Bridging the Gap between Sport and Health: The Role of Sport for Development Programs

Tiesha Martin, Virginia Commonwealth University

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Regular physical activity is important for achieving positive health outcomes, however only about 25% of children meet the physical activity recommendations of the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2015). This is of particular issue for minority and low-income individuals as they are typically less physically active and are more likely to experience negative health outcomes than their non-minority and wealthier counterparts (Fairclough, Boddy, Hackett, & Stratton, 2009; Syme & Berkman, 2010; Williams & Sternthal, 2010). While sport can be used as a vehicle to get children more physically active and to address social issues, the role of sport in addressing public health concerns has not been explored with much depth in sport management research (Berg, Warner, Das, 2015; Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hincekson, 2013). Specifically, as a mechanism for engaging underserved populations, sport for development programs could potentially help address public health concerns within marginalized communities. Thus, the proposed poster presentation is a conceptual assessment of how sport management scholars can bridge the gap between sport and health; particularly, the role that sport for development programs can play in producing positive health outcomes for underserved individuals.

Research indicates that health disparities exist in the United States, as the burden of illness, premature death, and disability disproportionately affects certain populations (CDC, 2014). For example, ethnic minority and low-income children are more likely to develop chronic illnesses (e.g., obesity and asthma), many of which can be prevented by regular physical activity and improvement in diet (Miller, 2000; Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2012). Accordingly, these marginalized populations are also more likely to engage in sedentary behavior and unhealthy eating (Fairclough et al., 2009). Fundamental Cause Theory (Link & Phelan, 1995) can be used to explain why health inequalities exist for disadvantaged populations. According to the theory, individuals with low socioeconomic status experience negative health outcomes because they do not have the resources to avoid risks and adopt protective strategies. Interventions aimed at increasing positive health outcomes for these marginalized populations should focus on addressing this concern (Phelan, Link, & Tehranifar, 2010).

Sport participation is one way to engage children in physical activity to reduce the risk of chronic disease (Henderson, 2010). Furthermore, sport’s ability to highlight and address social issues makes it an appropriate catalyst for addressing health inequalities (Sherry, Schulenkor, & Chalip, 2015). Public health scholars have acknowledged the link between sport and health. Specifically, Fairclough and colleagues (2009) suggest that efforts should be made to address inequalities in the prevalence of sedentary behaviors and sport participation in order to address health inequalities in children based on ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Sport Management scholars have begun to explore the link as well (Bergeron, 2007; Gotova, 2015). Chalip (2006) argued the importance of studying the relationship between sport and health in advancing sport management as a discipline. Additionally, in an effort to promote public health research within the field, Inoue and colleagues (2015) define the management of sport for public health as “a field of study broadly concerned with the role of egalitarian, elite, and entertainment sport in promoting the physical, mental, and social well-being of the general public while contributing to the prevention of disease and injury in and through sport” (pg. 1). Despite this growing focus on sport for public health, sport management scholars have not significantly explored the role of sport in addressing health inequalities. Exploring the role that sport for development programs can play in bridging that gap could have important implications for the health outcomes of underserved population and sport management as a whole.

Sport management scholars and practitioners have recognized the “power of sport,” and sport participation is regularly being used as a vehicle to address social issues (Crappe, 2006; Sherry, 2010). With that, the sub-discipline of sport for development (SfD) is growing rapidly. The goal of SfD programs is to use sport as a vehicle for social change in communities and as a way to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and contribute to peace-building efforts (Levermore, 2008; Sherry, Schulenkor, & Chalip, 2015; Welty Peachy & Lyras, 2015). Specifically, SfD programming is typically designed to focus on specific social issues that plague the population they serve.
existence of health inequalities among disadvantaged populations is a social issue, thus providing the perfect opportunity for SfD.

Both types of SfD programs, Sport Plus and Plus Sport, could help forge positive health outcomes for the people they serve. The main objective of Sport Plus programs is to increase participation in sport within groups that had been socially excluded (Sherry, 2010). These programs aim to reduce the barriers to entry to sports by providing resources, equipment and coaching. Typically, the benefits that participants might incur such as general fitness and health, development of life skills, and education are a secondary focus of Sport Plus programs. If administered effectively, these programs can improve health outcomes of participants by getting at the fundamental cause of health inequalities: lack of resources (Phelan, Link, & Tehranifar, 2010). On the other hand, Plus Sport programs put emphasis on sport being used as the tool to help foster social change. Usually, these types of programs combine a sport activity with an education component. In order to promote positive health outcomes for their participants, Plus Sport programs can develop curriculum focusing on reducing the risk factors of chronic illness (e.g., physical education, nutrition, smoking, alcohol use).

SfD programs have the potential to produce positive health outcomes for marginalized groups, and help bridge the gap between sport and health. This presents a great opportunity for SfD program administrators and sport management researchers. Program administrators might consider designing their programs to focus on improving the health of the community they serve. Furthermore, some SfD programs already include health promotion in their overarching mission and goals by encouraging physical activity through sport, fitness, and education (Williams, Wright, & Williams, 2014). However, it is important for researchers to evaluate what the programs are doing to achieve those goals, and explore to what extent those practices help to produce positive health outcomes. Scholars might also compare the health benefits produced by Sport Plus and Plus Sport SfD programs. These and other potential directions for sport management research will be discussed as a part of this poster presentation. This poster aims to facilitate conversations and exchange of ideas surrounding this topic to help advance the field.