimilating into hockey's dominant norms, many Latina/o families reshape tournaments and events into hybrid spaces of celebration, pride, and community identity. Post-season banquets feature bilingual speeches, and regional cuisine. Tournament sidelines pulse with music, horns, and family pride. Here, participation is not about access, it is about ownership. Latina/o families are not just joining hockey, they are reinterpreting it through their

own cultural frameworks. The effective integration of cultures represents a counter-hegemonic dynamic, where marginalized groups reshape dominant cultural practices to reflect their own lived realities (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1996).

However, even vibrant cultural adaptations exist within broader structures of exclusion. Ice hockey, the most prestigious and elite pathway of the sport, remains financially inaccessible for many, despite the proliferation of free entry points like street and inline hockey. As youth progress into older age groups where the competitiveness becomes highly accelerated, the economic demands of travel hockey, equipment upgrades, private coaching, and specialized training create new structural barriers. The difference between FD initiatives and TIF activities portrays this tension sharply. While FD emphasizes broad participation and barrier removal, TIF's competitive programming often gravitates toward already affluent families.

As urban studies scholars like Arellano (2020) and Lewinnek et al. (2022) emphasize, efforts toward inclusion can sometimes conceal deeper patterns of soft displacement, where surface-level diversity is promoted without addressing underlying structural inequalities. True legitimacy, then, is not achieved through expanded visibility alone. It demands transformative inclusion and the restructuring of hockey's economic, cultural, and social pathways to reflect, and be shaped by the communities it seeks to serve. Without this, the Team risks achieving a hegemony of appearance, a legitimacy that seems inclusive but preserves underlying systemic exclusions.

Cultural Adaptation vs. Assimilation

A second major tension arising from the Team's legitimacy-building efforts concerns the relationship between hockey and local cultural identities. Specifically, is hockey adapting to communities, or are communities expected to adapt to the sport? At its best, the Team's

programming fosters cultural adaptation, creating spaces where youth and families integrate hockey into their existing cultural practices and values. As discussed earlier, Latina/o communities provide a compelling example: hockey tournaments and events often transform into hybrid celebrations blending Latina/o culture and hockey culture. In these moments, hockey becomes organically woven into community life, reflecting Gramsci's (1971) notion that true cultural hegemony is secured not through coercion, but through negotiated consent, where new practices are accepted because they align with lived realities and values.

However, the Team's broader programming sometimes risks sliding into cultural assimilation, where participation subtly requires youth and families to adopt dominant North American hockey norms without reciprocal adaptation from the sport itself. This phenomenon is not abstract; it is deeply personal. As a Latino and Filipino individual who grew up immersed in hockey culture, I internalized the sport's middle-class, white, North American norms as a prerequisite for acceptance. Over time, this process often required negotiating or downplaying aspects of my cultural identity in order to "fit in" with the dominant norms of hockey culture. Reflecting back, this personal experience exemplifies the broader dynamics Gramsci (1971) described: cultural hegemony is most effective not through overt coercion but through subtle normalization, where marginalized individuals come to view dominant practices as "common sense." Thus, while hockey participation offers new opportunities, it also risks reinforcing forms of cultural displacement if community identities are minimized rather than honored. True cultural legitimacy would not require participants to dissociate from aspects of their identity to belong, but rather would create spaces where diverse identities can actively reshape the sport itself.

At higher competitive levels, especially in travel hockey structures affiliated with TIF, expectations often mirror traditional North American hockey culture as year-round specialization, heavy financial investment, English-dominant communication, and emphasis on specific styles of play and behavior. These norms can unintentionally alienate families who cannot or choose not to conform to such expectations. In effect, inclusion becomes conditional: offered, but only to those who already fit the status quo.

The divide between adaptation and assimilation mirrors a broader distinction between outreach and structural transformation. Outreach brings new groups to the table, while transformation reimagines the table itself to fit those groups. The Team has made impressive strides in outreach, especially at the grassroots level. But sustaining legitimacy will require deeper investments in transformative adaptation, where community values and practices actively shape how hockey looks, feels, and operates.

There have been promising adaptations which have already emerged organically. For instance, coaching styles in street hockey programs have become more relational than authoritarian and provided in different languages to better fit the diverse cultural background of many schools, bilingual materials have been integrated into school-based curricula, and celebrations of success often emphasize communal gathering rather than solely recognize athletic triumph. These examples demonstrate that legitimacy is strongest when hockey bends toward community culture, rather than demanding that communities bend toward hockey norms.

Still, as youth transition into competitive travel programs, the field narrows. Without deliberate intervention, this pattern risks reinforcing hockey's historical exclusivity, limiting the transformative potential of the Team's grassroots efforts. As Hall (1996) argued, identity is never fixed, rather, it is produced through negotiation, struggle, and adaptation. Similarly, legitimacy

(particularly cultural legitimacy) is relational and always fluid. Thus, for the Team, and PSTs in general, the challenge is clear, true cultural legitimacy requires more than offering hockey to new audiences, it requires letting those audiences remake hockey in their own image.

Sustained Access vs. Symbolic Inclusion

The third critical tension concerns the difference between creating entry points and sustaining meaningful pathways within hockey. The Team's programming has excelled at offering symbolic inclusion by providing low-cost or no-cost entry points like school-based street hockey, T-LTP sessions, and free loaner equipment programs. These initiatives lower immediate barriers to create important first impressions. However, sustaining long-term access, particularly into ice hockey and competitive youth clubs, remains difficult.

Symbolic inclusion, as scholars such as Bourdieu (1984) and Spaaij (2012) suggest, can function as a double-edged sword. It provides visibility and early participation opportunities but risks masking deeper structural inequities if not accompanied by sustained systemic investment. If young players' involvement ends once programming becomes expensive, travel-heavy, or overly specialized, then the initial legitimacy gained through outreach is unwarranted and conditional. Evidence from participant narratives highlights this challenge. While schools and families praised the Team's accessible introductory programs, they also expressed frustration when advancement required prohibitive costs such as tournament travel, elite coaching, and expensive ice time fees. As Noah, a current FD employee, and Tara, a TIF administrator, acknowledged, even with available subsidies, financial burdens re-emerge rapidly once youth transition out of beginner programs.

This pattern reflects a broader issue in sport development research, where many initiatives prioritize introductory access but neglect progression sustainability. Without deliberate

pathways that are financially and culturally accessible across all developmental stages (from primary exposure through adolescence), programs risk functioning more as performative programming than as durable community assets.

