Changing the Play: Using Action Research to Reform Youth Sport

Socio-cultural

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20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
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The rate at which children participate in the most popular youth sports in the United States has been declining in recent years (SBRnet, 2014). This rate of decline has been of increasing concern, particularly as it is expected to have negative consequences for the current and future wellbeing of the nation. The recent release of Designed to Move (MacCallum, Howson, Gopuoff, 2013) reviewed the risks, and set forth an action agenda to reverse the trend. In order to move that agenda forward, The Aspen Institute launched Project Play to build an agenda for reform of youth sports in the United States (http://www.aspenprojectplay.org). That initiative has engaged an array of thought leaders and executives from national sport organizations, and has produced white papers and reports intended to foster changes in the ways that youth sports are designed and delivered to American children. The missing piece has been engagement of local-level executives and grassroots youth sport programmers. Although reformulation of policies at the national level is clearly important in order to shift the national agenda and consequent culture of youth sport, social change also requires initiatives at the local grassroots level in order to enable changes to occur where they must be implemented (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). In order to complement Project Play with an initiative focused on the grassroots, a state-based effort was formulated in 2013 and implemented in 2014 (http://www.rst.illinois.edu/youthsport/). Since attempts to foster change take place in a context of uncertainty, research can be a vital component of any change effort (St. John, 2013), and action research is particularly effective means by which research enable social change (Kemmis, 2014). Chalip (1997) argued that action research is a vital means to advance sport management theory and practice simultaneously. Frisby et al. (2005) argued that incorporating those who must create and experience change into the action research process is particularly useful. Consequently, the state-based initiative has adopted a participatory action research framework.

Youth sport is known to be fraught with a number of challenges that can inhibit change of program design or implementation. Parents can become overly identified with their child’s performance with the result that they undermine program quality, and/or push their children in ways that create negative experiences for their children (Kanters & Estes, 2002). Adult demands for wins can intensify the pressure and training to the point that children choose to quit (Gould et al., 1996). A focus on competitive success can create social dynamics that make it challenging to sustain some youth sport programs (Chalip & Scott, 2005). The number of athletes to be included on teams is often limited with the result that some potential youth sport participants are cut and consequently discouraged from participating (Capstick & Trudel, 2010). Nevertheless, youth sport that is designed and implemented in a child-centered fashion can render positive benefits for participants (Le Menestrel & Perkins, 2007), and can attract families that might otherwise choose not to participate (Green, 1997). Nevertheless, the culturally dominant professionalized model of sport can undermine child-centered program designs (Chalip & Green, 1998). These matters must be considered in any effort to change youth sport, and they demonstrate that so doing is fundamentally a social change task. This presentation reports findings from the first stage of action research in the state-based effort to change youth sport.

In order to engage youth sport programmers and local-level youth sport policymakers, and obtain their commitment, a 2-day workshop was designed for 64 local-level executives and leaders of state and local organizations playing a key role in the design and implementation of sport for youth. The workshop was designed using standard protocols for such events (Creighton, 1981); the number of invitees was chosen after a review of potential participants, and was intended to enable eight working tables of each individuals each. The workshop consisted of three sessions (two on day 1, and one on day 2) of short (15 minutes each) presentations by nationally recognized experts regarding issues and ideals for youth sport, each of which was followed by each table working to identify needs and possible solutions. Tables subsequently reported their findings. The purpose of the workshop was three-fold: (1) to set a
Participants identified six target foci for positive reform of youth sport: (1) revision of sport programming so that it is child-centered and consistent with long-term [rather than short-term] athlete development, (2) formulation and implementation of strategies and tactics to manage parents, (3) systems to train coaches to be life skill mentors as well as sport instructors, (4) means to more creatively develop and manage resources for youth sport, (5) marketing and public relations to build status for participating in sport rather than merely for competitive success, and (6) designing and implementing programs for traditionally underserved populations. Between 3-5 reasons for each target focus were identified, and between 5-8 challenges for addressing each were identified. Participants also formulated between 6-12 tactics to address each. They suggested the following follow-up steps to enable change: (1) creation of working groups to undertake future work, (2) development and delivery of local-level workshops to enable change, (3) program evaluation, and (4) implementation of youth sport reforms in one or more communities to test methods and program alternatives that could then be shared with other communities. All four of these suggestions are being implemented.

The need for more child-centered programming, management of parents, systems to train coaches, and service to traditionally under-served groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, disabled, girls, poor) have been clearly articulated in the research literature. However, the breadth and depth of resource challenges and the need to reframe the status hierarchy in sport have not been given comparable attention. More research is needed to address these matters. Participants’ enthusiastic reception of the workshop and their demonstrated commitment to engage in working groups indicates that there is substantial concern among practitioners regarding youth-sport, and a substantial desire to improve it. Action research that assists local-level executives and regional youth sport leaders to form alliances and engage in the process of change may be a viable, perhaps even necessary, means to enable positive change in youth sport design and delivery.