Evaluating a Socially Responsible, Sport-for-Development Program: Shared Growth, Beneficiary Impacts, and Strategic Payback

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Sport-for-development (S4D) and social responsibility (SR) programs in the professional sport industry have been promoted as fostering similar outcomes (United Nations, 2014; Walker & Kent, 2009), which broadly include (but are certainly not limited to) reinvigorating disadvantaged communities, health promotion, gender equality, social integration, social capital development, and peace building. Despite such overlap, each are vastly different in both conceptual development and operational deployment. The evaluation of SR programs have focused mainly on strategic ‘paybacks’ (i.e., business-level benefits) to the focal organization (Bhattacharya et al., 2009; Burke & Logsdon, 1996; Hanke & Stark, 2009; Inoue et al., 2011; Walker & Kent, 2013; Weber, 2008), whereas S4D program evaluations have been centered on beneficiary and societal impacts (Coalter, 2007), a critical element that has been largely ignored in SR research (Irwin et al., 2010; Kihl et al., 2014; Schulenkorf, 2012; Walker et al., 2015).

As SR by professional sports organizations becomes the norm, rather than the exception, academics and consumers are becoming ever-more cynical about ‘social self-promotion’ without third-party evidence of the actual social and beneficiary impacts (Wagner et al., 2009). For example, research has shown that when consumers perceive an organization as deploying SR strategically (i.e., seeking payback rather than social impact), negative organizational perceptions result (Walker et al., 2010). As such, there is a need for SR evaluations to incorporate beneficiary and society impact assessments. According to Smith and Westerbeek (2007), there is an overlap between the social responsibilities of the sport and corporate worlds, and “… an opportunity lies at the intersection of these mutual responsibilities in the combination of the financial leverage available to corporations and the distributive symbolic power inherent in sport” (p. 43). Such partnerships are becoming increasingly evident. For example, Barclays bank uses sport as a vehicle for deploying SR via their ‘Spaces for Sport’ initiative that funds S4D initiatives in various communities in the United Kingdom (UK). However, organizations are unlikely to continue funding S4D without evidence that these initiatives are providing some form of payback. As such, there is a need for S4D evaluations to incorporate strategic payback for corporate funders, in addition to impacts on beneficiaries and society. In other words, SR evaluators have much to learn from S4D evaluators and vice-versa.

By measuring both social impacts and strategic payback, evaluations have the opportunity “… to demonstrate the elusive win-win proposition of organizations not only benefitting themselves but also program beneficiaries” (Walker et al., 2015, p. 1). Such an approach moves towards creating shared value, which according to Porter and Kramer (2011), “… involves creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges” (p. 64); and reconnecting company success with social progress to “… enhance the competitiveness of a company while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the communities in which it operates” (p. 66). This study examined the viability of such an approach by evaluating a socially responsible, S4D program in the UK.

Research Setting
A three month school-based program in the UK, delivered and funded by a high-profile professional sports league, was evaluated from the dual perspective of desired beneficiary impacts (i.e., enhancing character attributes and values, and increasing enjoyment in and levels of physical activity) and strategic payback (i.e., increased identification with the league, its member teams, and the sport in general). From the community perspective, this program can be conceptualized as S4D as their focus was largely on beneficiary impact. However, from the perspective of the league executives (i.e., the program funders), the program was conceptualized as SR from which some form of strategic payback (e.g., increased levels of identification) was required for continued support. This dyadic intersection makes this particular setting an interesting one for both SR and S4D scholars.
Method
Data collection consisted of pre- and post-program questionnaires, personal tracking logs for physical activity involvement, participant focus groups, and administrator interviews. A quasi-experimental design was used to estimate the impact of the sport-based intervention on the target group through the use of a control group. The analyses took place over a three month period, and consisted of six schools with classes of 9-11 year old children. Three schools had two classes in each age group, from which three classes were used as a control group. The questionnaire data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests to detect changes among the research outcomes from the pre- to post-intervention, and between program participants and the control group. Regression analyses were used for more specific questions that emerged from the data. Pre-and post-program focus groups were used to identify feelings towards physical activity, understanding and beliefs about positive character attributes, and feelings towards the sports league and the sport used as the vehicle for personal change. Six pre- and six post-program focus groups were conducted. Each focus group consisted of six boys and six girls, with the same participants being used in both conditions. The post-intervention focus groups considered the delivery of the program to establish the processes that lead to the impacts achieved. The data were triangulated against administrator interviews and the quantitative results. Interview and focus group data were analyzed by transcribing the audio recordings to identify themes related to the key performance indicators established at the program’s outset.

Results and Discussion
A total of N=361 individuals completed the pre- and post-program questionnaires (n=292 program participants; n=69 control group participants). Prior to the program, 42% of participants were defined as physically inactive (i.e., engaging in less than 30 minutes of physical activity outside of school in one month). At the end of program, 13% of participants were defined as physically inactive, a decrease of 29%. Physical activity was not significantly influenced among the control group but there was a significant difference in post-program physical activity levels between program participants and control group participants [F(3, 343)=4.70, p=.003]. For program participants, significant and positive changes were revealed for the following character attributes: unselfishness (p<.05, d=.56), self-control (p<.05, d=.49), self-awareness (p<.05, d=.23), individual loyalty (p<.05, d=.21), and perseverance (p<.05, d=.20), however, the positive mean score changes for respect and pro-sociality were not statistically significant. There was a significant difference in the post-intervention scores for unselfishness and self-control between program participants and the control group [F(2, 356)=5.65, p=.007]. Based on this, the significant influence of unselfishness and self-control can be confidently attributed to the program. Changes in self-awareness, individual loyalty, and perseverance were seen among both experimental and control groups, which means that something other than the program delivery was influencing these changes. The program significantly enhanced participant affinity for the sport (p<.05, d=.31), and for the sport team representing their school (p<.05, d=.30), but not for overall sport league perceptions. Participant recognition of the six sport team logos and team locations (i.e., city where the team was housed) significantly increased after the program (Mpre=5.60, Mpost=8.09, d=.70). Overall, this program was found to significantly enhance levels of physical activity as well as certain character attributes, demonstrating beneficiary impact. Strategic payback was also evident with enhanced sport and team affinity. Such shared value likely contributed to the program being renewed and expanded the following year.