

Ballin': Examining the Components of Sport Based Interventions which Lead to Holistic Benefits for African-American Girls

Joyce Olusbola, The University of Texas at Austin

B. Christine Green (Advisor), The University of Texas at Austin

Marlene Dixon (Advisor), The University of Texas at Austin

Floyd Jones, West Virginia University

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Literature on the effects of interscholastic sport participation on mental and athletic performance has shown conflicting results with regard to the benefits of sport on adolescent development (Coleman, 1961; Le Menestrel & Perkins, 2007; McHale, Vinden, Bush, Richer, Shaw, Smith, 2005; Zarratt, 2009). A deeper investigation into these studies uncovers a negative correlation for African- Americans between academic achievement and sport participation. Sport as a detriment to development can be attributed to a lack of cultural capital for African- Americans which results in low educational resources and high dependence on sport for survival, subsequently leading to poor academic performance (Eitle & Eitle, 2002). Dependency on sport can lead to high athletic identity or “toxic jock” identity which has been correlated with lower states of mental well being (Miller & Hoffman, 2009). This problem is further compounded for African American females given the gender disparities in sport opportunities and lack of research on this population (Trouman & Dafur, 2007). Yet, findings for White populations are often more positive (e.g., McHale, et al., 2005).

These findings have been used to criticize the nature (and sometimes even the presence) of sport programming for African Americans, particularly those living in working class or ghetto contexts (Berry & Smith, 2000; Smith, 1995). While it is certainly appropriate to call for greater emphasis on scholastic achievement and preparation for future work outside sport, the challenge, given the increase use of sport as a social intervention tool in this population (Coalter, 2001 Hartmann, 2003), seems to be to create sport environments that are appropriate to the social, cultural, and economic conditions in which African- American youth find themselves (Hanlon & Coleman, 2006; Schinke, Michel, Gauthier, et al., 2006). Despite the cultural popularity of sport in this demographic, little is known about how sport can be implemented to provide benefits to redress the socioecological barriers which create health and educational disparities in this population. The immense federal, state, and local attention and funding towards decreasing the social disparities in African- American communities stresses the growing interest in, and significance of, creating sport programs that lead to benefits for African- Americans. Thus, the task is to design, market, and manage sport programs in a manner that renders more positive and sustainable impacts for African Americans (Hellison & Martinek; 2007; Vail, 2007). The purpose of this study is to examine participants’ views of the role of sport in relation to other program components in facilitating their success and well-being after high school. Westinghouse Lady Bulldogs Basketball was selected to participate in the study based on the richness of the data that could be collected on how to recruit and retain participants in holistic sport programs for African- American girls. The program services high school African- American girls living in an area devastated by business divestment and gentrification. The school itself has suffered losses in enrollment, staff retention, and funding. To redress the individual and environmental factors which disadvantage students in this community, the coach, in conjunction with the Y.E.S. Foundation, created a program for young African- American women combining academic enhancement, athletic development, mentoring, and other social support components to prepare participants for successful lives after graduation. After IRB approval was granted and the coach granted permission to attend team events, the researcher began identifying key informants to begin data collection. In choosing subsequent participants that could give rich detail about the program, a snowball sampling method was used to identify current players, former players, and people close to the program for interviews. In total, two current players, six former players, two parents/guardians, the daughter of the coach, one school administrator, and the head coach were interviewed. Participation in the program ranged from two to four years with current participants, one to 21 years for former players, 4 to 10 years with parents and school administrator, and 25 years for the coach. Interviews were conducted over a three day period, in person, in the school or a local community room, and lasted from 7 to 50 minutes for individual interviews and 44 to 180 minutes for group interviews. A conversational approach was used to elicit detailed responses to the questions posed but also provide opportunities for the participants to comment and elaborate on topics not mentioned by the researcher as the goal was obtain the most complete understanding of the program and its benefits. All interview data were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The transcribed data was then reviewed by researcher and two senior researchers to discuss emerging patterns and themes. Those themes were used as a guide to begin open and axial coding with the NVivo 8 software and were placed in free nodes or tree nodes accordingly. Codes were then discussed again with the senior researchers to come to a consensus on how to define the codes and their accuracy in categorizing the data. Throughout the coding process, the following overarching values began to emerge as underlying components to the structure of the program and their derived benefits: Family, Education, Discipline, and, Civic Engagement. For example, parent described the family component of the program this way,

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From what I've witnessed her ministries- the family piece the nurturing piece, providing security, providing friendship, providing parenthood- the girls they are able to fellowship with one another in way I don't think other programs allow and when I say fellowship I mean they're able to be together in the weight room, in the pool, here at the Y, at each other's homes, in restaurants, in church. You know they study together so they are able to connect on another level other besides practice and games. It's a wide, wide spectrum that ends up into a big hug."(Diana, Mother of Former Participant Lisa, a former participant described the discipline provided by the program necessary, stating, "... Just discipline and that it's structured. So many things in their lives are washy and flip floppy nothing is ever concrete, their family lives never concrete you know. Other things in their life are not concrete you know. People go in and out their lives. So people leave them. Some people go friends come and go but this is concrete. This stays forever they could go in this program, do it, come back 20 years from now and still be the same way and I think that's what makes it the best..."

The data suggest that designing programs to illicit positive results must be done intentionally, with core values and a clear goal serving as the foundation. Values lead to consistency (tradition and legacy which serve as a marketing, recruitment, and resources development tool) and long term commitment (cf. Nakata & Sivakumar, 2001). Importantly, program structures are necessary, but insufficient to provide benefits without maintaining fidelity to core values. An organic structure, emphasizing flexibility in focus and resource utilization is vital to the sustainable of these programs over time due to the fluctuations of the participant's social environment. This study suggests that the key to replication is consistency in goals and in the values guiding the process; program structure is contingent on those two principles. Value driven implementation allows administrators to focus on the methods in relation to goals and values. Program replication would need to be context specific, geared towards resource development (i.e., human and other sustainable resources), long term (> 3 years), and continually monitored for value consistency. Researchers should continue to discern program specific practices from more universal ones that may translate to other settings.