This issue can be further understood through Green's (2005) normative theory of sport development, which proposes a holistic framework centered on athlete recruitment, retention, and transition. Within this model, development agents, such as sport organizations or community programs, are tasked with attracting initial participants and nurturing their long-term engagement and progression. The Team plays such a role through its school-based programming, which acts as a recruitment mechanism, introducing hockey through low-barrier, playful activities. Meanwhile, retention is supported through emotionally resonant, socially embedded programming that fosters identification with the sport. The third pillar, transition, is addressed through the construction of more advanced opportunities (e.g., MSRHL, THSHL, and club pipelines). Yet, as the findings reveal, retention and transition are often uneven, with cultural and financial constraints disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. These insights suggest that Green's (2005) model could be expanded to include cultural legitimacy, a factor that may powerfully shape whether retention is sustained through identity alignment and community relevance. In this sense, cultural legitimacy may act as both a mediating and amplifying force within the athlete development process.

Several participants framed the Team's initiatives as the best available in the Southern California region, yet they also cautioned that hockey's steep cost curve still becomes a barrier, particularly for working-class, immigrant, and marginalized communities. Thus, the Team faces a critical question: Can it move beyond symbolic inclusion to build a truly equitable developmental system? Potential strategies could include expanded financial aid structures

across all age divisions, supporting nonprofit club alternatives, establishing tiered programming that emphasizes recreation (i.e., in-house leagues) alongside elite competition, and building partnerships with public schools and city recreation systems for long-term support.

As Bishop (2007) argued, without deep structural commitment, symbolic gestures can amount to “false generosity,” essentially invitations to enter but with little support to thrive or lead. True legitimacy, particularly cultural legitimacy, demands that systemic barriers are eliminated at the point of entry, as well as across the entire development of youth athletes. Cultural legitimacy, in this sense, is not achieved through momentary exposure, but becomes evident through empirical indicators such as continued enrollment across age levels (behavioral), evolving family narratives around sport identity (discursive), and feelings of belonging or ownership expressed by youth and parents (affective). These markers distinguish performative outreach from transformative engagement.

Revisiting the Research Questions

The findings and analysis presented in this chapter, organized around the tensions of *Power and Participation*, *Cultural Adaptation vs. Assimilation*, and *Sustained Access vs. Symbolic Inclusion*, can now be reexamined through the lens of the study’s original research questions. Each tension speaks directly to the challenges and negotiations involved in achieving cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural legitimacy. Below, each research question is reviewed to synthesize key findings and demonstrate how the Team’s efforts both align with and complicate conventional legitimacy frameworks.

RQ 1) Has the Team established legitimacy (cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural) in their youth ice hockey programming in Southern California?

Across this study, legitimacy was found to be multifaceted, dynamic, and unevenly distributed. The Team has, in many meaningful ways, established legitimacy across cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions. However, this legitimacy is far from evenly distributed, and in many cases, remains fragile and contingent. To fully assess this, an examination of their extent and limitations in the context of a non-traditional sport market should be reviewed.

Cognitive Legitimacy: Recognition and Familiarity

Cognitive legitimacy refers to whether an activity is perceived as comprehensible, familiar, and taken-for-granted in its social context. In a region historically unfamiliar with ice hockey, the Team's programming has been remarkably successful at making the sport culturally intelligible and relevant. This legitimacy was earned through multi-sited school-based outreach, street and inline hockey curriculum integration, and highly visible initiatives such as STEM field trips hosted at the Team's arena. Over time, these repeated, low-barrier exposures normalized hockey for students and teachers. Programming essentially became "part of the school year." In this sense, hockey is no longer viewed as foreign or elite, but as an expected part of the educational experience by many Southern California schools. This wide-scale visibility, especially among public and Title I schools, marked a critical shift from novelty to normalcy.

However, this recognition alone does not guarantee deeper engagement or attachment. In many instances, especially in lower-resourced schools, hockey remained an enjoyable school activity, but not a sustainable or accessible pursuit beyond the blacktop. Thus, cognitive legitimacy was largely secured at the entry level, but not always translated into meaningful long-term participation.

Pragmatic Legitimacy: Value Delivery and Stakeholder Trust

Pragmatic legitimacy centers on whether an initiative is seen as useful, reliable, and beneficial to stakeholders. The Tam built this form of legitimacy by demonstrating consistent delivery of high-quality, professional programming that aligned with stakeholder priorities. Through the efforts of FD staff, the Team became a trusted institutional partner. Teachers described FD coaches as dependable collaborators, showing up with well-organized programming, respectful communication, and pedagogical alignment. Parents and school administrators praised the professionalism of events like the 4th Grade Street Hockey Tournament and the MSRHL, citing careful planning and consistent follow-through.

More importantly, legitimacy earned through relational investment. As discussed in *Power and Participation*, FD staff often became embedded figures within school communities, returning year after year, building rapport with teachers, and developing deep ties with students and families. These relationships functioned as what Bourdieu (1986) might refer to as social capital, and the Team's trustworthiness became a foundation for institutional legitimacy. Yet, even here, there were constraints. In cases where funding or staff capacity was stretched thin, the same level of service was not always possible across schools. Some lower-income schools experienced delayed equipment shipments, shortened, or completely diminished practice sessions, or inconsistent scheduling. Such shortcomings signified the structural limits of the Team's ability to offer equal pragmatic value everywhere.

Cultural Legitimacy: Emotional Embeddedness and Community Ownership

Cultural legitimacy is the most ambitious and complex form as it refers to when an activity is not just accepted, but is emotionally identified with, seen as "ours," and aligned with local values and identity (Gramsci, 1971; Suchman, 1995). In the context of this study, the

picture is much more layered. In some communities, particularly those with existing sporting infrastructures or higher socio-economic status, hockey has become culturally embedded. Former students returned to play in leagues, parents became coaches or volunteers, and family identities began to incorporate fandom and team allegiance. These patterns offer empirical signals of cultural legitimacy along behavioral and affective lines: returning participants, intergenerational engagement, and visible emotional investment suggest deepening social and symbolic ownership of sport. Also, such patterns demonstrate what Funk and James (2001) refer to as fan socialization, a process through which early exposure leads to enduring identification.

However, in many lower-income, immigrant, or otherwise marginalized communities, cultural legitimacy was fragile. The barriers were not only economic (i.e., ice time, gear, transportation), but also symbolic and cultural. For some immigrant families, hockey remained unfamiliar and disconnected from their cultural narratives or perceived paths to opportunity. Without specific relational or multilingual efforts, legitimacy faltered.

In affluent Korean and Mandarin-speaking communities, hockey became a form of aspirational capital, or a way to pursue prestige, structure, and achievement. But for less affluent Asian immigrant families, hockey often failed to resonate without broader cultural relevance or accessible support. In contrast, Latina/o communities actively reshaped hockey events into culturally celebratory spaces, indicating a form of bottom-up cultural adaptation and ownership, one that brings Gramsci's theory of counter-hegemony into focus.

Therefore, cultural legitimacy was not just earned, it was contested and negotiated. The Team's efforts often worked best when programming allowed for cultural reinterpretation, rather than assimilation. Yet this was not uniformly supported across all levels of the sport. At higher competitive levels, hockey norms became more rigid and standardized around elite, white,

middle-class expectations, limiting the space for cultural adaptation and, in turn, weakening cultural legitimacy among diverse participants.

Cultural legitimacy was evident when participants accepted hockey and expressed pride, familiarity, and emotional investment, indicators of deep affective resonance. Community co-ownership appeared through discursive shifts (“our team,” “our sport”) and recurring cultural adaptations (e.g., bilingual chants, celebratory rituals). These empirical indicators support a three-way lens of legitimacy as behavioral (engagement), discursive (narratives), and affective (emotional attachment).

Conditional and Stratified Legitimacy

Taken together, the Team has successfully established all three forms of legitimacy, but they operate asymmetrically. Cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy are strongest at the introductory and recreational levels, where the Team’s branding, relationships, and delivery are consistent and well received. Cultural legitimacy, however, is more conditional, more contested, and often dependent on the community’s ability to reshape hockey into something that reflects their values. In this sense, the Team’s legitimacy mirrors what Gramsci (1971) called “negotiated consent,” secured through emotional and cultural alignment, and not through domination. To deepen legitimacy in a lasting, systemic way, the Team must continue to move from exposure to empowerment, ensuring that marginalized communities gain access to hockey and are positioned to lead, reshape, and claim ownership over it.

RQ 2) What challenges does the Team encounter in attempting to achieve legitimacy with their youth hockey programming in a non-traditional market, and how do they overcome those challenges?

In its efforts to establish legitimacy within the non-traditional hockey landscape of Southern California, the Team faces several persistent and intersecting challenges. Notable among these are financial obstacles that limit access, cultural unfamiliarity that shapes perceptions of the sport, and deeply rooted structural inequalities across schools and communities that constrain participation and sustainability.

Economic barriers remain the most immediate and tangible obstacle. Ice time, equipment, travel, and coaching fees collectively make hockey one of the most expensive youth sports in the United States (USA Hockey, 2023). These costs are particularly exclusionary in lower-income neighborhoods, where even subsidized programming can only go so far once youth progress past entry-level stages. While the Team’s Learn To Play (T-LTP) initiative and school-based programming significantly reduce costs at the outset, these barriers quickly re-emerge when youth transition to club programs, travel teams, or more competitive leagues. In this fashion, financial access becomes a gatekeeper to both opportunity and long-term cultural legitimacy, as full belonging remains out of reach for many.

Cultural unfamiliarity presents a more subtle but equally potent challenge. In communities where hockey is not part of the traditional athletic landscape, particularly among immigrant families or communities where English is not the primary language, the sport often carries a perception of exclusivity or foreignness. Some families may lack historical reference points for the sport or may view it as “not for them.” This is where the Team’s community-based trust-building becomes critical. Through consistent visibility, partnerships with trusted schools

and CSOs, and culturally responsive programming, the Team has built emotional resonance and social proximity with families who might otherwise never consider hockey a viable option. These efforts are reinforced by the strategic deployment of bilingual materials, mascot assemblies, and culturally inclusive coaching styles, especially within FD programming.

Still, structural inequalities, such as unequal school resources, geographic disparities in rink access, and overrepresentation of elite clubs in wealthier zip codes, pose systemic barriers that cannot be overcome by outreach alone. For example, schools classified as Title I often face challenges in retaining coaches, securing transportation, and maintaining equipment. While the Team provides substantial logistical and financial support, sustainability remains a question when schools are stretched thin on staff and funding. This creates a pattern of conditional legitimacy, where participation exists but is dependent on the Team's external support rather than embedded infrastructure.

These challenges also become particularly significant when considering the possibility of national replication. The Team's model is often cited as a template for league-wide growth, especially in underserved markets. However, national expansion would require deep regional adaptation, not only to socio-economic variables, but to localized cultural sensibilities. Without this, initiatives risk appearing performative or temporary, as evidenced by the limited traction of NHL Street. In contrast, the Team's model works because it is embedded, and it thrives through sustained relational work, local investment, and trust-building over time, not just through curriculum and branding.

A particularly promising, though still early, sign of translatability occurred in May 2025, when the Team partnered with a school in Cancún, Mexico, to deliver a version of their T-LTP programming to over 50 local students, completely free of charge. This pilot program, long in

development and newly greenlit, introduced hockey to a population with zero prior exposure. It successfully blended the Team's technical infrastructure with a culturally adaptive, celebratory approach. Youth were provided with loaner gear, instruction, and the opportunity to step on the ice for the first time. Speaking with Noah and Jonathan, who both led the instruction and programming, there was high enthusiasm from both students and coaches, validating the idea that hockey can become meaningful across very different geographies when programming is designed responsively, not uniformly. This example also reinforces Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony as a negotiated and localized process, as legitimacy was not "exported" from Southern California to Cancún, but co-produced in a way that honored the new context.

In sum, the Team's experience shows that achieving legitimacy in a non-traditional market is not a matter of simply expanding reach. It requires actively confronting systemic inequality, being culturally responsive, and building durable partnerships rooted in relational legitimacy. These efforts demonstrate that programming can be both impactful and inclusive, but only when legitimacy is treated as a fragile and dynamic process that must be earned, adapted, and re-affirmed continuously.

RQ 3) Do various stakeholders (i.e., school administrators, coaches, parents) perceive the programming provided by the Team as appropriate (i.e., taken-for-granted and/or providing valuable programming for youth) and therefore legitimate?

Stakeholders overwhelmingly perceive the Team's youth hockey programming, and particularly the work of FD staff, as appropriate, valuable, and increasingly taken for granted within their educational and community contexts. This perception is critical to its legitimacy in Suchman's (1995) terms: legitimacy as that which is "taken for granted," naturalized, and no longer requiring justification.

