

Understanding the promotion of personal development for at-risk youth in community sport initiatives

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Aim

The aim of this study is to generate a more realistic understanding of the promotional strategies of personal development within nine selected community sport initiatives. This study is part of the CATCH (Community Sport for AT-risk youth: innovative strategies for promoting personal development, health and social CoHesion) project.

Theoretical background

Specific groups of young people in western societies are more at risk of being socially excluded in multiple (life) domains, such as education, employment, health, social participation and community integration. The progressive accumulation of negative experiences within institutions, such as school and labour market, can eventually amount into social exclusion. Different strategies within multiple policy domains have been developed to address such issues. One of these strategies is the use of sport-based initiatives (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2013). Sport in general, and community sport in particular, have been perceived as a potential rich context to reach this so-called hard-to-reach youth segment. It has furthermore been argued that wider benefits accruing from organised sport involvement are stronger for at-risk youth. Sport-based contexts are often viewed by policy-makers and program providers as vehicles for improving personal development, healthy lifestyle and as tools to alleviate the distorted relationships of youth, and the outcomes they produce. They argue that these contexts can help at-risk youth by improving their skills (e.g. self-efficacy and self-esteem) and increasing their amount of positive experiences.

To date, there is a broad consensus among researchers that the sport context largely determines if young people derive developmental benefits from their participation in sport. However, participation in any type of sport initiative will not inevitably produce positive developmental outcomes for all participants (Coalter, 2013). Were relationships between sport and development have been found, the nature and direction of cause (e.g. selection effects) remains speculative (Coalter, 2013). Furthermore, the mere part of the earlier published research only focused on individual behavioural or attitudinal outcomes and does not take into account the wider social structures in which young people live and in which sport initiatives operate (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013). Consequently, we still know little about the specific social mechanisms through which sport participation may promote personal development (Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds & Smith, 2016).

Methodology, research design & data analysis

A realist evaluation approach as described by Pawson and Tilley (1997) was used to explicate the promotional strategies related to personal development within nine community sport

initiatives in Belgium. The central research question was formulated as follows: What types of participation are presumed to lead to what type of personal developmental outcomes for what type of participant and in what circumstances? A fieldwork approach, including observations over a period of six weeks at nine community sport initiatives and in-depth interviews with at least 15 individuals within each community sport initiative (i.e., participants, program leaders and stakeholders), was used to uncover (a) the conceptualisations of personal development and (b) the implicit assumptions held by the different actors about the impact of the offered activities in relation to personal development. As a general framework for approaching the data, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was used, allowing us to understand the data from the perspective and experience of the interviewees relating to a shared phenomenon, namely the strategies for promoting personal development within community sport initiatives for at-risk youth.

Results, discussion, implications/conclusions

As we will conduct the interviews in May 2016, results are not yet available. However, we guarantee that they will be available by the time of the conference.

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