
Youth Sports: What Counts as “Positive Development?”

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Abstract

There is a widespread belief that sport participation inevitably contributes to youth development because sport's assumed essential goodness and purity is passed on to those who partake in it. Promoted and perpetuated by sport evangelists and kindred spirits, this belief inspires the strategy of using sports to create among young people the attributes needed to achieve personal success. This neoliberal approach to development is perpetuated by anecdotes and unsystematic observations that uncritically support the evangelistic promise that sport participation produces positive development among young people. Although a few scholars in the sociology of sport have studied sport participation and identified conditions under which particular outcomes are likely to occur, there remains a need for critical research and theory that identifies the processes through which sport participation is or is not linked with subsequent forms of civic engagement and efforts to produce progressive change transcending the lives of particular individuals. Strategies for doing this are identified.

Keywords

sports, development, socialization, social change

“Sport contributes to development.”

Worldwide, few people disagree with or qualify this statement, whether it is said in reference to individual, community, or society-wide development. The seldom questioned link between sport and development is grounded in the dual assumption that sport, unlike other activities, has a fundamentally positive and pure essence that

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transcends time and place so that positive changes befall individuals and groups that engage in or consume sport.

The implications of this dual assumption are significant. It often leads decision makers at all levels of power to allocate public and private resources to sports and sport programs. It influences parental, peer, and personal decisions about sport participation and general social and economic support for athletes, teams, and sport programs at local and national levels. Most important, it is often woven into popular narratives, reproduced in uncritical forms, and used by well-meaning people and organizations from wealthy nations to justify the creation of sport programs for populations that lack participation opportunities and face challenges caused by poverty, war, natural disasters, or oppression.

Although research on sports and development has increased recently, sport-related decisions and policies remain shaped primarily by unquestioned beliefs grounded in wishful thinking, the idealized testimonials of current and former athletes, and the hunches of sport scientists seeking research opportunities and job placements for their students. This approach is fueled further by self-interested boosters who prepare bids and ballot issues to host sport events, build expensive venues, and support privately owned professional sport teams. Both public and private sector leaders fund policies and programs based on assumed developmental benefits of sports, and they are joined by others who believe that sport participation and consumption will create healthy, productive people; decrease deviance and disruptive actions; and alleviate boredom and alienation. As these beliefs, testimonials, and endorsements are woven into dominant narratives, most people see little need for critical research and theory that could inform policy formulation, program design, and personal decisions about sports in everyday life.

In this article, I focus on youth sports, review literature related to development, and ask critical questions about what counts as development in organized youth sport programs.

Youth Sports: The Word According to Sport Evangelists

The beliefs, wishful thinking, and personal testimonials that often influence sport-related policies, programs, and personal decisions are widely publicized and promoted by people described aptly as “sport evangelists” by sociologist Giulianotti (2004). These evangelists view sport in essentialist terms and assume that it inevitably leads to multiple forms of development, including remediation for individuals perceived to need reformative socialization and revitalization for communities perceived to need an infusion of civic awareness and engagement. Sport, therefore, is viewed as an effective activity for solving problems and improving quality of life for individuals and society alike.

The claims of sport evangelists are many, but, in the case of youth sports, they fall into three major categories, including personal character development, reforming

“at-risk” populations, and fostering social capital leading to future occupational success and civic engagement (Coalter, 2007). These claims highlight the belief that sport participation has a positive impact on youth development because it does the following:

- Creates motor and sport-specific skills convertible into physical capital
- Improves health, fitness, and an overall sense of physical well-being
- Increases self-confidence, self-esteem, and positive body image
- Builds character in the form of discipline, teamwork, and responsibility.¹

These claims are based on the assumption that for young people, sport has a *fertilizer effect*—that is, if it is tilled into their experiences, their character and potential will grow in socially desirable ways. This assumption continues to influence policy discussions among teachers wanting elementary schools to sponsor interscholastic sport teams and among urban leaders wanting their cities to prepare bids to host the Olympic Games.

Second, sport evangelists claim that sport participation reforms “at-risk” young people because it does the following:

- Structures their lives around mainstream values and goals
- Removes them from the streets and consigns them to adult-controlled environments
- Teaches them self-control, obedience to authority, and conformity to rules
- Provides them with positive adult role models.²

This claim, often linked with narratives about reducing drug abuse, violence, and crime rates, is based on the assumption that sport participation among “at-risk” populations produces a *car wash effect*—that is, it cleanses character and washes away personal defects so that young people become acceptable to those in mainstream society.