Across interviews with school administrators, PE teachers, community coaches, and parents, a recurring theme emerged: the Team’s programming is no longer seen as novel or optional, but rather as a reliable, expected part of the youth development ecosystem in Southern California. Teachers referred to FD staff as co-educators. Administrators noted that students would often anticipate hockey sessions with the same enthusiasm as they would for field trips or schoolwide events. Some even planned academic schedules around the Team’s programming calendar. This level of routine integration indicates that legitimacy is no longer contingent on proving hockey’s value, it has become part of the cultural and institutional infrastructure.

Many educators praised FD for its relational consistency and cultural responsiveness. Teachers in Title I schools described FD coaches as trusted adults who understood the needs and rhythms of their student populations. Several emphasized that FD staff were sensitive to school-specific dynamics, such as offering bilingual instruction when needed, and adjusting curriculum for students with special needs or limited physical experience. These relational practices were perceived as essential elements of why the program “works” in their context.

From the parental perspective, legitimacy was often expressed in terms of trust and emotional safety. Parents shared stories of initially skeptical children growing more confident and excited after each LTP session or FD ran blacktop street hockey session. Some noted that the Team’s branding and mascot appearances helped “break the ice” and gave children a sense of connection and pride, especially for those from communities that had no previous relationship with hockey. Others appreciated that the Team provided a safe and inclusive environment where fun and development were prioritized over competition, a sentiment particularly emphasized by families who had left high-pressure club teams due to burnout or exclusionary dynamics.

One of the clearest indicators of perceived legitimacy came from repetition and longevity. Multiple participants noted that they had been involved with the Team's programming for five, ten, or even fifteen years, first as teachers or parents, and now as collaborators, coaches, or even FD staff themselves. In several instances, former students who had learned hockey through school programming had returned to work with part time FD staff or volunteer at tournaments. This cyclical participation serves as a powerful social endorsement: legitimacy is no longer abstract but embodied in real relationships and sustained through lived experience.

However, it is also important to note that this legitimacy is not universally distributed. While widely affirmed in grassroots contexts (i.e., schools, entry-level programming), concerns emerged around the opacity and inaccessibility of elite pathways. Some parents and coaches questioned how children could progress from school-based exposure into club hockey without significant financial resources or insider knowledge. These concerns did not negate the perceived value of the foundational programs but instead highlighted a growing tension between the legitimacy of early access versus long-term inclusion. For legitimacy to be fully sustainable, stakeholders noted, the Team would need to communicate and support developmental trajectories that extend beyond beginner stages more clearly.

Still, among all stakeholders, the consensus was clear: the Team's programming is appropriate, well-designed, and socially meaningful. Its legitimacy is grounded in how it is experienced, relationally, emotionally, and structurally, by the communities it serves. Over time, these perceptions have solidified into a form of institutional trust, making the Team's programming both symbolically and functionally legitimate in the eyes of those most proximate to its impact.

RQ 4) How has legitimacy been viewed over time by various stakeholders (i.e., school administrators, coaches, parents) for the Team’s youth hockey programming?

Stakeholder perceptions of the Team’s legitimacy have undergone a significant transformation over time, moving from cautious curiosity to widespread acceptance, and in many cases, genuine enthusiasm. Initially, many school administrators and teachers regarded hockey as a foreign, unfamiliar, or even exclusionary sport, particularly in communities where basketball, soccer, and baseball were the dominant cultural norms. Hockey seemingly was not on the radar. In this early phase, hockey’s legitimacy was fragile and largely dependent on the novelty and charisma of the Team’s presence in schools, or the relative success of the two local Southern California NHL teams, rather than on deeply rooted community resonance.

However, as the Team’s programming evolved from single-visit assemblies to multi-tiered engagements like street hockey leagues, curriculum-aligned field trips, and accessible LTP sessions, perceptions began to shift. Teachers, parents, and administrators began to see hockey as a valuable educational and developmental tool. Stakeholders cited increased student engagement, school pride, and even improved classroom behavior linked to hockey participation. These indicators signaled the emergence of pragmatic legitimacy, as the sport began to deliver clear and tangible value to schools and families.

As outlined in earlier sections, cultural legitimacy, or the point at which hockey is accepted as “common sense” or natural, emerged more slowly and unevenly. Over time, however, participants described a noticeable normalization of hockey within the school and youth sport ecosystems. Street hockey tournaments became annual expectations; appearances by the Team’s mascot at school events elicited excitement rather than confusion; and alumni of early programs began returning as coaches, referees, or even FD staff members. PE coaches went

from explaining what a hockey stick is, to having students excitedly ask when tryouts for the hockey teams would be. This temporal evolution reveals how legitimacy can be cultivated relationally through repeated interactions, emotional connections, and trusted institutional partnerships.

Yet, while stakeholder perceptions have generally shifted toward positive assessments, they also remain conditional and dynamic. The most consistent theme across interviews was a sense of appreciation for grassroots-level efforts but also concern about the limitations of access and equity as youth progress into more competitive levels of the sport. Coaches and parents frequently expressed gratitude for free programming, loaner equipment, and vouchers for free gear, but voiced frustration that these supports eventually taper off just as children become more committed to hockey. In this sense, stakeholders view the Team's programming as both transformative and incomplete, and in a sense, celebrated for its broad entry points but critiqued for a lack of sustained support structures.

These insights point to an important theoretical contribution: legitimacy is not a one-time achievement but a process of ongoing reaffirmation. In line with Suchman's (1995) theory and Gramsci's (1971) notion of negotiated consent, stakeholder legitimacy is relational, fluid, and dependent on continued alignment between institutional efforts and community values. Even as stakeholders increasingly take the Team's presence "for granted" at the entry level, a marker of deepening legitimacy, they remain critically attuned to the disparities embedded in the pathway beyond.

Ultimately, legitimacy is seen as earned but not guaranteed. It is a social contract, one that must be constantly renewed through responsive programming, equitable access, and

community accountability. If these elements are present, stakeholders will continue to see hockey as a shared cultural asset, and the Team as builders of community infrastructure.

