Sport for Social Change in the City: Case Southeastern United States

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The United Nations Millennium Developmental Goals (MDG) included the ability of sport to provide aid for various social issues. Since then, sport has been taken up by numerous governments and non-profit agencies around the globe to assist marginalized groups of people in the betterment of their lives (United Nations, 2003). Levermore (2008b) listed goals such as conflict resolution, promotion for cultural understanding, and empowerment of women and children, with over 200 projects serving those goals in low-income countries.

In the United States, Messner (2014) emphasized on the importance of continuing to do research in youth sports as fewer children are participating in physical activity today. Some of the reasons why we see fewer number in sport participation in the United States are: “lack of neighborhood recreation spaces, inadequate coaching, rising costs and exclusionary league and team policies, excessive time demands on families, safety concerns, cultural norms, and too few sport options to accommodate the interests of all” as some of the most prevalent obstacles facing kids and their parents (Project Play, p. 2). These obstacles mostly hurt low-income parents that work multiple jobs or lack the means to transport their children. Fortunately, nonprofit organizations have stepped in to provide sports for this demographic, however, there are many children who are not reached or the sport of their preference is not offered.

Furthermore, Americans are becoming more and more isolated and individualistic (Putnam, 2001) and the sense of community is lost. Sports remain one of the few areas where people still come together and socialize. Putnam (2001) argued that there are benefits to having close-knit relationships and community capital, as people can lower transactional costs by asking for favors and giving back to those that have previously helped them. There is access to more information by being connected to others who might know more or have different resources.

This research looks at a sport organization that caters to low-income children who may not otherwise participate in organized sporting activities. They provide equipment, coaching, transportation, volunteers, training, and facilities to many families who live in government housing and do not have the ability to have their children in sports. The organization offers American football, cheerleading, gymnastics, basketball, and most recently tennis. Most sports, apart from football and basketball, are non-competitive and provide a safe, fun environment for children to play and express themselves through sports.

Through sports, the organization is focused on fostering a community among the children, parents, coaches, and volunteers that extends beyond sport. Thus, the purpose of this research is to understand how the organization being studied succeeds in fostering communities within and outside the sports field. The research questions were: 1) what are the main barriers for sport participation of low income minority parents taking part in this program? and 2) in what ways has the program enhances the lives of its participants, their families, coaches, and volunteers?

Ethnographic methods of participant observations, interviews, and document analysis which are widely used in qualitative data collection and research, were employed in this study. They originated from ethnographers’ long traditions of lengthy stays with foreign cultures, however, they are now used for shorter periods of time and in local cultures and classrooms to inquire about various phenomena. This method was deemed appropriate as the purpose of this research was to find the relationships being developed on a deeper personal level between people involved with the nonprofit organization.

Van Maanen (2011) wrote that: “Ethnographic writings can and do inform human conduct and judgment in innumerable ways by pointing to the choices and restrictions that reside at the very heart of social life” (p.1).

Participant observations allow the researcher to get access to the community she is studying (Glesne, 2016). So far, I have spent four months observing four different sports and writing up fieldnotes after every observation. I have also used semi-structured interviews, which is a technique commonly used in qualitative research and it aims to gain...
insight into the subject’s life world and add a deeper comprehension of how they make meaning of certain processes. (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, Roulston, 2010). Documents or artifacts were also collected and included program advertisements or pamphlets, volunteer manuals, parental guidelines, training sheets distributed to volunteers before or after practices, donor communication, grant applications, monthly newsletters, information posted on their official website and other social media accounts, etc. Those artifacts added another layer of data that provided more depth to the study consisted with document analysis methodology (Prior, 2003). Furthermore, I used it to cross-reference my experience as a volunteer and what the organizational goals are for their volunteers.

My other two involvements were as a leader/coach of the newly added tennis program and for football I was an observer. These roles provided for three different angles of data collection and the observations, interviews, and document analysis ensured that data can be triangulated for validity.

Preliminary results show that indeed many of the children would not otherwise be taking part in sporting activities. For all sports, the main obstacle for many parents remains transportation to and from practices and game days. The nonprofit organization provides rides by bus, coaches and volunteers pick up children, or parents help out other parents once they get to know each other. This extends beyond just transportation as deeper relationships are created between participants, coaches, volunteers and families. One grandmother who takes care of her grandson noted that when her car broke down, the volunteer who regularly took her grandson to tennis practice, took him to school as well. This provides for the nonmonetary exchange of capital between members of a close-knit community as found in the literature (Putnam, 2001). Thus, the organization helps foster relationships between members of the community who have different socio-economic status and access to various resources. This was confirmed by the document analysis, as all volunteers go through training where they learn about the realities of the families who are served. This prepares them to deal with situations and circumstances quite different than their own.

So far, analysis of the semi-structured interviews shows that participants receive a wide range of benefits from the program. A single mother noted that her son now has positive male role models in his life in the face of male coaches and volunteers, as before he did not have that interaction. She noted a change in his behavior. When she and her son were new to the program, she would stop him from going to practice when he misbehaved in school. The coaches told her to bring him to practice and that they would talk to him. He now does not miss practice and behaves well in school.

On the volunteer side, when asked about the reasons to coach, one young men answered: “I have a passion for giving back to the community and I believe there is no better way to do that than invest in the children”. Another volunteer noted: “I enjoy helping the community I live in”. Many of the volunteer coaches have been with the organization for seven to eight years and more continue to express interest to join this growing organization.

From a coaching perspective and as someone starting a new sports program, I found that consistency of participation was the hardest one to achieve. There are many obstacles that these families face and it is easy for the sports program to fall behind in their schedule.

This is just the beginning of data analysis and there are rich accounts that will add to thick description of the experiences and relationship between between the people involved with this non-profit organization. Data analysis will be completed before the presentation of this paper and by the conference dates, I will have completed the study.