Fighting for First Place or a Race to the Bottom? Policy Diffusion within Elite Youth Sport

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Context and Review of Relevant Literature
In order to produce “successful” athletes, it is argued countries need a sport development system to effectively progress its competitors from grassroots to high performance sport (Green & Oakley, 2001). Hylton and Bramham (2008) defined sport development as the policies and systems that bridge elite sport performance and mass participation. Sport events are arguably a vehicle for sport development, to move participants towards deeper engagement in sport (i.e., elite sport performance). While most sport governing bodies include the summer and winter Olympic Games when deciding which events to send their athletes to, most other events, have varied, and usually lower, attendance (LTAD Sport Models, n.d.; Skille & Houlihan, 2012). This discrepancy is most noted with elite youth athletics, as more event options are available to them. Yet, event rights holders often argue these youth events are the pathway to the “senior” events in order to justify their existence (Hanstad, Parent, & Kristiansen, 2013; Wong, 2012).

Policy diffusion can help explore the process of event selection and the changes to the process and pressures over time. Policy diffusion occurs when one government, city, or governmental agency’s decision to adopt a new idea for a program or policy is affected by the decisions of another (cf. Graham, Shian, & Volden, 2012, 2013; Walker, 1969). The diffusion process can be broken down into three stages: discovery of the policy innovation within the organization or group, assessment of the policy innovation, and adoption of the policy (cf. Douglas, Raudla, & Hartley, 2015; Karch, 2007). Mechanisms of diffusion are composed of: learning, imitation, competition, and coercion (Füglister, 2012; Graham, Shipan, Volden, 2012; Shipan & Voldan, 2012). Diffusion policy analysis also accounts for interactions between those adopting the policy at the micro level, as well as the general policy environment at a macro level (Douglas et al., 2015). Two categories of said environment are the “external actors”, or other governments who have adopted the policy, and “go-betweens”, or actors across multiple jurisdictions (Douglas et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2013).

For the purpose of this research, the policy in question is the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) Model, specifically areas related to elite youth event selection. In Canada, athlete development plans are left to individual sport federations. Based on funding requirements put in place by Sport Canada through the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework, Canadian National Sport Organizations (NSOs) must follow the LTAD model (Sport Canada, 2013). Each athlete is put into a developmental category and Sport Canada funding is distributed accordingly (Canadian Sport for Life, 2011). Canadian NSOs autonomously select which Games and events their sport will partake in, as well as which teams and personnel will represent them (LTAD Sport Models, n.d.). Resources are allocated to these events with neither consensus among the varying sport federations, nor understanding of what works and what does not in terms of athletic development (Havaris & Danylchuk, 2007). Many external stakeholders (e.g., governments, international federations, the Coaching Association of Canada, and events rights holders) also play a role, both implicitly and explicitly, when making these decisions.

Purpose and Research Questions
The purpose of this presentation is therefore to understand how Canadian sport system stakeholders govern the selection of events attended, particularly by elite youth athletes, within a sport development perspective. This purpose is broken down into the following questions: (1) What policies have the federal government put in place to guide behaviours relating to youth elite sport?; (2) What processes do Canadian sport system stakeholders use to create such policies?

Methods and Timeline
This exploratory qualitative study follows a policy diffusion approach as a guide for both data gathering and analysis.
This approach allows us to understand the roles of key stakeholders (here Sport Canada, Own the Podium, and NSOs) in regards to the implementation of LTAD models, and specifically the role of youth developmental events each sport. Documents and interviews comprise the main data sources. The research is still in data collection stage. The document review targets the following stakeholders: NSOs, Sport Canada, Own the Podium and national level organizations that played a role in Canadian sport policies that directed NSOs. All reports included during the creation or evaluation of said policies are included for analysis. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with Canadian sport system stakeholders, including approximately 20 NSOs as well as staff from Sport Canada, Own the Podium, the Coaching Association of Canada, and key events right holders. The interviews will explore the policy creation and implementation processes in greater depth. Data analysis will be conducted in January-March using NVivo. Open and axial coding will focus on statements related to policy creation and implementation specifically related to elite youth events. This will lead to pattern finding and higher order themes (the results).

Expected Results, Discussion and Conclusions

Final results have not yet been identified. However, preliminary analyses suggest the Canadian sport system has many differing priorities amongst its stakeholders. While the national policy, the Canadian Sport Policy 2012, serves as a framework, it does not provide explicit direction to any stakeholder. Stakeholders placing pressures, through policies, on NSOs in relation to elite youth event selection, affect not only the initial policy creation but also timeliness and adherence levels. Analysis will look at NSOs’ current diffusion process phase (discovery, assessment, or adoption) and at how pressures change over time. Pressures are expected to vary based on when the changes are made within an NSO, both in relation to the policies but also in relation to other NSO implementation. Human and financial resources within, during, and after NSOs’ initial implementation will also likely affect the policy implementation’s adherence level.

This research will provide insights into a seemingly disjointed policy area within Canada. Comparatively little research has been completed in regards to youth elite Games despite their presence in the national and international sportscapes. This study’s findings will help build the sport development and policy literatures by looking at the pressures exerted on Canadian sport stakeholders through policies and documents. Understanding the middle of the so-called sport development pathway is important if we are to create an effective and efficient system from the grassroots to high performance. An alignment between sport events and a country’s sport development framework will help improve the quality of development, be it medals or other. Findings may be used to help stakeholders in their decision and policy making regarding either supporting or rejecting further refinement to policy mandates, which require important monetary and human resources.