Third, sport evangelists claim that sport participation provides individuals with experiences and relationships that lead to personal success and civic engagement because it does the following:

- Creates physical capital that can be used to acquire social and cultural capital
- Inspires educational achievement
- Facilitates the formation of social networks
- Fosters aspirations that transcend sport.³

This claim is based on the assumption that sport has a *guardian angel effect*—that is, it will guide young people in success-oriented and civic-centered directions throughout their lives.

The collective claims of sport evangelists and their disciples are informed by neo-liberal ideology focusing on *personal* development and success and discounting social issues and the need for progressive change at a collective or community level (Darnell,

2010; Hayhurst, Wilson, & Frisby, 2010). At the foundation of this approach is the belief that sport participation provides individuals with indispensable developmental lessons, although individuals must integrate these lessons into their lives to enhance their own life chances. Only when these lessons are internalized by enough people will the positive qualities, decisions, and choices of individuals benefit the communities in which they live.

This approach is not used in all youth sport programs, but the commitment to neo-liberal ideas runs deep in the United States and in the global social problems industry funded primarily by North Americans and Northern Europeans. In addition, these ideas are widely promoted in mainstream global media and sports in which the cult of the individual is routinely used as a marketing tool by corporate sponsors and media companies. When organized into interpretive perspectives, these ideas constitute widely shared visions of how social worlds could and should be organized—much like other interpretive frameworks inspired by ideology more than research and theory. When combined with similarly shared emotions, identities, and dominant narratives, they tend to resist change, even when evidence contradicts them.

Over the past century, the claims of sport evangelists have informed and justified sport-related program and funding decisions at local and national levels, despite a general lack of research support (Kay & Bradbury, 2009). They are accepted to such an extent that even when programs fail repeatedly, neither are there critical evaluations of the culture and organization of sports or the contexts in which sports are played and given meaning nor are there critical examinations of the dual assumption that sport is essentially good and that its goodness is automatically experienced by those who partake in it. Instead, when failures occur, blame is attributed to those individuals whose inferred character flaws or defective social and cultural backgrounds are perceived to prevent them from internalizing the essential developmental lessons of sport.

Studying Sport and Positive Youth Development

Taken as a whole and evaluated in terms of methodological quality, research on the relationship between sport and youth development has led scholars to conclude that the relationship is contingent (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Coakley, 1996, 2002; Holt, 2008; Kane & LaVoi, 2007; Weiss, 2008; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009). By itself, the act of sport participation among young people leads to no regularly identifiable developmental outcomes. Instead, outcomes are related to and dependent on combinations of multiple factors, including the following:⁴

- Type of sport played (Adler & Adler, 1998; Coakley, 1983; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Crissey & Honea, 2006; McCormack & Chalip, 1988)
- Orientations and actions of peers, parents, coaches, and program administrators (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Horn, 2008; Kay & Spaaij, 2011; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Laurer, Gould, Roman, & Price, 2010; Schinke et al., 2010; Smoll & Smith, 2002; Trulson, 1986)

- Norms and culture associated with particular sports or sports experiences (Hartmann & Massoglia, 2007; Hellison, 2003; Rutten et al., 2007; Swanson, 2009; Trulson, 1986)
- Socially significant characteristics of sport participants (Coakley, 2002; Hoffman, 2006; Miller, Sabo, Farrell, Barnes, & Melnick, 1998; Miller, Sabo, Barnes, Farrell, & Melnick, 1999)
- Material and cultural contexts under which participation occurs (Coakley, 2002; Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Guest & Schneider, 2003; Hoffman, 2006; Light, 2010; Martinek & Hellison, 1997)
- Social relationships formed in connection with sport participation (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010; Miller, Melnick, Barnes, Farrell, & Sabo, 2005; Petitpas, Cornelius, & Van Raalte, 2008; Theberge, 2000)
- Meanings given to sport and personal sport experiences (Fine, 1987; Guest & Schneider, 2003; Wacquant, 1992, 2004)
- Manner in which sport and sport experiences are integrated into a person's life (Fine, 1987; Perks, 2007; Shehu & Moruise, 2010; Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009)
- Changing definitions and interpretations of sport experiences that occur during the life course (Anderson, 2000, 2005; Mahiri & Van Rhee, 2010; Shehu & Moruise, 2010).

