The Sport Commitment Model and Sport Based Youth Development Programs: Are They a Match?

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Participating in sports and physical activity is associated with a wide range of benefits including physical (Smith, Eather, Morgan, Plotnikoff, Faigenbaum & Lubans, 2014), socio-emotional (Whitley, Hayden & Gould, 2015) and cognitive benefits (Hillman, 2014, Colcombe, Erickson, Raz, Webb, Cohen, McAuley & Kramer, 2006). A variety of studies support the use of physical activity and sport as a meaningful activity that fosters positive developmental outcomes among its participants. Research reveals how social competencies of respect, caring for others, self-discipline, personal and social responsibility have been developed through sport participation (Hellison, 2011; Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish & Theodorakis, 2005; Whitley, Hayden & Gould, 2015). In this vein, Perkins and Noam (2007) have discussed how positive youth development can take place through the medium of sport, coining the term “sports-based youth development (SBYD).” Sport-based youth development programs are generally characterized by having empowering environments, intentional activities and a life skills focus (Holt et al., 2016; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). A major key to the success of the sport based youth development framework is the maintenance of sustained relationships with participants (Perkins & Noam, 2007). Hence SBYD programs are particularly vulnerable to issues that arise from lack of participant retention and inconsistent attendance. We need to find ways to evaluate participant commitment in order to address these issues. A construct which may prove useful which has not been applied to this specific setting is sport commitment.

Sport commitment can be defined as “as a psychological state representing the desire and resolve to continue sport participation in a particular program, specific sport, or sport in general” (Casper, Gray, & Babkes, 2007, p. 256). As measured by the Sport Commitment Model (SCM) this construct can be used as a method of evaluating the likelihood of athletes maintaining or discontinuing participation. The sport commitment model uses five domains to explain sport commitment: sport enjoyment, involvement alternatives, involvement opportunities, social constraints, and personal investments (Scanlan, Simons, Carpenter, Schmidt, & Keeler, 1993). Sport commitment, in this model is defined narrowly to the specific sport program the athlete is currently participating in. Sport enjoyment encompasses the positive affective state the sport derives. Involvement alternatives are the other activities that are foregone to participate in the sport. Involvement opportunities are the opportunities that would be missed if the athletes were to stop playing. That is, what is that they can only experience through this sport. Personal investments are what the athlete invested to participate, be it time, money or other resources, that would be lost if they quit. Social constraints are the societal pressures that obligate the athlete to continue playing.

While the model has been tested outside of organized sports in exercise commitment (Zahariadis, Tsortatzoudis, & Grouios, 2002), it cannot be assumed that the model components will be equally valid in SBYD settings. This form of programming incorporates sport with additional components including but not limited to academic success, life skills, and social competencies (Berlin, Dworkin, Eames, Menconi & Perkins, 2007). These additional aims alter the sport product and may impact how commitment is developed. Given the nature of the SCM and its original intended purpose, it is necessary to test the validity and reliability of the model in a sport based youth development settings in order to judge whether it can be used to predict commitment in these programs. In doing so, research in this area will provide practitioners more tools to gauge the commitment levels of participants and more information that may lead to development of more engaging programming. Researchers will gain an additional lens to evaluate SBYD programs and a means to better understand member retention, attendance, and attrition. Should the SCM prove invalid and/or unreliable, researchers may find useful constructs in school engagement literature or refer to previous literature tracking attendance and retention in after school programs.