Evaluation of a Sport Based Youth Development Adhocracy

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Sport-based youth development (SBYD) programs engage youth through sport, while educating and teaching other life skills that enhance positive development. Following calls to unpack the specific programmatic elements that contribute to youth development outcomes, a number of “scripts” and “checklists” have been developed to guide program design and implementation. These include: consistency in program delivery, sustained adult-youth relationships, safe facilities and training environments, opportunities for skill building, and coordination with the community (Catalano et al., 2002; Lerner et al., 2005). In addition, previous research has also highlighted several elements that are specific to sport programs, including coaching effectiveness, parental involvement, and positive peer interactions (Cote, et. al., 2008; Strachan et al., 2011).

While these factors provide useful guidelines, their exact implementation and connection with youth development outcomes varies considerably across different environments. Moreover, the cultural relevance of certain sports, and thus their utility as the “hook” to engage youth, also varies. As a result, many larger SBYD initiatives have evolved as “adhocracies” (c.f., Mintzberg, 1992), characterized by a network of programs delivered at multiple sites. Although recommendations for programming are provided, this decentralized organizational structure is intended to provide program managers with some degree of flexibility in terms of implementation.

However, much of the extant research on SBYD has continued to examine single-context programs, or multiple initiatives across multiple contexts, which limits opportunities for comparison (e.g. Coalter, 2012). This study contributes to the current body of literature by analyzing how a tennis program associated with the same SBYD initiative was implemented at multiple sites. Using two phases of data collection, the salience of different contextual and programmatic factors across multiple sites are first compared, and then linked with participant-level outcomes.

Method

In Phase One, we purposively selected 10 programs associated with the same youth tennis network, all of whom operate with the same overall mission to use tennis to teach education and character to under-resourced youth. The 10 programs operate within urban, suburban, and rural contexts across eight U.S. states, and are given flexibility in terms of organizational and program design. We conducted interviews with each executive director and focus groups with staff and volunteers. Additionally, we conducted an average of four hours of direct observation at each program site.

Phase Two involves a survey instrument of participants in all 10 programs, to be collected November of 2018. Measures include the following program outcomes: academic attitudes, resiliency, moral character, well-being, self-regulation, and connection to tennis.

Initial Findings

Phase One findings revealed several models of program delivery, primarily contingent upon a sport-plus or plus-sport approach. However, elements of community integration, parental engagement, and strategic staff/volunteer recruitment were found to have the greatest impact on youth-to-youth and youth-to-adult relationships during direct field observation. This was particularly true when recruitment was also an element of community integration and/or parental engagement. Phase Two will measure individual program outcomes against program delivery models and strategies, with the goal of linking those programmatic elements essential for success, and those with contextual flexibility.