Research on the developmental influence of sport participation among young people classified as "at-risk" supports the general research findings on sport and youth development. However, it is more likely to identify specific contextual factors as prerequisites for positive developmental outcomes. For example, sport participation must occur in settings where young people are physically safe, personally valued, morally and economically supported, personally and politically empowered, and hopeful about the future (Hellison, 2003; Hellison & Walsh, 2002; Martinek & Hellison, 1997; Walsh, 2008).

In addition, research focusing on sport participation and the incidence of aggression and violence among young people indicates that positive developmental outcomes are most likely when coaches are trained to teach an explicit philosophy of nonviolence, respect for self and others, the importance of fitness and self-control as a part of overall development, confidence in physical skills, and a sense of responsibility to self and others (Trulson, 1986). Apart from these conditions, playing sports, especially contact sports, is more likely to be associated with high rather than low aggressive orientations and actions (Kreager, 2007; Pappas, McKenry, & Catlett, 2004; Trulson, 1986).

The relationship between sport participation, educational achievement, social capital formation, and personal success has more often been the focus of personal testimonials than social research. Tracking and measuring changes in social capital and associated life chances along with their real-life consequences over time is methodologically challenging. It is difficult to analytically separate the developmental changes related to sport participation from more general developmental changes in young people's lives and from the influence of social forces and structural factors unrelated to sports.

Another challenge is that institutional review boards often are skeptical of proposals to study young people because children are unable to provide informed voluntary consent and are considered a protected population in the ethical guidelines that govern research. In addition, social researchers (as opposed to medical researchers) may not be able to provide clear statements of the exact nature of the research setting and the anticipated benefits and possible risks associated with the project, especially when it involves participant observations in settings characterized by spontaneity and unanticipated events and actions (Adler & Adler, 2002).⁵

Nearly all the research on sport participation and educational achievement has been done in the United States where sport participation is institutionally linked with schools, attendance patterns, eligibility to play school sports, formal team selection processes, grades, and social status among peers and teachers. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that studies consistently show a positive sport participation–academic achievement relationship. However, this tells us more about the organization of schools than the developmental implications of playing sports, and it provides no information about developmental outcomes among young people whose participation occurs outside of school-sponsored sports.

The topic of youth sport participation and the development of social capital and social networks has recently attracted attention from a few sociologically oriented researchers. For example, Perks (2007) analyzed data from a representative sample of Canadian adults and found a small but consistent positive relationship between recalled past participation in youth sports and current involvement across a range of community activities. However, the extent and type of sport participation was not known, and the large majority of the people in the study sample participated in youth sports prior to the 1980s—a time when programs were publicly funded and community based, with teams constituted from local neighborhoods where people knew one another.

Using a culturally reflexive version of participatory action research, Schinke and his colleagues (Blodgett et al., 2010a, 2010b; Schinke et al., 2010) found that youth sports served as a site at which Canadian Aboriginal family members developed social capital as they worked with each other and pooled resources so their children could play sports. However, the collectivist culture of the Aboriginal community constituted a unique social context and the researchers facilitated the formation of social capital by including members of the community on the research team and encouraging them to use in other community contexts the capital and research skills honed during the 5-year project.

Kay and Bradbury (2009) report a similar outcome in a project in which young people were trained to work as youth sport volunteers. Through their volunteer experiences, the young people developed social capital and a growing sense of altruism and citizenship that were linked with forms of social involvement that went beyond youth sports into other community contexts. However, Kay and Bradbury report that forming and using social capital is a complex process influenced by multiple factors that have not yet been clearly identified.

Research on adult populations indicates that the social capital formed in connection with sports is frequently characterized by intragroup “bonding” rather than intergroup “bridging” processes (see Putnam, 2000, Putnam & Goss, 2002), although both may occur under certain circumstances (Beaudoin, 2011; Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009). This raises questions about the types of developmental outcomes associated with youth sport participation. In cases where bonding prevails, participation may facilitate the formation of homogeneous relationships that could limit personal success and restrict civic engagement in particular ways (Harvey, Lévesque, & Donnelly, 2007). In addition, when patterns of youth sport participation are linked with socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, and social definitions of race, the social capital formed in connection with sports may be characterized by exclusive forms of bonding rather than inclusive forms of bridging among young people (Kelly, 2011). That is, they may bring together and facilitate relationships among people who share similar SES and racial and ethnic identification rather than “bridging” differences and connecting people across structural and identity categories. This possibility begs further research across different types of youth sport programs.

Youth Sports and Development: Current Practices

“Sport and development” is a key buzz phrase at this point in the 21st century. Today, there are people working and volunteering in hundreds of programs worldwide that use sport as a key component in their efforts to intervene in the lives of children and adolescents perceived to be in need. Most of these young people face challenges created by poverty, war and dislocation, and a range of medical, psychological, and social problems believed to be more than they can handle by themselves. The stated missions of these programs vary, depending on where they are, who they serve, and the priorities of organizational sponsors.

Programs involving participants from low-income and poverty areas in wealthy nations often focus on providing activities that young people can do after school, on weekends, and during school breaks in a safe environment where there is adult supervision and access to sport facilities, equipment, and coaching. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s in the United States, when a social problems industry emerged in response to the public services vacuum created by cutbacks in social services, sport programs became increasingly dependent on “soft money” from public and private sources. To solicit funds from sources often having conservative orientations, those who proposed programs usually argued that youth sports would reduce character deficits among young people from low-income, predominantly ethnic minority families—a population that potential funders often perceived as threats to the status quo. “Midnight Basketball” programs and their youth sport equivalents were funded to take “Black inner-city males off the streets by keeping them in the gym during . . . the hours when they would be most likely to get into trouble” (Bessone, 1991, p. 21). Other youth sport programs were organized around this narrative and sought support that

would “give kids an opportunity to do something besides hang out on the street and get into trouble” (quote in Coakley, 2002). According to those proposing the programs, sports would simultaneously control and inculcate discipline among “disadvantaged” and “at-risk” youths who lacked the attributes needed to obtain socially acceptable goals in mainstream institutional spheres (Hartmann, 2001; Hartmann & Depro, 2006; Pitter & Andrews, 1997).

Narratives used to support programs for young people from upper-middle income, predominantly White families were based on different ideas about positive development. Instead of emphasizing control and discipline, they highlighted achievement and upward mobility as developmental outcomes (Coakley, 2002). The goal was not to “take them off the streets” but to assist them in identifying the streets that would take them where they wanted to go. However, this approach to development was grounded in similar neoliberal assumptions about the need for increased individual responsibility and making acceptable life choices.

Regardless of social class, positive development in most sport programs was *not* defined in terms of the need for social justice, rebuilding strong community-based social institutions, reestablishing the resource base of the communities where young people lived, or empowering young people to be effective agents of social change in their communities. Instead, development was defined in terms of providing socialization experiences that would maintain and extend opportunities for “privileged youth” or compensate for what was missing in the lives of “disadvantaged youth” (Coakley, 2002; Hartmann, 2001, 2003, 2008).

In parts of the world where there are desperately low standards of living, sport-for-development programs tend to focus on fostering self-efficacy and self-esteem, changing gender attitudes so as to reduce gender inequities, increasing knowledge about HIV/AIDS so as to change sexual practices, and providing leadership training so as to create local staff that could work alongside existing staff and possibly become involved in their communities as well (Coalter, 2010). There are so many of these programs today that it is difficult to identify them much less count them accurately (Cronin, 2011). Like domestic programs in wealthy nations, their goals and program designs vary in terms of where they are, who they serve, and the orientations of people in sponsoring organizations. However, their mission statements and fund-raising narratives are generally similar to those used previously in the social problems industry in the United States. Overall, they are organized around a deficit reduction model with children portrayed as innocent victims of drought, civil war, the oppressive or genocidal actions of national and tribal leaders, and general social disorganization caused by widespread corruption and a lack of individual irresponsibility.

When sports policy analyst Coalter (2007, 2010) studied sport-for-development organizations, evaluated selected cases in Africa and India, and reviewed well-designed and reliable research on sport and development, he noted that most current programs are organized around a *Sport Plus* or a *Plus Sport* approach to youth development. A *Sport Plus* approach emphasizes traditional sport development objectives such as increasing participation and building sport knowledge and skills but adds other

activities so that young participants learn information and strategies for effectively dealing with challenges faced in their everyday lives. For example, a youth sport soccer/football program in Uganda might include information and activities that teach young people how they can avoid contracting HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, a Plus Sport approach is used by nonsport organizations that offer sport participation as a means of recruiting, retaining, and motivating young people in the primary activities of the organization, whether they are educational, religious, economic, or political. For example, volunteers in a faith-based organization may create and maintain a sport program to attract young people and create peer pressure to encourage participation in religious worship and education.

Although distinctions between Sport Plus and Plus Sport approaches are sometimes fuzzy, both use sport as a hook on which to hang socializing experiences that promote forms of personal development valued by the sponsoring organization and its staff. In this sense, sports provide sometimes a necessary but never a sufficient experiential basis for producing desired developmental outcomes. In addition, the assumptions underlying both approaches are usually grounded in a self-control/deficit-reduction model of development (Coakley, 2002; Coalter, 2010). The rationale underlying this model is that deprived, disorganized environments produce young people who lack the attributes and coping skills to make choices and manage their lives in ways that lead to positive development. However, the socializing experiences that come with sport participation will produce the attributes needed to increase life chances for program participants.

Although people who favor structural transformations find these neoliberal programs to be ineffective, the self-control/deficit-reduction model remains consistent with the dominant narrative about positive personal development in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and some European nations. This narrative is informed by beliefs that emphasize individualism as a central value and stress the importance of self-confidence/efficacy/esteem in overcoming barriers, making choices, and improving one's life. Such an approach to development is often favored—and stubbornly embraced even in the face of contradictory evidence—by many who donate money to, manage, and serve as staff in these sport programs (Coalter, 2010).

In Coalter's (2010) assessment of the organizations sponsoring this type of youth intervention, he concludes that "there is no consistent and predictable 'sport-for-development effect' in terms of personal development" (p. x). Additionally, identifying such an effect is difficult because most programs provide more than sport participation opportunities alone. Further, the management and staff in sponsoring organizations found it difficult to explain why or how certain developmental outcomes occurred and they could not outline a theory that could explain the process through which desired outcomes are produced by their programs.

Other evaluations of sport-for-development programs, especially those in southern hemisphere locales where extreme poverty is the norm, indicate that many do a poor job of coordinating their efforts with the programs of other nongovernmental organizations and agencies that have similar goals (Giulianotti, 2011; Lindsey & Banda, 2011).

This may be partly due to the relative newness of sport-for-development organizations and the naiveté of their staff, but it clearly shows that their programs are based on a limited awareness of the contexts in which they work and the need to join with others to transform those contexts.

Coalter (2010) notes that the people working in these organizations generally have an “uncritical and one-dimensional view of ‘sport,’ and believe that it has inherent properties that inevitably produce positive outcomes in the form of ‘development’” (p. 17). This leaves them unwilling or unprepared to establish relationships with people in nonsport organizations who may question their faith in the benefits of sport participation and the merits of working with those who are not critically self-reflective about what they do. As a result, people in sport-for-development organizations miss opportunities to pool resources, gain support from organizations that usually have deeper and longer standing institutional connections in a region or community, and develop a deeper understanding of change at both the individual and community levels.

Bringing Sociology to Youth Sport-for-Development

From the perspective of the sociology of sport, an interesting aspect of youth sport-for-development is that research has been done primarily by scholars in policy, health, or family studies; psychology; education; and human/child/adolescent development (Cronin, 2011). Their research focuses on the relationship between sport participation and a host of personal attributes, including motor and sport-specific skills, health-related fitness, substance use, self-esteem/mastery/efficacy, autonomy, resilience, body image, social and emotional competence, moral development, prosocial behaviors, educational and occupational outcomes, and visions of one’s future. In fact, these are the primary “development variables” identified by Weiss and Wiese-Bjornstal in their 2009 report on “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Physical Activity,” which was commissioned and published in the United States by the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. This report cites 75 sources that the authors determined to be the best recent studies on this topic, and none has an author affiliated with a sociology department or possessing a PhD degree in sociology, and only one has an author that I recognize as connected with the sociology of sport (Jennifer Bruening in the Kinesiology Department at the University of Connecticut).

