Examining Representations of Sport in Sport for Development: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Language Used by Organizations to Communicate Sport and Physical Activities

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The United Nations has adopted several resolutions recognizing sport as a valuable tool for accomplishing development goals (Beutler, 2008; Coalter, 2010; Lemke, 2016). As a result, the field of sport for development (SFD) has become proliferated with practical interventions and research focused on using sport to promote positive social change in diverse contexts (Coalter, 2007, 2013; Levermore & Beacom, 2009; Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014; Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016). Despite the increased attention from researchers, few studies have critically examined the nature of the sports and activities used for delivering SFD interventions (Darnell, Chawansky, Marchesseault, Holmes, & Hayhurst, 2016; Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016).

According to the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace (2003, p. v), sport in the context of SFD encompass “all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction. These include play; recreation; organized, casual or competitive sport; and indigenous sports or games.” To date, the literature suggests soccer is overwhelmingly used as the primary means for delivering SFD programs (Schulenkorf et al., 2016). This indicates a rather narrow definition of sport in SFD practice (Darnell et al., 2016). Although soccer is arguably one of the world’s most popular sports and requires little equipment (Martinez, 2008), critical scholars have raised several concerns about its popular use in SFD. For example, traditional organized sports remain competitive and highly institutionalized (Darnell et al., 2016). These sports often marginalize participants by age, skill levels, and gender (Thorpe, 2016). Consequently, the popularity of soccer in SFD can result in unintended outcomes (Rookwood & Palmer, 2011; Darnell et. al, 2016). Therefore, more critical engagement with SDP practice and the literature is needed for advancing the field (Burnett, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to examine representations of sport in SFD practice. Specifically, the researcher was guided by the following questions: (a) how is sport defined by SFD organizations? (b) what language is used to communicate the role of sport and physical activities in SFD efforts? and (c) do organizational discourses vary depending on the type of sports and physical activities used? Findings from this study will contribute to the literature by expanding our understanding of how practitioners view and communicate the nature of sport (Darnell et al., 2016).

A qualitative method was chosen to address the purpose of this study. A purposive sample of 30-40 organizations will be identified to represent a diverse range of SFD organizations, geographical locations, and sports and physical activities. Organizational documents, including organizational newsletters and annual reports, created by SFD organizations are currently being collected for further analysis. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be used to explore the language used by organizations in constructing social meanings of sport and the role of particular sport(s) and physical activities in SFD programs (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). This approach has previously been employed to examine how indigenous SFD programs are reported in local and national media (Coleby & Giles, 2013). The use of CDA allows the researcher to develop a more detailed contextual understanding of the terminologies and words used by each organization (Creswell, 2013). The primary purpose of this analysis is to examine the discursive representations of sport in organizational documents, which enables for a deeper understanding of the espoused values and meanings of sport in SFD practice (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider, 2008). Additionally, a content analysis will be conducted in terms of information communicated by each organization to external stakeholders through publicly available information. This includes information on organizational websites and organizational social media accounts. This analysis will enable the researcher to examine the language used to communicate the sport(s) and physical activities used in SFD efforts and whether these discourses vary across different means of communication.
Findings from this study will contribute to the literature by indicating how SFD organizations are defining sport within the contexts of their programs. Specifically, results from this analysis will indicate whether definitions of sport in SFD practice reflect the broad definition set forth by the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace (United Nations, 2003). The literature suggests traditional sports used in SFD efforts are associated with strong emphasis on competition, supremacy, institutionalization, and male-dominance (Darnell et al., 2016). As a result, some scholars suggest alternative sports such as action sports (e.g., skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding, parkour) may be better suited for SFD programs since these sports are non-competitive, less institutionalized, and often gender-neutral (Thorpe & Ahmad, 2014; Thorpe, 2016). The results of this study will highlight if these differences are emphasized in SFD practice or if idealistic assumptions regarding the role of sport remain prevalent across all types of SFD organizations (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2013). Moreover, this study will also contribute to the literature by expanding our understanding of organizational communication in SFD (Hambrick & Svensson, 2016; Svensson, Mahoney, & Hambrick, 2016; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013). Implications for SFD practice and research will be further discussed.