Theoretical Implications

This dissertation contributes to the theoretical understanding of legitimacy in youth sport development by extending Suchman's (1995) framework of cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural legitimacy. Findings from this study illustrate that legitimacy is not a static condition but a relational, contested, and stratified process that unfolds across varying communities and institutional contexts. While cognitive legitimacy, where an initiative becomes taken for granted, and pragmatic legitimacy, where stakeholders see clear instrumental value, are often secured through visibility and alignment with stakeholder needs, cultural legitimacy remains more precarious. Cultural legitimacy, as discussed in Chapter 2, requires emotional resonance, local cultural fit, and a sense of community ownership. These qualities manifested through three empirically grounded dimensions: behavioral, discursive, and effective. Patterns of sustained participation (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008), role continuity from player to coach, and multi-year family involvement demonstrated behavioral legitimacy. Discursive legitimacy emerged through changes in community language, where hockey was reframed as a local tradition embedded in schools and families. Affective legitimacy, rooted in pride, joy, and ritual, was evident in emotional displays during bilingual celebratory events and tournaments. These expressions reflect the deep cultural embedding described by Gramsci (1971) and later scholars addressing affect in youth sport contexts (Holt et al., 2017).

This study's focus on cultural legitimacy adds a valuable extension to Green's (2005) normative theory of sport development, which theorizes three core goals for sport development agents: athlete recruitment, retention, and progression. In this case, recruitment occurred through

school-based exposure programs such as SEP, that reduced barriers to entry and normalized the sport within academic contexts. Retention was supported through joy-centered practices and play, and relational coaching, echoing findings that relational enjoyment is key to sustained youth engagement (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Progression was offered through structured pathways into the MSRHL, THSHL, and TYHC or TAGYHC. Yet this study goes further, by showing that emotional inclusion and cultural belonging serve as essential preconditions for each developmental stage. The Team's ability to make hockey feel like home in non-traditional communities suggests that cultural legitimacy should be treated as a fourth axis in sport development frameworks, alongside recruitment, retention, and progression.

This theoretical position is strengthened when examined through the Social Ecological Model (McLeroy et al., 1988; Sallis et al., 2015), which allows legitimacy to be analyzed across multiple layers of influence. At the intrapersonal level, young participants expressed growing confidence and curiosity about hockey, overcoming initial feelings of exclusion or intimidation. At the interpersonal level, the consistent presence of FD staff created trust and relational continuity with students and families. Organizational legitimacy was achieved through long-term school partnerships and adaptable programming, reinforcing stakeholder alignment (Suchman, 1995). At the community level, popular events like the 4th Grade Street Hockey Tournament functioned as symbolic rituals that cemented hockey as part of the region's cultural landscape. These ecological dimensions reflect cultural integration, supporting the idea that legitimacy is embedded across and between system levels.

Still, despite many structural efforts to expand access, findings reveal the persistence of internalized constraints, which Leisure Constraints Theory (Crawford and Godbey, 1987) helps to explain. While the Team's programming significantly lowered structural barriers such as cost

and equipment, intrapersonal barriers like unfamiliarity with the sport, fear of social exclusion, or perceived lack of cultural fit remained noticeable and impactful for many youth. This was especially true in Title I school contexts, where coaches described difficulty in sustaining participation over time. These observations are consistent with research emphasizing the importance of psychological safety and identity alignment in youth sport retention (Eime et al., 2015; Merkel, 2013).

Taken together, these frameworks underscore a central insight of this study: legitimacy in youth sport is a dynamic process that unfolds across emotional, cultural, and structural dimensions. It is both systemically constructed and relationally felt, often developing unevenly across different communities. For PSTs operating in non-traditional hockey markets, legitimacy cannot be assumed as a lasting outcome. Rather, it must be continually reinforced through cultural attentiveness, responsiveness to community needs, and programming that fosters shared meaning. These findings contribute to broader theoretical discussions by showing that legitimacy is both institutional as well as deeply personal, rooted in affective experiences like pride, joy, and belonging. Table 1 outlines the study's theoretical contributions by identifying observable indicators, common tensions, and strategic responses related to cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural legitimacy.

Practical Implications

Entry-level programs, such as T-LTP and street hockey initiatives, are vital starting points. However, without sustained and affordable pathways into higher levels of participation, early access risks becoming symbolic or performative rather than transformative. PSTs must invest in continuum-based pipelines that enable youth to transition from introductory programming to recreational leagues, developmental clubs, and competitive structures without

encountering insurmountable financial or cultural barriers. This can be achieved by creating tiered models that explicitly prioritize “recreational-first” programming alongside elite-track opportunities, ensuring broader developmental accessibility.

Table 1 – Empirical Dimensions of Legitimacy in Youth Sport Development

Form of Legitimacy	Empirical Markers	Common Tensions	Supporting Strategies by the Team
Cognitive Legitimacy (Does this make sense?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Widespread school participation - Familiarity with basic hockey vocabulary and programs - Association of hockey with local culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited awareness in some geographic or demographic communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School-based curricula (SEP) - Branding integration (e.g., mascots, jerseys) - Field trips and teacher programs
Pragmatic Legitimacy (Is this useful or valuable?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repeat participation in LTP and MSRHL - School and parent endorsements - Use of Team programming as PE curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inconsistent resources across schools - Risk of perceived performativity without systemic support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free gear/equipment - League subsidies for Title I schools - FD coaches and staff embedded in schools
Cultural Legitimacy (Is this ours?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expressions of pride (e.g., “I’m a hockey player”) - Local language and storytelling (e.g., “small world” narratives) - Participants returning as staff or coaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exclusion of newcomers from tight-knit hockey circles - Dominance of prior-hockey-experienced schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inclusive programming design - Emotional coaching strategies - Community events and alumni role models

Invest in Community-Led Leadership

True legitimacy cannot be automatically applied; it must be co-constructed with the communities PSTs seek to engage with. The future of sustainable growth lies in nurturing relationships with coaches, organizers, administrators, and advocates, drawn from historically

marginalized or nontraditional hockey communities. By launching paid coaching apprenticeship pipelines, mentor programs, and leadership designed specifically for participants from underrepresented groups may foster such a strategy. This may be achieved by establishing tiered programming models that explicitly prioritize recreation-first opportunities alongside elite-track options, ensuring broad developmental accessibility.

Culturally Adaptive Program Design

Expanding hockey's cultural legitimacy requires allowing the sport to adapt rather than asking communities to conform to the in-place traditional norms of the sport. Programs must celebrate, not flatten, or ignore, cultural difference. This includes integrating multilingual materials and instruction, culturally relevant celebrations, alternative competitive structures, and family-centered events. This strategy should involve a creation of culturally adaptive curricula and events co-designed with community stakeholders that reflect local values, languages, traditions.

Sustain Financial Accessibility Across the Developmental Spectrum

Financial barriers re-emerge at critical points, especially when youth transition from free programs into club or travel hockey programs. A true commitment to access requires sustained financial support, not just subsidies at entry. Expanding needs-based scholarships, building nonprofit community clubs as affordable alternatives, and reinvesting revenue from elite programs into supporting grassroots accessibility may allow for sustained participation.

Resist the Commercialization Trap

There will inevitably always be pressures to monetize youth sport participation, particularly as programming becomes popular. However, prioritizing short-term commercial gain over long-term cultural legitimacy risks alienating the very communities PSTs seek to engage.

Therefore, PSTs should anchor programming evaluation metrics around participation retention, cultural resonance, and developmental outcomes, and not revenue generation. Specifically, tracking behavioral (e.g., multi-year enrollment), discursive (e.g., language used in school communications), and affective (e.g., expressions of fan pride) indicators may offer a more holistic picture of legitimacy.

In sum, this study suggests that the future of youth sport growth lies in reimagining hockey and other historically exclusionary sports, as dynamic, culturally embedded, and structurally equitable practices. PSTs that embrace this transformation will not only earn legitimacy in new markets, but they will help redefine what it means for a sport to truly belong to a community.

Limitations and Reflexivity

While this study contributes valuable insights into the processes by which cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural legitimacy are cultivated within non-traditional hockey markets, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's geographic specificity restricts generalizability. Because it focuses exclusively on the Southern California market, the findings reflect the unique demographic, cultural, and economic dynamics of this region. Other non-traditional hockey markets, such as Arizona, Florida, Utah or Washington, may exhibit different patterns of participation, legitimacy formation, and community engagement based on their distinct socio-political and sport ecosystems.

Second, my positionality as an insider is not without potential biases. As a former employee and insider within FD, I possess deep contextual knowledge, access, and trust among participants. While insider status enabled rich, nuanced data collection, it may have also influenced participant responses through social desirability biases or led to selective

interpretation of data. Reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process to mitigate such effects, but total neutrality cannot be assumed.

Third, the study relies primarily on cross-sectional data, gathered through semi-structured interviews, document review, and observations conducted within a relatively confined timeframe of three months (December 2024 – February 2025). Although some retrospective reflections from participants captured changes over time, the lack of true longitudinal tracking limits the ability to ultimately assess *long-term* retention, systemic changes in participation, or evolving perceptions of legitimacy across developmental stages.

Fourth, sampling limitations must be considered. Participants were recruited through professional and social networks connected to the Team’s programming, which may have unintentionally excluded critical voices, such as youth or families who disconnected from hockey early or who were excluded to the Team’s programming. Future studies would benefit from incorporating broader participant pools, including critical or opposing perspectives that might offer alternative narratives about the Team’s impact.

Fifth, language and cultural translation challenges were an underlying limitation. Although bilingual materials and outreach were increasingly incorporated into the Team’s programming, all data collection occurred in English. As such, the experiences of non-English-speaking families, particularly among Latina/o, Korean, and Mandarin-speaking communities, may not be fully represented.

Sixth, the evolving nature of sport ecosystems presents a limitation. Youth sport participation patterns, professional team success, regional demographics, and urban dynamics are all fluid factors. The findings of this study reflect a particular historical moment; subsequent

developments, such as demographic shifts, economic changes, or shifts in NHL marketing strategies, may alter the landscape considerably.

Cumulatively, these limitations do not diminish the value of this study's contributions but instead highlight opportunities for future research, particularly in relation to positionality, contextual variability, long-term impact, broader sampling, and inclusive cultural representation.

Lastly, on reflexivity, during the writing phase of the Chapter 5, I had the opportunity to meet with noted journalist and scholar Gustavo Arellano, whose work critically examines issues of urban gentrification, cultural displacement, and the transformation of Southern California's socio-cultural landscapes. This encounter profoundly influenced the conceptual framing of the latter stages of this dissertation. Arellano's insights prompted a more critical interrogation of legitimacy-building practices, particularly regarding the potential complicity of sport initiatives within broader gentrification processes. As a result, the discussion shifted from viewing legitimacy as a purely developmental success to acknowledging the ways in which inclusion may be performative while structural inequities persist. This intellectual pivot emphasizes the dynamic, reflexive nature of the research process, where emerging engagements continually reshape analytical perspectives.

Future Research Directions

While this study provides a strong foundation for understanding how an NHL organization might cultivate cognitive, pragmatic, and cultural legitimacy in non-traditional hockey markets, it also reveals significant avenues for continued exploration. To deepen, challenge, and extend these findings, future research should pursue several critical lines of inquiry, including: (1) *longitudinal impact studies*; (2) *comparative analyses across emerging*

hockey markets; (3) interdisciplinary research linking sport, gentrification, and urban cultural change.

Longitudinal Impact Studies

While introductory programs such as street hockey and LTP initiatives provide valuable access into the sport, the true test of legitimacy lies in long-term retention, advancement, and community integration. Therefore, a critical future research direction involves conducting longitudinal impact studies that trace trajectories of participants across developmental stages. Specifically, future studies should examine how retention rates differ between participants from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, and racial and ethnic groups. For example, do youth who initially engage with free or low-cost programming remain involved in hockey as they progress into middle school, high school, and postsecondary levels? Or as findings in this dissertation suggest, do financial, logistical, and cultural barriers reassert themselves over time, leading to attrition?

Research should also investigate upward mobility pathways into more competitive or elite levels of hockey. Key questions include: What proportion of youth participants successfully transition from grassroots programs to club-level or travel hockey systems? How do structural factors, such as cost escalation, geographical access to ice rinks, and availability of qualified coaching, expedite or limit this progression? Importantly, it is critical to assess whether the pathways to competitive advancement are equitable across racial, cultural, and socioeconomic lines or whether they reinforce pre-existing patterns of privilege.

Another essential line of inquiry concerns whether early experiences in street and inline hockey translate into broader sport ecosystem engagement. Do participants become long-term hockey players, recreational athletes, fans, coaches, or advocates? Or do they disengage entirely

when opportunities become more demanding or exclusive? Capturing these lifetime dynamics will offer vital insights into where intervention is most needed and which strategies are most effective in building a sustainable, culturally inclusive hockey ecosystem.

