Sport and Disadvantage: The Impact of Participation

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Sport is increasingly recognised as a means of promoting community development and engagement, with social inclusion and social capital two of the most prominent concepts used to explain the relationship (Collins & Kay, 2003; Liu, 2009; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). There is an established body of academic research linking participation in sport, recreation and the arts to improved health and wellbeing (Coalter, 2007; Lawson, 2005; Liu, 2009; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008); however, it is often not clear what the outcomes of participation are for specific population cohorts, such as people experiencing disadvantage.

Within Australia there is a distinct widening of the gap between ‘rich’ and ‘poor’, which has a direct impact on the ability of those less fortunate to gain access to sport and recreational activities (Collins & Kay, 2003). This study examines the impact of sport and recreation participation on the physical, mental and emotional health of people experiencing disadvantage, such as social isolation, drug addiction, mental health issues ranging from schizophrenia to depression, which in some cases is drug induced, problems with the law, including incarceration and repeat offending, homelessness and broken relationships. The specific context for the research was sport and recreation programs funded or supported by Reclink, a not for profit organization that provides services to people experiencing significant disadvantage throughout Australia.

The research utilised a qualitative method to explore the impact of sport and recreation participation on the lives of individuals. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who were active participants in Reclink funded or supported sport and recreational programs. The project collected and analysed data from twenty-eight interviews conducted from June-July, 2010; interviews lasted on average 30 minutes, which included an interviewee briefing. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed. The transcripts for each interview were used to probe emergent themes in subsequent interviews. The data analysis employed qualitative procedures aimed at uncovering themes in the perceptions of interviewees regarding the impact of Reclink supported and funded programs on their lives.

The findings reveal that many of the study’s participants faced an ongoing and daily battle with boredom and its consequences, and Reclink programs were able to successfully ameliorate some of the problems associated with a lack of purpose among the participants. One of the greatest benefits from participating in Reclink activities appears to be regular access to a support network, and being part of a community of people who have had similar experiences or difficulties, which in turns means that there is understanding and support from people who will stick with them through difficult times. The majority of interviewees revealed that they had either established friendships through a Reclink activity, or had strengthened existing relationships with other participants that they knew previously. At the very least Reclink activities appear to provide an environment in which participants can access regular social activity and interactions. The majority of interviewees also reported that their self esteem and confidence had been boosted by participating in Reclink activities, while it was also clear from the research that participation in Reclink activities was a catalyst for addressing drug problems.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the research. First, sport and recreation programs are often a catalyst for people experiencing severe disadvantage to transform their lives. Second, in the majority of cases sport and recreation successfully address the problems associated with boredom, stress and depression, which often have a corrosive effect on participants’ lives. Finally, sport and recreation programs provided by Reclink facilitate useful and durable social networks, which in turn have additional health benefits.