What’s Our Play? The Role of Front-line Sport Management Professionals in Promoting Physical Literacy in North American Youth

Catherine Quatman-Yates, Cincinnati Children's Hospital
Trevor Bopp, University of Florida
Christin Zwolski, Cincinnati Children's Hospital

Socio-Cultural - Community (Youth Sport) 60-minute symposium, roundtable, or workshop
Abstract 2017-244
Friday, June 2, 2017 3:10 PM
Room: Yale

Over the last several years, there has been considerable world-wide interest in the emerging concept and field of study of physical literacy. Defined as the “ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life” (Play, 2015a, 2015b, 2016), physical literacy is thought to be a cornerstone to lifelong health and fitness (Whitehead, 2001, 2010). Childhood and early adolescence have been hailed as critical windows for the development of optimal physical literacy (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013; Lloyd et al., 2016). The underlying foundation of the physical literacy model suggests that there are a fundamental set of movement skills and fitness level that should be mastered during childhood to facilitate the potential for long-term engagement and confidence in physical activity (Bergeron et al., 2015; Mountjoy et al., 2011). Insufficient mastery of these skills can lead to an inability to physically and socially keep up with active peers, which can in turn, lead to cascading down-stream effects on motivation, desire, and ability to be physically active and avoid injury in later adolescence and adulthood (Bergeron et al., 2015; Emery & Meeuwisse, 2010; Hägglund, Atroshi, Wagner, & Waldén, 2013).

Recent recommendations and position statements promoting physical activity in youth from the World Health Organization (Organization, 2010), the National Strength and Conditioning Association (Lloyd et al., 2016), and the International Olympic Committee (Bergeron et al., 2015) have all highlighted that the population of youth today is alarmingly less physically active compared to the generations that have preceded them. A recent survey of sport participation rates by age, gender, and income level revealed the percentage of youth participating in “high-calorie burning activities” a minimum of 151 times per year has fallen since 2008 from 30.2% to 26.6% for children ages 6 to 12 years and from 42.7% to 39.3% among adolescents (Play, 2016). Research also suggests that up to 70%, will quit sports all together by age 14 (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). Moreover, participation in organized sports alone does not guarantee the recommended amount of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Leek et al., 2011; Troiano et al., 2008). Estimates indicate that only about 24% of youth sports participants meet the moderate-to-vigorous recommendation during team practice, as more than 55% of time can be spent standing in line and receiving verbal instruction (Leek et al., 2011).

From a different perspective, there are rising concerns about emerging trends of pushing youth to higher intensities and more frequent training schedules at younger and younger levels in youth sport programs (N. Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick, & Labella, 2013; LaPrade et al., 2016; Malina, 2010). Thus, we see a dichotomy of physical activity behavior extremes in our youth. On one end of the spectrum sit the kids who lead increasingly sedentary lifestyles, with little to no access to recess or physical education and increasing rates of disease, such as diabetes and obesity (Feeley, Agel, & LaPrade, 2015). At the other end of the physical activity spectrum live the kids who participate in intense amounts of physical activity, specializing early in their respective sports, and at high risk for overuse injuries and burnout (Feeley et al., 2015; N. A. Jayanthi, LaBell, Fischer, Pasulka, & Dugas, 2015). These extremes paint a bleak picture for the physical literacy and overall health and well-being of the next generations.

Current efforts for the promotion of physical literacy among children in the United States and Canada have been spearheaded by several high-profile initiatives and programs (e.g, Canadian Sport 4 Life, the Aspen Institute’s Project Play, and SHAPE America). Many of these programs emphasize the need for physical literacy to be more than simply a learning outcome for physical education and advocate for it to be a cause that more programs outside of the educational systems adopt. For example, Project Play, which was launched in 2013 by the Sports and Society Program of the Aspen Institute, is designed as wide-scale multi-stakeholder intervention for improving the country’s youth sports culture. Through summits, roundtable discussions, and town hall meetings, thought leaders have...
convened to produce a number of groundbreaking reports to guide members from all sectors. The leaders behind Project Play have called upon these members to name their “play,” or meaningful commitments to action, in order to grow the physical literacy movement in this country. Sport management professionals in particular have been recognized as vital stakeholders in the provision of quality sport experience for all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, family income, and disability.

The format for the forum will be comprised of three parts. Part I will familiarize the audience with the concept of physical literacy, the Aspen Institute’s Project Play initiative, and some highlights from Project Play Summits. The focus of Part I will be to establish a foundation for why sport managers should care about and engage in physical literacy research and the Project Play movement. The presenters will draw upon several medical and socio-cultural theories and conceptual models to substantiate the points of emphasis. Part II will move the discussion toward how sport managers and sport management educators can integrate and apply physical literacy principles in practice and trainings. To do so, the presenters will provide several case examples from different youth sport stakeholder perspectives and lead the audience through an interactive dialogue about application strategies. Part III will focus on what research questions and strategies sport management scholars might embrace to support physical literacy promotion efforts. The format for Part III will entail a collaborative brainstorming session facilitated by the presenters.