Understanding the Local Sports Council as a Mechanism for Community Sport Development

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The notion of sport development is an important concept in how we understand and plan for advancements in sport participation and achievement. It can be characterized as "a process whereby effective opportunities, processes, systems and structures are set up to enable and encourage people in all or particular groups and areas to take part in sport and recreation or to improve their performance to whatever level they desire" (Collins, 1995, p. 21). The scope of literature on sport development is wide, ranging from policy analysis to social and personal change, as well as managing organizational relationships and practical interventions. The central focus of the related research has been on athlete development, with an emphasis on increasing sport participation and enhancing the level of sport performance (e.g., Girginov, 2008; Green, 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008).

Vail (1992, 1993, 2007) and others (e.g. Bolton, Fleming, & Elias, 2008; Boshoff, 1997; Frisby & Millar, 2002; Lawson, 2005) have used a community development perspective to inform their investigations of sport development and contend that this perspective is vital for not only athlete/participant development, but also for using common interests in sport to facilitate a social change process driven by communities themselves (Vail, 2007). More broadly, community development initiatives are a form of grassroots activity that have demonstrated effectiveness in addressing local needs (Kelly & Caputo, 2006). Specific to sport, some of these initiatives have addressed important issues such as training of community members as lay sport administrators in disadvantaged cities (Boshoff, 1997), involvement of marginalized citizens in local sport and recreation (Frisby & Millar, 2002), and improved communication and collaboration among community partners involved in sport provision at the local level (Vail, 1992, 1993). Bolton et al. (2008) suggest that community sport development recognizes the intimate relationship between community, citizens, and providers and takes on a non-hierarchical form of governance.

Local sports councils may be one vehicle for supporting sport development at the community or grassroots level. These organizations are not primary sport service providers; rather, they have the potential to act as an information conduit for policy and sport-related initiatives from all levels of government while providing leadership, integration, and a collective voice for sport in the community. While municipal governments have a substantial role in facilitating the delivery of sport and recreation at the community level (Thibault, Frisby, & Kikulis, 1999), sports councils tend to be arms-length organizations that provide support to a community’s sport infrastructure while drawing attention to sport policy (Nichols, Gratton, Shibli, & Taylor, 1998; Rose, 2007). Sports councils are comprised of active citizens who engage public and private initiatives in sport and recreation (Rose, 2007). In North America, sports councils provide a range of services and forms of support to their respective communities. Comparable organizations exist in the form of Regional Sports Assemblies in Australia (Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2009), and County Sport Partnerships in the United Kingdom (Houlihan & Lindsey, 2008). However, apart from identifying their basic characteristics, there has been little systematic investigation of these organizations. Thus, it is useful at this point to develop a theoretical understanding of the nature and role of the local sports council as a mechanism for community sport development.

To that end, the current study has adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach in order to conceptualize and ultimately derive an explanation of the role of these organizations in the community (Charmaz, 2006). Following the tenets of this approach, we are using an instrumental case study of one local sports council (Stake, 2003). The focal organization has been recognized as a leader among sports councils in the province of Ontario, Canada. It was formed in 1999 as an arms-length initiative of the municipal government in its home community. The “Local Sports Council” (LSC) is governed by a Board of Directors, staffed by an Executive Director, and has a membership comprising community sport clubs, facility representatives, and organizations and individuals with a vested interest in the development of sport in the city. Interviews have been conducted with the former and current Board Chairs and Executive Directors of the LSC (n = 6). Interviews are also underway with a sample of representatives from recent and long-time member organizations, and will continue until data saturation is reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In-person interviews are conducted whenever possible and all interviews are audio-
recorded and transcribed verbatim. An open-ended interview guide is used to uncover rich detail on the history, mandate, management, policies, relationships, and initiatives of the organization. Consistent with grounded theory, our method involves constant comparison, memo-writing, and analytic interpretation through initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006).

Preliminary findings reveal that, since its inception, the LSC has had a consistent mandate to provide opportunities and support for sport development through citizen-based leadership. Its role in community sport development has been in the form of advocacy, support, and inclusion through initiatives such as low-income sport access programs, collaborative grant writing, volunteer recognition awards, and a community sport Hall of Fame. However, it has experienced several shifts in the focus of activities as a result of internal and external pressures. The LSC has been governed by an influential board, with certain powerful members, representing a variety of community sectors and interests. Relationships between the board and member organizations, and among the member organizations, are not a central focus for the LSC, however the connection with municipal government has been noted as critical. The presentation will highlight concepts and patterns that inform a theoretical framework for understanding the nature and role of local sports councils in community sport development.

Several implications for community sport leaders, municipal governments, and policy makers at all levels of the sport system will be presented. The findings can begin to inform sport development policy and practice with regard to the nature and role of sports councils. Sport management educators may also find the presentation valuable as it highlights an under-researched organizational context and the potential for collaboration between citizens, local nonprofits, sport service providers, and municipal government in community sport development initiatives.

Select References:


