Multiple Champions: An Exemplary Case of How One Local Government is Responding to Recent Immigrants

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In cities experiencing high levels of immigration, local sport and recreation providers are becoming increasingly aware of how difficult it is for newcomers to access the services offered (Doherty & Taylor 2007; Frisby, 2011). While not all municipalities are being proactive in responding to shifting demographics, one local government in Canada recently won an award for its newcomer program and is therefore considered to be exemplary (Gaskell, 1996). The purpose of this first phase of a larger case study was to examine the newcomer program from the perspectives of the managers and staff who were involved in its development and implementation. The specific research questions were: i) what are the factors that led to the development of the newcomer program, ii) what promising inclusion strategies are being implemented, and iii) what challenges are being encountered. We expect the benefits of studying an exemplary case will be to uncover what organizational inclusion strategies are working (and not working) to contribute to the ‘best practice’ evidence base that is currently lacking (Cortis, 2009).

We drew on Ponics’ (2007) definition and theoretical framework of social inclusion. She defined social inclusion as the process of creating just and equitable systems that facilitate people’s agency and opportunities to engage (or not) in a range of social and democratic activities, including sport and recreation. In this phase, we are focusing on the organizational dimension of Ponics’s framework, but will consider the psychosocial, relational, and broader structural dimensions in subsequent phases when we interview recent immigrants and various community partners. Our review of the literature uncovered examples of organizational exclusion rather than inclusion. For example, Taylor and Toohey (1999) found that Australian sport organizers blamed people’s cultures for their perceived lack of interest, and Allison and Hibbler (2004) reported that negative attitudes and stereotypes held by some local government recreation staff created barriers to serving ethnic minority populations.

We used a single embedded case study design (Yin, 2009, p. 18), which is “preferred in examining real life and contemporary events where multiple sources of data can be collected to investigate a distinctive situation.” While the findings cannot be generalized, Yin (2009) contends this design is appropriate when the goal is to extend existing theory and to provide a comparison point for the study of other cases. After obtaining ethical approval, our data sources included related documents (e.g., print and website information on the program and strategic plans of the city and recreation department) and interviews with all the managers (2) and staff (6) responsible for the newcomer program. Interviewees were asked about the reasons for developing the program, the success of inclusion strategies implemented, and challenges encountered. Member checks were conducted with interviewees by sending them transcribed transcripts that were subsequently entered into ATLAS ti, a qualitative data analysis program, for coding and analysis.

The results revealed how having not one but several staff who championed the newcomer program was a key factor driving its development. The six staff regularly interacted with newcomers who came to facilities or were referred by community partners and became very aware of the barriers they encountered. They also listened to suggestions from newcomers about what would facilitate their participation. Skinner et al. (2008) have also shown that local leadership is a critical success factor when developing programs for underserved groups. All interviewees saw having multiple staff champions reflected the department’s goal of creating a welcoming environment by being responsive to individual needs, which was also central to their definition of organizational inclusion. Key inclusion strategies entailed offering ‘welcome evenings’ led by Mandarin, Farsi, Korean and Tagalog speaking volunteer hosts; print and website marketing materials available in eleven different languages; a few multilingual program leaders; free sampler classes; and a leisure counseling approach to subsidy provision. They also had partnerships with several community organizations that are crucial for referrals and leveraging resources (Frisby, 2011; Skinner et al. 2008). The key challenge was sustaining all program elements when the one time grant received for implementation
ran out. The volunteer welcome evenings and free sampler classes were the program elements that were not sustained, although managers and staff expressed interest in resurrecting and diffusing the elements across all eleven of the city's facilities.

The next phase will examine the newcomer program from the perspectives of recent immigrants and community partners. This will provide additional insight into promising organizational inclusion strategies to help refine Ponic's (2007) theoretical framework, while also serving as a guide to other sport and recreation organizers striving to work proactively with diverse immigrant populations (Cortis, 2009).