Methodologically, longitudinal studies should employ mixed methods designs, combining quantitative tracking (e.g., participation rates, advancement metrics) with qualitative insights (e.g., interviews with participants and families) to capture the nuanced, lived experiences behind statistical patterns. Only through sustained, long-term observation can researchers fully grasp whether youth sport programs move beyond symbolic inclusion to produce durable cultural legitimacy. Ultimately, longitudinal research will help reveal whether hockey's expansion into nontraditional markets is building new cultural foundations or producing momentary visibility without deep structural change.

Comparative Market Analyses

Beyond understanding local dynamics, future research should engage in comparative analyses across multiple emerging hockey markets, such as Arizona, Florida, Utah, and Washington. Doing so would provide valuable opportunities to deepen understanding of how legitimacy is built, sustained, or challenged in different regional and cultural contexts. Future studies should examine how different PSTs design and adapt grassroots-to-elite development models based on local demographics, economic structures, and community needs. Comparative studies should also identify consistent empirical signals of cultural legitimacy: patterns of multi-year participation (behavioral), shifts in local language or discourse about hockey (discursive), and affective expressions of pride, belonging, or ritualization. These markers would allow researchers to move beyond participation numbers and assess deep cultural integration. Key questions include: What outreach models and programming strategies are transferable across

markets? Where have PSTs successfully dismantled systemic barriers to access, and where have efforts ultimately stalled or failed? A critical area for inquiry within these comparative studies is the impact of professional team success on grassroots sport growth.

Several participants in this study noted that when the Team and their immediate local competitive NHL franchise achieved Stanley Cup victories, youth hockey participation and interest surged. Tara, a TIF administrator, highlighted a similar trend in Florida, where the recent competitive success of the Tampa Bay Lightning and Florida Panthers has coincided with sharp increases in youth hockey enrollment:

When we're good, business is great because that means we don't have to convince people to come try hockey. When the [other Southern California NHL team] are good, it's the same, and they get a bump from that... When both teams are good, it is so good for us... When the Ducks and Kings are good at the same time, kids want to play hockey, and that's when our numbers skyrocket. So, the Lightning and the Panthers are both in their prime right now, and those numbers are off the charts, and I think those clubs are doing a really good job of taking advantage of that.

These observations align with broader theories of fan socialization and aspirational fandom (Funk & James, 2001), suggesting that NHL success may serve as a catalyst for temporary or even sustained growth in youth sport engagement. Future comparative analyses should therefore consider how professional success, media visibility, and community outreach interact to either deepen or diminish long-term participation rates. Integrating models from sport sociology and consumer behavior (Green, 2005) could enable scholars to distinguish between organic growth linked to team achievements versus growth dependent on sustained grassroots investments.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for PSTs hoping to leverage professional success into meaningful, culturally embedded youth sport ecosystems.

Interdisciplinary Research

Future research should investigate how youth sport programming interacts with broader urban processes such as gentrification, displacement, and cultural change. As Arellano (2020) and Lewinnek et al. (2022) argued, gentrification is not only an economic phenomenon but a cultural one, involving the reshaping of local identities, landscapes, and public spaces to align with sanitized, often market-driven aesthetics. In this context, seemingly inclusive sport initiatives may unintentionally contribute to the soft displacement of historically marginalized communities. Youth sport programming can sometimes serve as a catalyst for urban rebranding efforts, symbolically presenting diversity and access while failing to dismantle deeper systemic inequalities. Therefore, interdisciplinary research at the intersection of sport studies, urban sociology, and cultural geography is essential to understand the full impact of these programs.

Critical research questions could include: How do youth hockey programs, and sport initiatives broadly, intersect with patterns of neighborhood gentrification? To what extent does the introduction of sport infrastructure correlate with rising property values, demographic shifts, or the displacement of lower income communities? Are sport initiatives strategically deployed as cultural “proof” of inclusion during urban redevelopment efforts? Furthermore, how do different communities perceive, resist, or appropriate these programs in the face of broader structural changes?

Methodologically, such research would benefit from mixed methods approaches, combining spatial analysis (e.g., Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping of rink locations relative to demographic shifts) with qualitative fieldwork (e.g., interviews with

longtime residents, community leaders, and youth participants). Archival research could also uncover how sport has historically been used as a tool of both inclusion and exclusion in urban development projects.

Understanding the role of sport within processes of urban cultural change would not only deepen critical sport scholarship but also provide PSTs and policymakers with a clearer roadmap for ensuring that sport-based outreach does not inadvertently replicate the very inequities it seems to address. By situating hockey and similar sports within the broader politics of urban change, scholars and practitioners alike can push toward models of youth sport development that are genuinely inclusive, community-centered, and resistant to displacement-driven logics.

Taken together, these proposed research trajectories (longitudinal impact studies, comparative market analyses, and interdisciplinary inquiries) highlight the need for a more critical, reflexive, and inclusive approach to sport development scholarship. Expanding youth hockey and other non-traditional sports into diverse communities demands more than tracking participation growth, it requires sustained attention to how legitimacy is constructed, challenged, and transformed across socio-economic, cultural, and political lines. Future research must move beyond questions of whether programs are merely expanding to examine for whom they are expanding, under what conditions, and with what long-term consequences. Only through layered, community-centered, and justice-oriented inquiry can scholar and practitioners reimagine youth sport as a dynamic and contested arena, one where legitimacy is not simply claimed, but continually earned through inclusive practices, sustained engagement, and cultural reciprocity. In this vision, sport becomes truly legitimate by being meaningfully shaped through the values, voices, and lived experiences of the communities it serves.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the tensions, patterns, and contradictions that shape how legitimacy is built, challenged, and sustained within the Team's youth hockey programming. Through a careful synthesis of stakeholder voices, programming structures, and socio-cultural contexts, the findings affirm that legitimacy is not a static achievement, but a negotiated, dynamic process influenced by power, access, and identity. While the Team has demonstrated remarkable success in establishing cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy, through consistent delivery, school integration, and relational trust, that path to cultural legitimacy remains uneven and contingent. This is especially evident at the intersection of sport, race, class, and community identity, where emotional ownership and structural access often diverge.

Ultimately, this study invites a rethinking of youth sport legitimacy as a process that must be continuously earned, not merely granted. By centering community voices, embracing cultural pluralism, and dismantling structural barriers, sport-based organizations like the Team can move beyond symbolic gestures toward transformative inclusion. In doing so, they not only grow the game, they help reshape its meaning in the lives of those historically excluded from it.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide for Youth Hockey Parents

Thanks for taking the time to answer some questions about you and your child's experience playing hockey! This is completely voluntary, meaning that if you want to stop, at any time, we will stop.

