A Systematic Review of Sport and Youth Development

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Positive youth development (PYD) has emerged as a popular framework guiding a variety of youth sport programs (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2014). Theoretically, youth who are able to continuously align their personal assets with contextual resources are more likely to contribute positively to the development of self, family, community, and civil society (Theokas et al., 2005). However, much of the research examining the relationship between youth sport and PYD has focused disproportionately on individual attributes (i.e., self-esteem, social competence), with less attention to contextual resources or conditions. Although proximal environments, program features, and organizational capacities significantly influence the ability of youth sport programs to facilitate PYD (Doherty & Cousens, 2013), they are seldom accounted for in empirical research (Coalter, 2010). Consequently, despite a large body of literature detailing individual outcomes associated with youth sport participation, there is much less information on how these outcomes (both positive and negative) occur (Coakley, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, many youth sport programs, particularly in North America, have developed along similar reductionist paradigms (Coakley, 2011). Rather than acknowledging the social and economic conditions that may inhibit positive youth development, many programs focus primarily on developing individual skills and abilities related to PYD (Riley & Anderson-Butcher, 2012). In these settings, the responsibility for positive development is placed almost exclusively on the individual, with less attention to the structural or social constraints that may constrain important contextual relationships. As a result, many programs are informed by overly positive outlooks which suggest youth can “take responsibility for helping themselves to get ahead and thrive” (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2011, p. 681). As noted by Coalter (2010), this trend is evident in the proliferation of youth sport programs that attempt “to solve broad gauge problems via limited focus interventions.” (p. 295). In response to these critiques, scholars and practitioners have called for more process-based approaches to youth sport program design and research (Coalter, 2010). These approaches are intended to contextualize observed developmental outcomes, and facilitate organizational development by linking organizational inputs and processes to pertinent outcomes.

Thus, the purpose of this presentation is to inform the development of these process-based approaches by presenting the results of a systematic review aimed at identifying the trends, findings, and assumptions inherent in sport-based youth development literature. While previous reviews have summarized the relationship between sport participation and PYD outcomes (see Holt & Neely, 2011), this presentation will provide a broader depiction of the process by using theory of change (Weiss, 1995) to frame analysis. Theory of change has frequently been adapted to analyze the underlying logic of programs working for social change (Weiss, 1995). It allows researchers to not only determine whether a change model is effective, but also sharpens change logic by clarifying outcomes, specifying inputs and activities, and identifying potentially influential contextual factors (Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Coryn et al., 2011). Within the youth sport context, this model may be used to identify which segments of the change model (i.e., inputs/resources, activities/outputs, program impacts) have been focused on most intently by researchers, and how each section may relate to promoting PYD through sport. Using theory of change as a framework, this presentation will provide a deeper understanding of how PYD has been conceptualized in the sport context, identify gaps in the literature, and offer informed recommendations for future research agendas.

The systematic review will include all empirical studies, conceptual papers, book chapters, and other research articles from peer reviewed journals related to sport-based PYD. Seven academic databases will be searched (SportDiscus, PsychINFO, ERIC, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts, PsychArticles, and Academic Search Premiere), and articles included for review will be identified using variants of the following search terms: “sport*”, “youth*”, and “develop*”. Articles will be screened through an iterative review process based on 1) title and key words, 2) abstract,
and 3) content (Bocarro et al., 2008; Floyd et al., 2008). Descriptive analysis will be used to identify research contexts, methodologies employed, and phases of the change model incorporated. After counts are completed, content analysis (Babbie, 2013) will be used to identify key research themes, profile PYD outcomes associated with sport participation, and provide an understanding of how the logic undergirding sport-based PYD is conceptualized and incorporated into research designs. This analysis will provide a comprehensive review of how PYD is being studied in the sport context, as well as the related processes and contextual factors that may support or constrain youth development.

As stated by Coakley (2011), the relationship between youth sport and PYD is contingent upon a variety of factors related to the theory of change that guides sport initiatives. Despite the importance of these factors in contributing to PYD, there are concerns that many empirical studies have focused disproportionately on program impacts (i.e., initial outcomes, intermediate outcomes, and long-term outcomes). Although outcome assessments are critically important, there is a need to supplement this work with information on the conditions, processes, and structures influencing development. This systematic integrative literature review provides a first step in that process by examining what is known about the relationship between youth sport and PYD, and directing scholarly attention toward areas requiring further consideration. In addition, by adapting theory of change to guide analysis, this study will help elucidate connections between youth sport programs and broader contextual climates, which is essential to facilitating sustainable development (Hartmann & Kwuak, 2011). This is especially critical for sport management scholars in contemporary society, as PYD is increasingly comprehended, conceptualized, and applied differently amongst diverse populations (Green & Bowers, 2013). Similarly, understanding these process and contextual influences will help sport management scholars position youth sport programs within broader developmental goals, and maximize the utility of their research (Levermore, 2011).