The Sport Development Cube: An Emerging Sport Development Framework

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Sport development is about “participation and promoting the opportunities and benefits of participation” (Shilbury, Sotiriadou, & Green, 2008, p. 1). Previous research has extensively investigated sport development (Green, 2005; Harris & Andrews, 2016; Schuleinkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016) and it now represents a rapidly evolving focus of research within sport management. The term sport development has progressed to include the development of sport and the development through sport or, in more contemporary terms, sport-for-development. While the development of sport represents the focus on developing elite athletes from a pool of young participants using a systematic athlete attraction, retention-transition and nurturing processes (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008), sport-for-development has been defined as “the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialisation of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution” (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011, p. 311).

Although these streams of sport development appear distinct, there is overlap and inconsistencies in the theoretical understanding and application of each stream. Specifically, three key debates emerge. The first relates to the popular understanding that the two streams of sport development are separate entities, should be funded as such, and are bipolar in the goals and outcomes. This view sees the end-game of the development of sport as focusing on elite athletes, and development through sport draws attention to grassroots sport and mass participation programs. Second, the trickle-down effect (i.e., the likely influence that elite athlete success may have on grassroots sports) can confound the understanding of the development of sport because it links elite success (i.e., the outcomes of development of sport) to interest in and increase of mass participation (i.e., also an outcome of developing through sport). Third, the trickle-up effect sees the opposite relationship and presents sport development programs at schools, or clubs and other opportunities offered to young populations as the avenue and source of talent identification, hence development of sport outcomes. Although some of these contentions hold some merit and can be considered using empirical evidence, undoubtedly the two key streams of sport development and the lines between them often overlap. Furthermore, just like the development of sport intersects with development through sport, the latter stream is also confused with new emerging terms, including development-for-sport and development-for-peace.

The broad coverage of sport development related research and the application of sport development concepts in sport generally has led to the growth in this body of work without underlying theoretical frameworks or directions to the various dimensions of sport development (Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & De Bosscher, 2015). This evolution has seen sport development related research adopt varying theoretical perspectives (e.g., governance, policy, stakeholder theory, social capital) to investigate context specific sport development phenomena. At the same time, this evolution illustrates the rapid growth and expansion of the field.

The issues presented so far highlight an uncertain theoretical and methodological environment when exploring sport development related phenomena. In response to these issues, the aim of this conceptual presentation is to offer a theoretical framework on sport development (the sport development cube) that clarifies sport development concepts, demonstrates their relationships and explains the layers of sport development. The ‘cube’ evolved from the analysis of extant literature on sport development and is informed by organisational theory and specifically a systems theory perspective that recognizes input-throughput-output relationships. The ‘cube’ helps clarify the multiple dimensions of sport development and recognizes Chalip’s (1996) call to develop sport-focused theory and Shilbury’s (2011) view to consider context when shaping distinctive theories, in this case across the broad domain of sport development.
The aim of this conceptual presentation is twofold: (a) it presents the complexities of sport development through a graphic multidimensional model that depicts the multiple sport development layers and the theoretical interactions between existing sport development concepts and dimensions; and (b) it shows how the theoretical dimensions encapsulated by the ‘cube’ help highlight potential future research agendas and offer suggestions on how to apply sport development theory in various sport development research endeavors. For instance, the ‘cube’ highlights four sport development dimensions:

1. Development of and development through sport;
2. Attraction, retention/transition, nurturing;
3. Sport development context and systems;
4. Sport development policy to sport development operationalization and their sub-dimensions (or sub-cubes) (e.g., various groups of participants in dimension 1 and national, state or local organizations in dimension 3).

When considering development of or through sport, the ‘cube’ is broken down into sub-cubes, that represent subsets of the cube’s dimensions and the ways sport development dimensions intersect. Sub-cubes include various participant groups and levels of participation, the sport development processes (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008) and how policy (Green, 2007) informs the operationalization of such participation in all streams of sport development. In addition to sport development dimensions, and unlike the dated dominant perception that the development of elite athletes is a linear process starting from grassroots participation at club level through to professional club, national or international representation as the pinnacle of elite performance. The ‘cube’ illustrates how participants, athletes and other persons such as coaches, administrators and volunteers involved with sport in various capacities, can enter, exit and re-enter a sport development stage. The types of theories that inform the dimensions within the ‘cube’, such as stakeholder theory or policy formulation and analysis, can inform research efforts in sport development. The research directions to emerge from the conceptualization of the cube will be discussed during this presentation.