The Challenge of Theorizing Social Change in Sport-for-Development

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Developing a theory of change (ToC) for a sport-for-development (SFD) program is critical to understand the connections between program delivery and outcomes (Bruening et al., 2015; Coalter, 2007; Walker, Hills, & Heere, 2017). Yet, ToC development can be an overlooked step in the program planning process. As a result, robust theorizing of how sport imparts individual and social change is limited (Coalter, 2013; Hartmann, 2003; Kruse, 2006; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2012), and certain causal outcomes or limitations to social change may go unrecorded. The purpose of this study is to illustrate the implications of not robustly theorizing the relationships between a SFD intervention’s processes, mechanisms, experiences and desired outcomes within a specific context. This is achieved via a case study of Magic Bus, an award winning SFD charity who expanded their operations from India to London via a school-based SFD program.

A mixed methods quasi-experimental approach was utilized to measure effect against program outcomes (e.g., pro-social norms, sportspersonship, goal-setting, etc.) and understand mechanisms, processes, and experiences behind any effect (or lack of). Within-subjects analysis (i.e., pre- to post-program) established that time had a significant effect on 4 out of 12 of the research variables. Both values variables (i.e., pro-social norms and sportspersonship) and 2 out of 3 growth variables (i.e., aspirations and goal-setting) improved following the program. However, these improvements were also present in the comparison group, as evident in the between-subjects analysis (i.e., condition x time) which found no significant effects, suggesting that something other than the program was causing the within-subject changes.

Participant focus groups and administrator and teacher interviews offered several insights that explain the lack of programmatic effects: (1) Similarities between the program and Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), which was present in the comparison group school, thus potentially explaining the lack of time x condition effect. (2) A lack of focus on a clearly defined and measurable social problem, whereby the program lacked focus and the assumed deficiencies were not evident in the baseline data. (3) Misalignment between an over-ambitious curriculum and research variables, whereby processes and mechanisms were not aligned with desired outcomes. (4) A failure to understand context, whereby the intervention was delivered via physical education (PE) classes, but did not meet the legal curriculum requirements of PE classes in England. In sum, Magic Bus were attempting to validate a high level ToC that had proved effective in India, but demonstrated a lack of sufficient appreciation of their new context in London, whereby they were unwilling to adapt to a shifting context and reframe for a different social problem.