
PARENTS' SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN YOUTH SPORT: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

AIM OF STUDY

Youth sport has and will continue to play an important role in communities across the globe. While numerous scholars have sought to understand and assess the benefits and pitfalls of sport participation for youth (e.g., Fraser-Thomas, Coté, & Deakin, 2005; Wright & Coté, 2003), it is also important to understand how other stakeholders (e.g., parents) might also benefit from youth sport programs. An emerging body of literature supports the assertion that sport, if appropriately designed and managed, can be utilized to build or enhance community among participants and others associated with sport. The purpose of this study is to understand the specific elements of a youth sport program that foster a sense of community for parents. This research advances sport and community building theory by exploring boundary conditions of existing theory. It also offers practical insight on connecting people to communities with sport.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The innate need for individuals to experience a sense of community has been studied extensively, especially within the community psychology literature. Sense of community describes the environmental or community characteristics that lead members to feel a sense of belonging and attachment, and that support is available at the group-level. Sense of community has been associated with numerous life-quality enhancing benefits, such as increased levels of health, civic participation, and well-being. While many of the outcomes of an increased sense of community are clearly desirable, creating such an environment via sport is a timely challenge for researchers. Trends indicate more individuals are socially isolated and missing the benefits of being involved in a supportive community and considerable anecdotal evidence and media coverage continues to focus on the over-bearing and negative images of youth sport parents. This study provides

empirical evidence of a potential benefit of sport for parents and insight on how to increase parental sense of community while demonstrating a potentially positive outcome. .

Based on this challenge, initial grounded research in sport led to the development of a Sport and Sense of Community Theory (Warner Dixon, & Chalip 2012). This theory contends that Administrative Consideration, Common Interest, Competition, Equity in Administrative Decisions, Leadership Opportunities, Social Spaces, and Voluntary Action were the fundamental factors that fostered a sense of community among university sport participants. This initial theory suggests that there are underlying factors relevant to the creation of community across contexts. However, to date this research has only focused on direct sport participants (i.e., not fans, coaches, parents, etc.), and it was developed based on data from university sport settings.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative interpretive approach. Parents from an Upward Sports youth basketball league served as participants for this study. Upward Sports is a youth sport organization focused on “providing a fun sports experience based on healthy competition.” Over a half a million 5-12 year-olds compete annually in Upward leagues throughout the U.S. and Canada .

A total of 36 parents (20 mothers and 16 fathers; unrelated) participated in 6 focus groups lasting 48 to 78 minutes. All focus groups included both mothers and fathers, and were held until researchers felt that data saturation was reached. A semi-structured focus group format was used, following a modified version of the interview guide in Warner and Dixon (2011, 2013).

After transcription, the researchers, with the aid of Nvivo 9, independently located themes and assigned codes in an attempt to condense the data into categories. Through an iterative process, the researchers discussed the emergent codes and deductively compared their findings with the data until complete agreement was reached as to the meaning and content of the themes.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Results demonstrated that this community sport organization was clearly fostering a sense of community for parents whose children participated in it. Underlying elements for creating this sense of community were: The Child's Experience, Clear Logistics, Administrative Consideration, and Equity in Administrative Decisions, which are somewhat different than those found in a college context (Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013). The most important factor that emerged was the child's experience. As parents felt their child was cared for and improving in skill, the parents felt free to also begin bonding with each other. Further, clear logistics played role in sense of community by removing concerns about scheduling and organization. These elements will be discussed in detail along with the practical implications for sport organizations in creating

positive experiences and fostering sense of community for parents.

References

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