Can SFD Really Impact Health Disparities?: A Multiple Case Study

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Sport for Development - Other (Community Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
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Research indicates that health disparities exist in the United States, as the burden of illness, premature death, and disability disproportionately affects certain populations (Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006). Social and economic characteristics of individuals and communities can affect health behaviors, environmental risks, and access to medical care, which can influence overall health (Christine et al., 2017). An overarching goal of Health People 2020 is to achieve health equality and eliminate disparities (USDHSS, 2010). This goal acknowledges that health disparities exist and places the issue on a national policy platform.

There is evidence to suggest that Sport for Development (SFD) has been used to promote health among marginalized individuals (Conrad, 2016). However, more research is needed evaluating the processes of health-based SFD programing in order to determine how they work to promote health and reduce health disparities within low-SES communities. The purpose of this study was to understand the role of SFD in addressing health disparities in low-SES communities by assessing what specifically programs are doing to address the health concerns that exist in the communities.

A theoretical model, consisting of the theory of fundamental causes (Link & Phelan, 1995), the classification of SFD programs (Coalter, 2007), and the ecological model of health promotion (McLeroy, 1988), was developed to guide this study. The model suggests that SFD programs operating in a low-SES community should work to provide opportunity, education, or access to goods and services in order to reduce health disparities for participants. Programs should work to influence individual, social and environmental, and policy factors that may impact health. This study tested and expanded upon this model.

This study utilized a qualitative, multiple case study design. Five SFD programs that operate in low-SES communities within one city were selected to take part. Semi-structured interviews with two administrators, two staff, and two youth participants from each of the five programs were conducted. Data analysis followed an evidence-based, three-step deductive coding process (Gilgun, 2005), in which the researcher used the theoretical framework to make sense of the data. The data were coded based on the elements of the model, then grouped together to create overarching themes related to how the programs work to address health disparities within the communities they serve.

The results suggest that the SFD programs are promoting health and addressing health disparities by providing education about life skills, sports, and health, using sport as a hook or a compliment to reach the youth participants, and by providing resources and services to participants. Finally, the programs promote health at multiple levels of the ecological model by focusing on participants’ individual behavior, influencing participants’ social networks, working with organizations that have contact with participants, working to improve participants’ physical environment, and working to influence policy related to health. These results provide evidence into the role SFD can play in addressing health disparities within low-SES communities. By assessing how the cases align with the developed theoretical framework, this study also holds implications for SFD theory and practice. These and other implications will be discussed.