

Can the Heart of Sport Deliver Social Policy?

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Abstract

Aim of Paper

This paper presents a conceptual argument that the use of sport and sport clubs, the heart of the sport delivery system, as a "policy tool" and as a panacea for various social ills is beyond their mandate and capacity to deliver. Further, current sport management practice and education do not focus enough on these topics. Sport is supported ideologically, structurally, and financially as a policy tool (Chalip, [1], Lawson [4]) by various levels of the State and society. Sport is seen as a key factor in the development of social capital and in community development, yet the premises of this relationship is not often questioned. We follow the lead of Craig [3], Coalter [2], and Vail [7] to argue that these uses for sport and sport clubs are poorly strategised and delivered. Likewise, as in Craig's [3] critique of community capacity building, the concept of social capital must also be questioned, especially in regards to its relation with sport. This argument also then has implications for the management at the heart of sport, for which we also make suggestions.

Theoretical Background

Vail [7] uses community building to make a sound argument for sport development. She points to four core components: community selection, the need for a community catalyst/ champion(s) to provide process leadership, the need to build a cadre of collaborative group/community partnerships, and the need to promote sustainability through community development processes. Craig [3] made similar arguments in his critique of community capacity building (CCB) in that a "critique, drawing on experience worldwide, suggests that its [CCB] widespread use represents a continuing failure of governments properly to engage in 'bottom-up' development, is built on a 'deficit' model of communities which fails to engage properly with their own skills, knowledge and interests, and helps to obscure structural reasons for poverty and inequality". Parallel to this is Coalter's [2] critique of broader policy initiatives that attempt to use sport and sport clubs as "altruistic welfare organisations" (p. 551), which is a burden and a poor context for the delivery of programs seeking to rectify systemic social issues.

In terms of social capital we follow Leonard and Oxyn's [5] five theme model of social capital where networks, reciprocity, trust, shared norms, and social agency are identified. Each theme is discussed and analysed in terms of how sport might develop community social capital. After presenting how community development and social

capital are bedfellows, we argue that perhaps social capital is over emphasised as a model for positive community development.

Methodology

We use and critique a number of papers that identify existing sport programs that seek to be panaceas, policy tools, and State interventions, including our own [6].

Discussion and Implications

As Coalter [2] sagely recognises, we don't have enough theoretically informed empirical evidence to make judgments on the role sport and sport clubs as the main delivery point of social policy and in the development of social capital. Most policy agendas are top-down, limited and poorly contextualised, thought-out, and delivered. Volunteer-led third sector organisations cannot and should not be expected to do the work of government departments. Examples show that sport can enhance community development by building social capital, but this relationship works in both directions. Again, as Coalter [2] argues, there is a "conflict between developing sport in communities and developing communities through sport" (p. 552, emphasis in original) and that these are two different projects and processes. In the end, a viable path to manage at the heart of sport, and how sport managers are developed, must focus on community sport development, on viable sport policy goals, and on ways to structure and operate strong developmental levels of sport at the heart of the sport system.

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