A Policy Analysis on the Promotion of Traditional Education for Elite Athletes in China

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Background & Research Question. In China, there is a general disconnect in conjoining athletics and academics, and a limited notion of interscholastic sport. Due to the lack of education for athletes in China, many who transition out of sport have difficulty finding jobs in non-sport related industries (Hong, 2004). The visibility of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games brought domestic and international attention to the plight of many Chinese elite athletes who were unemployed or homeless despite winning gold for their nation (Macur, 2008). Little research has examined policy initiatives that target traditional education for elite athletes in China. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate how current policy and managerial practices affect the ability for a student-athlete to exist in Chinese society. We will critique/evaluate the effectiveness of providing a balance of education for athletes in Chinese society.

Theory & Literature Review. Policy analysis explores the rationality that underlies public policymaking to understand its processes, networks, and institutions better. The results of these studies can be used to provide policy recommendations for the future (Enserink, Koppenjan, & Mayer, 2013). Deliberation on sport policy is needed because it affects both athlete development, and building sport programs that optimize athlete recruitment, retention, and transition (Green, 2005). There is a severe problem in the transition out of sport for many elite Chinese athletes due to their lack of education (Ling & Hong, 2014; Tian, 2003; Wei, Hong, & Zhouxiang, 2010). This problem necessitates looking at the policy framework and the managerial delivery of providing education to China’s elite athletes.

Method

The authors used interpretive and critical methods of sport policy analysis for this study (Chalip, 1995). Policy papers written by the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Education were identified and analyzed due to their policy implications for solving issues stemming from athlete retirement, education, and welfare benefits. The subsequent critique is based on using critical methods to identify common themes found in documents regarding problem definitions, attributions, and frames. Data analysis involved thematic and pattern coding using a two-cycle coding process recommended by Saldaña (2014).

Results

Our research shows that because institutional policy and managerial practice fall short in providing athletes in China with a strong educational foundation, non-governmental organizations can provide grassroots programming that champions the idea of a student-athlete is needed. For athletes to efficiently transition out of sport, they need to be provided with an education that helps them compete for non-sports related jobs and succeed within broader societal constructs.

Discussion and Recommendations

The implications of these findings advance the literature by providing recommendations to improve the formation of sport policy and its managerial implementation in China. The practical implications include positing how the design of sport for development type programs that fit China’s ideological context could bridge the educational gap for its aspiring athletes (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). The research will also further our theoretical understanding of athlete development, particularly with regards to the underrepresented population of elite Chinese athletes.