According to Weiss and Wiese-Bjornstal (2009), positive youth development refers to the creation or expansion of “personal skills or assets, including cognitive, social, emotional, and intellectual qualities necessary for youth to become successfully functioning members of society” (p. 1). However, their only references to concrete forms of “functioning” in society refer to demonstrating social skills with peers and adults, exercising personal responsibility, and resolving personal conflicts. In this sense, the academic literature appears to reproduce a functionalist neoliberal approach to positive youth development rather than extending ideas about the many ways that youth development can be defined in connection with sport programs. Overall, the sources

selected and cited by Weiss and Wiese-Bjornstal appear to uncritically accept the stated missions of youth sport-for-development programs.

After closely reviewing research on youth sports over nearly 50 years, I am not surprised by the author affiliations for citations in the Weiss and Wiese-Bjornstal report. Sociologists and scholars in the sociology of sport have done research on youth sports, but most of their studies have been published after the mid-1990s and the majority of them deal with gender-related topics, including equity, access to participation opportunities, body image, power relations, and the meanings given to sport experiences by girls and young women. This is unintentionally documented by Mary Jo Kane and Nicole LaVoi who directed the project out of which was published The 2007 Tucker Center Research Report, "Developing Physically Active Girls: An Evidence-Based Multidisciplinary Approach." The project was supported by the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota, and it had one sociologist, Doug Hartmann, on the 5-member advisory board. The report listed 409 references among which only 25 were authored by one or more people with primary affiliations in sociology or sociology of sport. Among these 25 citations, 3 have authors associated with sociology exclusively, 9 are authored by Margaret Duncan and her colleagues, and 16 of the 25 deal directly with girls and young women.

Kane and LaVoi wrote the Tucker Center Report primarily for practitioners and decision makers in physical education and community-based programs. None of the research they cited dealt with forms of development that went beyond the personal attributes of individuals, but they concluded the report with recommendations among which it was noted that there is a need to study the ways that youth sport programs can be used to help girls themselves reduce barriers to sport participation, support gender equity in sport programs, and challenge male power and privilege in sports. Although these recommendations were included in a long list, they represent an acknowledgment that development can be defined to include changes in critical awareness and social action in addition to attributes that are primarily psychological and oriented toward personal success.

On a global basis, the sociology of sport is better represented. For example, a 2011 review of the literature on sport for development, broadly defined, listed 265 references (Cronin, 2011). Thirty-five of those were done by people associated with the sociology of sport, although more than half were authored by four scholars (John Sugden, Tess Kay, Simon Darnell, and Cora Burnett).

To put the sociology of sport on the table in discussions of youth sport-for-development programs, there is a need for research that focuses on the impact of these programs on larger issues of social and structural change at the neighborhood and community levels. In part, this involves studies of how young people learn about factors that negatively affect their lives and receive guidance in making informed decisions about participating in collective efforts to confront and change those factors. In the case of wealthy sporting nations, there is a need for research on how youth sport participation is related to various forms of current and future civic engagement and involvement in social and community development.

As I observe young people in the United States who become increasingly skilled athletes and compete at progressively higher levels in club-based youth sports, it appears that they see themselves as individuals sponsored by their parents with little or no reference to or awareness of their membership in a community that transcends family and sport club. If this is the case, youth sport programs are unlikely to produce forms of development that link young people with their local communities or encourage them to identify as citizens with vested interests in collectivities that go beyond family and team. This creates a situation in which positive youth development comes to be a matter of personal achievement, an indication of moral worth for the parents who sponsor and nurture participation (Coakley, 2009), and a measure of quality among the clubs that hire coaches and arrange schedules. If a young person succeeds as an athlete under these conditions and “wants to give back,” as elite athletes often proclaim, to whom do they give back when parents and elite clubs were the primary, if not the only, sponsors and support system in a sport structure that progressively separated them from their communities and from opportunities to engage themselves in civic actions?

Fortunately, there is a tradition of youth organizing and critical youth empowerment programs that critical scholars in the sociology of sport can use as models for Sport Plus and Plus Sport programs that define development in ways that go beyond personal attributes (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Christens & Dolan, 2010). For example, Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, and Lacoe (2006) have made the case that one of the most important indicators of development among young people is “their ability to increasingly recognize their potential for making contributions to the public sphere” (p. 236). They concluded that youth development programs are ideally suited for facilitating civic engagement because they provide the combination of support and opportunities required for overall healthy growth. In their comparative study of programs that used different approaches to youth development, they found that those focused on local organizing had participants who scored higher on levels of youth leadership, decision making, and community involvement than participants in traditional youth programs focused more on nurturing individual attributes than individual-community awareness and connections.

