
Joyce Olushola, University of Texas at Austin
D. Floyd Jones, West Virginia University
B. Christine Green, University of Texas at Austin
Phyllis A. Jones, George Westinghouse High School

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 that 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 to 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, Vinden, Bush, 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 seems to be to create sport environments that are appropriate to the social, cultural, and economic conditions in which African American youth find themselves (Schinke, Michel, Gauthier, et al., 2006). Thus, the task is to design, market, and manage sport programs in a manner that renders more positive and sustainable impacts for African Americans.

A number of non-profit organizations have recognized this need and created programs which link sport participation with the development of self-concept, educational attainment, and life skills (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Institute for Athletics in Education, Youth Enrichment Services). While the relative emphasis on sport varies, there is an underlying assumption that sport can (and does) assist in the development of young people. Three categories of assistance have been identified (Green, 2008). Sport for social inclusion programs are based on the assumption that sport has inherent benefits, thus programs should be available to everyone. Sport as diversion programs such as midnight basketball, see sport as a way to keep teens busy thereby limiting the time they have to participate in antisocial activities. The third category, sport as a hook, uses the popularity and cultural acceptance of sport to bring teens into the program. Sport is merely one part of a program which includes non-sport components explicitly designed to develop broader social and life skills. These programs tend to downplay the capacity of sport to develop youth, instead relegating the sport component to one of recruitment and retention of participants. 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.

Participants of Y.E.S. (Youth Enrichment Services), a program which was designed by African American social scientists and community workers to prepare African-American girls to be successful were interviewed 2-5 years after graduating from high school (and participating in the program). The award winning program has been ongoing in the East Liberty section of Pittsburgh since 1994. It uses basketball as a hook to attract young women to the program (cf., Green, 2008). However, the overall goal of the program is academic success. Four components contribute to the program: academics, group activities, athletic development, and personal mentoring and intervention. As a result, the program contains activities in each of the four areas (Jones, 2009; Jones & Jones, 2002).

There is a great deal of evidence to support the efficacy of the Y.E.S. program (e.g., Jones, 1995; 1996; Jones, Lerner, & Jonson, 1996). There is evidence that active participation in the program results in the development of leadership skills, enhances academic performance and credentials, builds career skills, and builds confidence that enhances
graduates' sense of well-being. Yet, these same outcomes extend to participants of Y.E.S. programs that do not incorporate sport. This study seeks to understand the potential role of sport to contribute to African-American women's sense of well-being as they build their lives and careers after high school.

The sample consists of twenty randomly selected program graduates that completed the program at least 2 years and no more than 6 years prior to the study. This time frame was selected to ensure that respondents remembered their experience, and had had time enough to make the transition to adulthood. Interviews are in process and are being conducted in person and via telephone. All interviews are recorded (with permission of the interviewee) and transcribed. Semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit respondents' views of their experience in the program, and the ways in which the program has affected their lives. Sub-questions and probes are used to elicit participants' views of the role of their sport experiences vis-à-vis other program components. A seek, preserve, avoid framework (Hirschman, 1970) is used to seek recommendations for future program design.

Interviews are in the process of being transcribed. Coding will progress by identifying patterns, themes, and relationships among the data with particular attention to identifying the place of sport in people's experience and the outcomes participants link to their sport experiences (cf. Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The themes, patterns, and relationships identified via our analysis are expected to determine the potential role of sport to facilitate or hinder African-American women's well-being during their transition to adulthood. Implications for sport, program design, and the integration of sport, mentoring, and life-skills programs will be discussed.