Sport as a Medium for Cultural Understanding? The Effectiveness of a Cross-Cultural Coaching Exchange

Carrie LeCrom, Virginia Commonwealth University
Brendan Dwyer, Virginia Commonwealth University

Abstract 2012-155

Over the past decade, sport has been gaining recognition as a valuable medium for promoting development and peace efforts, including but not limited to: public health issues, socialization of youth, social inclusion of the disadvantaged, economic development, and fostering intercultural exchange (Lyraas & Welty Peachey, in press). Consequently, the field of sport for development and peace (SDP) has blossomed, as organizations throughout the world have found value in sport, partly as a result of “the recognition that the orthodox policies of ‘development’ have failed to deliver their objectives” (Levermore & Beacom, 2009, p. 1). There is a common belief that sport can be a successful change agent that supports traditional development efforts; however, debate exists as to the effectiveness of individual programs, as there is still limited research and evidence in this area (Levermore, 2011; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011; Brunelli & Parisi, 2011).

As SDP efforts are often funded by external agencies, program coordinators may spin the evaluation in their favor, as they recognize that negative results might impact future funding (Levermore, 2011). “It’s a lot easier to simply justify your program’s existence than to do the hard work of justifying the impact of the intervention. That’s why all sport-for-development programs need rigorous monitoring and evaluation” (Wolff, 2011, p. 72). As a result, the academic sector has been encouraged to engage in the evaluation of SDP programs to help provide objective evidence and justification for the continuation of these efforts (Brunelli & Parisi, 2011; Levermore & Beacom, 2009). To this aim, the purpose of this research is to qualitatively evaluate one SDP initiative’s impact on cultural awareness and understanding.

Focusing not only on their own work in the field of SDP, but also on contributing to the discussions surrounding the evaluation of SDP, the researchers will provide evidence for the changes in cultural awareness and understanding resulting from a coaching education exchange program. The Developing and Improving Synergies in Chinese and United States Soccer (DISCUSS) program, developed for and funded by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, aimed to promote cultural understanding between the two countries through the sport of soccer. As a ‘sport plus’ (Levermore & Beacom, 2009) initiative, the program trained youth soccer coaches and administrators in the on- and off-field practices and methodologies aimed at developing players to be successful in soccer and in life. Meanwhile, the goal of increasing cultural awareness and understanding was the broader social issue being addressed.

DISCUSS was a two-way exchange program, which took place from 2010-2011. As part of Phase I (July 2010), 12 Shanghai Football Association (SFA) soccer coaches traveled to Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia, to take part in a 2-week coaches training program. Topics covered included technical, tactical, physical, and mental aspects of the game of soccer, teaching life skills through sport, communicating with players and parents, understanding differences in coaching boys and girls, and managing your team, among others. During Phase II of DISCUSS (July 2011), six U.S.-based soccer coaches and sport administration faculty traveled to Shanghai, China to administer a similar coaching program to over 50 SFA coaches, as well as to observe the changes that had occurred as a result of Phase I. Evaluation of both phases of DISCUSS is currently ongoing, but this presentation will specifically focus on the results of the 12 SFA coaches who participated in Phase I and Phase II of the program.

Responding to a growing concern in SDP evaluation that participants are often excluded from the analysis, the researchers employed a type of participatory methodology in analyzing the data, specifically the Rapid Appraisal Methods (RAMs) approach. The RAMs approach utilizes a combination of focus groups, interviews, informal discussions, and direct observation and, “provides relevant information rapidly; contributes to in-depth understanding; [and] is flexible” (Levermore, 2011, p. 342). In addition to the interviews, discussions and observation (all of which occurred during participants’ two-week visit to the United States), the researchers also
utilized three surveys, administered six-months before programming began, six-weeks before programming began, and six-months after programming concluded.

To ensure the study was grounded in theory and to properly measure the subjective reality of the participants in a way that is meaningful for the participants themselves, the theory of interpretivism was used as a guide in developing interview and survey questions, leading discussions, and observing interactions (Crotty, 2005). Researchers utilized method and researcher triangulation by questioning the same group of subjects in multiple ways, utilizing various methods of data collection, and enlisting a multi-member research team in the process. Additionally, reliability was addressed through member checking and tape-recording the interviews.

While all data has been collected, translated, and transcribed, analysis is ongoing (expected to be completed by March 1, 2012). The initial results indicate that this short-term exchange experience did affect change in cultural awareness and understanding among participants, and that sport had an influence on this change, as soccer was one of the ways in which cultural habits and tendencies were displayed. Additionally, specific components of the program (home-stays, sporting events, and interaction with youth) contributed to the overall outlook the Chinese participants took from the exchange. These and other results will be discussed.

According to Levermore and Beacom (2009), “sport in development has reached the point where it is critical to leverage the experience and knowledge of organizations operating across a broad range of programmes [sic], countries and issues to build an evidence-base that enables meaningful comparative analysis” (p. xiv). The current research aims to contribute to the conversation by providing a rigorous evaluation of a short-term exchange program in improving cultural awareness, as well as addressing how the results can impact future programs and practices.