1. How long has your child been playing hockey, and have they also played either street/roller/ice?
 - a. Has your child played in the Anaheim Ducks S.C.O.R.E. Shootout, i3 Roller Hockey League, Learn To Play or Learn Her Way?
2. How did your child first find out about hockey, and what made them want to start playing?
3. Do you feel there is a "culture" of hockey in Southern California, if so, what does that culture look like?
4. Why have you decided to allow and support your child's participation in Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programming? (if clarification is needed: For example, do the Ducks provide anything different than other local hockey or sport organizations?)
5. Are the Anaheim Ducks youth hockey coaches and programming credible? If so, what do you feel makes them credible?
6. Has your child expressed the desire to continue playing hockey in any other Anaheim Ducks youth hockey program?
7. How has your perception of hockey in Southern California improved or changed since you have been involved in the sport?
 - a. Do you feel other Southern California residents feel the same?
8. Have you witnessed, or are aware of, any similar partnership between a professional sport organization and youth sport organizations anywhere in North America?
 - a. If yes – How does the Ducks youth programming compare?
 - b. If no – Do you feel that the Ducks youth programming could be successfully replicated in other areas of the country or world?
9. What other sports does your child participate in?
 - a. How often do they participate in that sport? Do they play that other sport more than hockey?
10. Are there any hardships with getting your child to participate in hockey?
 - a. Does the partnership with the Anaheim Ducks alleviate any of the hardship?

Interview Guide for Coaches & P.E. Teachers

Thanks for taking the time to answer some questions about you and your players experience playing hockey! This is completely voluntary, meaning that if you want to stop, at any time, we will stop.

1. Do you coach in any of the other Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programs (Anaheim Ducks S.C.O.R.E. Shootout, i3 Roller Hockey League, ADHSHL)?
 - a. Secondly, do you coach other sports?
 - i. If so, how would you compare the Ducks youth hockey programs to these other sports teams and organizations?
 - ii. What do the Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programs do differently than any other program or sport you have coached?
2. Do you feel that the Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programming is effective and/or legitimate? Why?
3. Have you played/coached/witnessed hockey in a different part of the United States and/or Canada?
 - a. If so, how would you compare hockey in Southern California compared to these other locations?
4. Do you feel there is a “culture” of hockey in Southern California, if so, what does that culture look like?
5. How has your perception of hockey in Southern California improved or changed since you have been involved in the sport?
6. What is your experience or knowledge on the Anaheim Ducks partnership with your team and/or school?
 - a. What are your thoughts on that partnership?
7. Are the Anaheim Ducks youth hockey coaches and programming credible? If so, what do you feel makes them credible?
8. Have you witnessed, or are aware of, any similar partnership between a professional sport organization and youth sport organizations anywhere in North America?
 - a. If yes – How does the Ducks youth programming compare?
 - b. If no – Do you feel that the Ducks youth programming could be successfully replicated in other areas of the country or world?
11. Are there any hardships with getting your team to participate in hockey?
 - a. Does the partnership with the Anaheim Ducks alleviate any of the hardship?

Interview Guide for School/Community Sport Organization Administrators

Thanks for taking the time to answer some questions about your school/organizations experience with providing hockey! This is completely voluntary, meaning that if you want to stop, at any time, we will stop.

1. How long has your school/organization provided hockey to youth?
2. Does your school/organization have any involvement in other forms of hockey (inline/ice/street)? If so, are they Anaheim Ducks leagues or programs (Anaheim Ducks S.C.O.R.E. Shootout, i3 Roller Hockey League, Learn To Play, Learn Her Way)?
3. Do you feel that the Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programming is effective and/or legitimate? Why?
4. What made you want to bring hockey to your school/organization? For example, did you used to play the sport and are a fan of a team?
5. Have you played/coached/witnessed hockey in a different part of the United States and/or Canada?
 - a. If so, how would you compare hockey in Southern California compared to these other locations?
6. Do you feel there is a “culture” of hockey in Southern California, if so, what does that culture look like?
7. How has your perception of hockey in Southern California improved or changed since you have been involved in the sport?
8. What differentiates the partnership your organization has with the Anaheim Ducks from other interorganizational partnerships?
9. Do you feel that the Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programming provided to your organization is effective and/or legitimate? Why?
10. Have you witnessed, or are aware of, any similar partnership between a professional sport organization and youth sport organizations anywhere in North America?
 - a. If yes – How does the Ducks youth programming compare?
 - b. If no – Do you feel that the Ducks youth programming could be successfully replicated in other areas of the country or world?
11. Are there any hardships with getting your team to participate in hockey?
 - a. Does the partnership with the Anaheim Ducks alleviate any of the hardship?

Interview Guide for Anaheim Ducks Fan Development Employees

Thanks for taking the time to answer some questions about your involvement with the Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programming and your experience playing hockey! This is completely voluntary, meaning that if you want to stop, at any time, we will stop.

1. How long have you been/were you employed with Anaheim Ducks Fan Development?
Have you worked for other fan development departments with other sport organizations?
2. Have you ever coached hockey before? If so, how long have you been a hockey coach?
 - a. What made you want to coach hockey?
 - b. Where else have you coached hockey?
3. Have you played/coached hockey in a different part of the United States and/or Canada?
 - a. If so, how would you compare hockey in Southern California compared to these other locations?
4. What makes the Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programming different and effective when compared to other similar programs in Orange County?
5. Do you feel there is a “culture” of hockey in Southern California, if so, what does that culture look like?
6. How has your perception of hockey in Southern California improved or changed since you have been involved in the sport?
7. How are the youth hockey programs that the Anaheim Ducks provide effective and/or legitimate?
8. How do/did you go about making Anaheim Ducks youth hockey programming relevant, effective, and/or legitimate in the community? What does Fan Development do now to continue this?
9. Has hockey in Southern California improved or changed since you have been involved in the sport?
10. Do the NHL or any other NHL organization provide similar youth programming to what the Ducks provide?
 - b. How does the Ducks youth programming compare?
 - c. Do you feel that the Ducks youth programming could be successfully replicated in other areas of the country or world via the NHL or other NHL organizations?
11. What challenges, if any, do you encounter with Anaheim Ducks Youth Programming, and how does the department overcome such challenges?