Beyond Xs and Os: Administrator Roles in the Creation and Maintenance of Interscholastic Sport Programs for African-American Girls

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Socio-cultural

Abstract 2012-269

Saturday, May 26, 2012

20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(North)

Each year millions of African-American girls participate in interscholastic sport (fitness.gov). Some of these girls face unique developmental challenges given the intersection of race and gender, often conflated with low social economic status, in their perception of themselves and interaction with the world around them. These perceptions have been linked to deviant behaviors including teen pregnancy, over-aggressiveness, and poor academic performance (Eitle & Eitle, 2002). Sport for this population has been shown to be a powerful agent in salubrious socialization when implemented with the purpose of doing so (Chalip, 2006; Hellison & Martinek, 2007). Despite data highlighting the holistic benefits of sport participation for African-American girls, little is known about the process by which sport administrators create these sport programs or the benefits received by participants in these programs (Hartmann, 2001, 2003). Hartmann (2003) suggests that the ad hoc nature of these programs is a probable cause for the dearth of information. Created from the ground up, these programs usually are centered around, and dependent on, a sole administrator, and are contingent upon and confined to their communities, making them difficult to identify and even harder to evaluate. Uncovering this data is critical to creating more sustainable sport programs to redress the social, economic, and health disparities this population faces and to prohibit the cyclical nature of these inequities in adulthood. The purpose of this presentation is to examine the processes used by sport administrators to create and maintain sport programs for African-American girls.

Using a purposeful sampling method, administrators of a girls’ flag football program in the Southeast were chosen to illustrate the process of creating and maintaining the program in their city. The city has suffered from a loss of people, and consequently students, given the destruction of homes and communities by a major natural disaster. Relief efforts have been staggered and fragmented, particularly in the administration of public education. Local schools are governed by three different bodies, the local school district, the federal government, and the Catholic Church, which create challenges in addressing issues facing different student populations, including the promotion of self-control and other prosocial behaviors in African-American girls. The local school district’s athletic director, with the assistance of local teachers and the city’s sport commission, developed girls’ flag football to provide these girls with a means of developing these skills and meeting academic goals.

The grassroots nature of the program fosters a complex social environment between the sport administrators, program participants, and the larger society, lending itself to a case study approach (Yin, 2003). A case study is appropriate for investigating this topic as it allows the researcher to gather data on “understanding contemporary complex social phenomena” without manipulating participants to “retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life” (Yin, 2003, p. 2). More importantly, case studies also allow us to discern the factors which are unique to one context from those that have more universal application. A previous case study of a sport program geared towards African-American girls showed that African-American girls value athletic participation and academic success, benefit from African-American female role models, and value the relationships developed through sport participation (Olushola et al., 2010). Enabling their sport participation required sport administrators dedicated to their holistic development, transportation, and value driven program structure that focuses on education, family, civic engagement, and discipline. Building on that case, the current study will help us further understand sport participation and its benefits among African-American girls with the goal of developing theory and practice for effective sport management in this population.

Semi-structured interviews are currently being conducted with the administrators on the components critical to them in building sport programs for African-American girls. Questions in the interview guide are based in literature on sport-for-development (Hartmann, 2003), African-American female athletes (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2006; Carter, 2010), and sport programs for underserved youth (Hellison, Martinek, & Walsh, 2007; Smith & Smoll,
1979; Theokas et al., 2007). Questions are designed to obtain background information (e.g., “How many years have you been a coaching/administering sport programs for African-American girls?”) and program specific data (e.g., “How are the needs of students identified?”). Sub-questions and probes are being used to elicit the administrators’ experience in creating and maintaining sport components that provide positive benefits for African-American girls. All interviews are digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using logic models to describe the administrators’ experience in creating and shaping the program.

Logic models will be used for data analysis. These models provide insight into the goals of these administrators and how they implement different sport components to meet these goals. Given the dynamic nature of such programs, these models also provide room to discuss the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes that shape the overall program implementation over time. Data collected from the interviews will be reviewed and coded into causes and/or effects in order to create a model (or models) of the process undergone to make the program as it is seen today. The model(s) will then be discussed with expert researchers in the field of sport development until a consensus is reached about the processes presented via the data. Triangulation of data will be performed by reviewing the information with the administrators and coming to a consensus about how the coded data represents what they wanted to convey. The data from the member check will be used to recode the data as necessary to best represent the processes conveyed by the informants.

Initial findings suggest the success of this program lies in the dedication of the athletic director and the coaches in securing participation of the girls and facilities needed for play. Challenges to the girls’ participation include transportation, access to playing and/or practice fields, time constraints due to participation in other sports or to home obligations, and delays in obtaining uniforms and safety equipment. In maintaining participation opportunities, partnerships with local businesses and organizations are vital to the funding of the program and can be leveraged to meet program goals outside of the sport context. Initial success has been observed through the addition of more schools and participants to the program, participants’ positive behavior changes at home and school, and the retention of past participants.

This research provides further insight into sport’s ability to provide social benefits for African-American girls and further legitimize the need for trained sport managers to oversee sport-for-development programs. The importance of program structure and the underpinning values guiding the structure in providing benefits to sport participants are also explored.