Similarly, Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, and McLoughlin (2006) used four existing models to develop a critical social theory of youth empowerment organized around “critical reflection, reflective action, and social change at individual and collective levels” (p. 50). The key factors in their theory were “(1) a welcoming, safe environment, (2) meaningful participation and engagement, (3) equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, (4) engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, (5) participation in sociopolitical processes to affect change, and (6) integrated individual- and community-level empowerment” (p. 41). Their review of youth program models showed that critical social empowerment involves changes at both the individual and group level—that is, it enhances “the capacity of individuals to contribute to and work in collaboration with others to effect social change” (p. 50).

In a more recent synthesis of research on this topic, Christens and Dolan (2010) explained that youth organizing produces multiple impacts because it “weaves together youth development, community development, and social change into a unified organizing cycle” (p. 1). They also provided evidence showing that youth development programs were more effective if they had a more strategic programmatic focus on the connections between individual development, community development, and social change. This was particularly apparent case when program participants were members of marginalized populations that must mobilize as many people as possible to be politically effective. Overall, Christens and Dolan concluded that youth organizing was effective because it produced a critical awareness of power relations and the ways that power relations affected local communities and the lives of individuals. This outcome has been described as “sociopolitical development” by Watts and Guessous (2006)—a form of development overlooked by most youth programs today but one that is crucial to the lives of many young people targeted by sport-for-development. As Christens and Dolan observed, “Paradoxically, youth organizing (at its best) is a highly effective vehicle for youth development precisely because it is not solely focused on youth development” (p. 200).

Although youth organizing and critical youth empowerment have not been linked with youth sports in literature I have reviewed, there is no a priori reason that such a link is not possible or would not be helpful in producing positive developmental outcomes for individuals and communities. As Spaaij (2009) cautioned, it is important to “avoid naive and unrealistic generalizations about the transformative capacity of sport” (p. 1266), but, at the same time, there is a need for theoretically informed explanations of the ways that sports and sport participation can be organized and combined with other activities for the purpose of empowering young people to make choices about change-oriented civic engagement based on a critical awareness of the factors that negatively affect their lives.

Finally, it is admittedly difficult to develop programs designed to enhance the agency of young people (ages 12-18). However, the people who work in youth organizing and critical empowerment programs may be willing to form cooperative and mutually supportive relationships with scholars who want to engage in forms of action research to test the efficacy of including sport participation in those programs. There is no research on how this might occur, but the recent growth in the visibility and popularity of sports in many parts of the world creates a more amenable climate for such relationships. Of course, it is important to avoid an evangelistic approach in making this case and to become familiar with the theories and models used in the realm of community practice and organization. Fortunately, we already know that outcomes associated with sport participation are contingent and vary with contextual factors that have been identified in a number of studies. Many of these factors overlap with key factors in youth organizing and critical youth empowerment—another reason to make connections with these organizations and programs. Without these and similar connections, sport for development programs miss opportunities to extend and evaluate their impact on communities as well as individuals.

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Notes

1. This list summarizes many of the outcomes that sport evangelists claim to occur in association with sports and sport participation, especially among young people (see <http://www.livestrong.com/article/136633-youth-sportsbenefits/> for statements based on an assumed fertilizer effect). These claims are presented and documented in more extensive lists in Coalter (2007), Donnelly (2007), and Fullinwider (2006).
2. This list summarizes many unsubstantiated claims; more complete lists are provided by Donnelly (2007), Hartmann (2001, 2003, 2008), Hartmann and Depro (2006), and Hartmann and Massoglia (2007).
3. This list summarizes many unsubstantiated claims; more complete lists are provided by Coakley (2002) and Coalter (2007).
4. These are selective, not exhaustive references for each of these conditions.
5. Well-regarded sociologists who have studied children and adolescents in the past have told me that they no longer do so because obtaining the approval of institutional review boards is so tedious. They also say that it is increasingly difficult to obtain parental permission in the United States because many parents demand that the researcher disclose what their children do and say, thereby undermining confidentiality and the establishment of rapport.

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Bio

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