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Building Meaningful Programs for Indigenous Youth

Project Summary

The main purpose of this research program was to help build more meaningful and relevant sport and recreation-based programs for Indigenous youth through the examination of a series of multidisciplinary analyses and case studies (mainly the Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth [PLAY] program from Right To Play, Project George, and Milo Pimatisiwin from Moose Factory).

Sociocultural studies of youth programming:

Most of these studies were inspired by the work of Indigenous scholars such as Taiaiake Alfred, Leanne Simpson, Glen Coulthard and Jeff Corntassel, who elaborate on Indigenous resurgence theory and practice. Study 1 explored youth experiences in the context of the PLAY program in Whitefish River First Nation and their potential for encouraging Critical Youth Empowerment and Indigenous resurgence. Study 2 presented autoethnographic reflections on sport for development from a practitioner/researcher's perspective. Study 3 examined the Indigenous game of lacrosse and reflected upon its potential as a decolonizing and re-empowering tool when understood within Indigenous knowledge. Study 4 analyzed self-critical discourses of PLAY program practitioners from an Indigenous postcolonial lens, and reflected on ways to decolonize programs. Studies 5 and 6 examined the importance of the connection to the land in youth programming. The purpose of Study 7 was to strengthen the use of Indigenous research methodologies.

Sport psychology (positive youth development) studies:

Study 8 provided an understanding of youth's experiences during a PLAY program community sport event in the PLAY program while Study 9 examined local community mentors' perceptions of the program. Study 10 presented a utilization-focused evaluation based on the perceptions of the PLAY team's successes and challenges.

Sport management study:

Study 11 explored how a community-external agency partnership attempted to use an ice-hockey program to create sustainable community development outcomes.

Research methods

All studies were based on a qualitative design and drew from emerging Indigenous methodologies' values of reciprocity and participation, through formal partnerships with the communities and/or the organization and through formal ethical principles established by our Indigenous Research Advisory Committee, which was created specifically for this project. Most studies used semi-structured and in-depth interviews as well as participant observation in a wide variety of community and sport events related to the PLAY program from Right To Play, Project George, or Milo Pimatisiwin programs from Moose Factory. Our research team worked mainly with the communities of Moose Factory, Whitefish River First Nation (WRFN), Sandy Lake, Henvey Inlet, and Aamjiwnaang. Our researchers participated in approximately 10 different week-long PLAY events with the PLAY team, partners and local mentors from the 57 communities participating in the PLAY program.

Research results

Study 1 shows that youth experiences of the PLAY program in WRFN show great potential for youth empowerment and Indigenous resurgence. More sport and program resources could target: 1) supporting strong youth identity foundations; 2) walking youth through a healing journey; 3) addressing trauma, suicide ideation, and other mental health issues; 4) encouraging a political understanding of historical and colonial structure reproducing inequalities; and 5) encouraging Indigenous resurgence advocacy.

Study 2 indicates practitioners and academics could be encouraged to reflect critically on their positions, which have the potential to reproduce and maintain unequal power relations.

While lacrosse is presented as an excellent opportunity to revitalize Indigenous games, Study 3 shows that the epistemological significance of the game for the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Nations is complex and rich.

Study 4 brings to light an increasing reflectivity amongst PLAY practitioners. Discussions on structural problems linked to the neo-liberal system in which the program operates, issues of Indigenous agency and voices within the program were examined.

Studies 5-6 reinforce the need for programs to be centered on restoring a connection to the land as it strengthens a sense of wholeness through kinship systems, a community of learning through stories and oral tradition, and recognition of women's contribution to community well-being.

Study 7 stresses that Indigenous methodologies encourage and respect the flow of Indigenous knowledge-based values throughout a project, and favour Indigenous resurgence advocacy.

Preliminary findings from Study 8 indicate community sport events provide an important and meaningful experience for all involved, including youth leaders, children, and families as they offer opportunities for skill building to program participants.

Study 9 indicates that the strategies for success in community-based sport programs in Indigenous communities are: moving away from an academic setting; participants being a positive presence through being creative and adaptable; respecting and integrating appropriate cultural heritage; and identifying partnerships and developing relationships with the community. Three barriers facing such programs are community diversity, social issues, and volunteer and program staff burnout.

Study 11 showed that sport is critical to initiate positive change within a community. Challenges exist in program funding, human resource management, and communication, all of which highlight the importance of sustainable resource planning.

Limitations:

- Whilst the PLAY program is highly dynamic, and changes very quickly, academic research tends to be somewhat slow in publishing results. Highlighted issues may have been addressed or become less relevant at the time of knowledge exchange.
- Indigenous communities and local program contexts are extremely diverse, which presents a challenge for analysis of the research results.

Policy implications


Whilst acknowledging the excellent work on sport-based programming, it must not be forgotten that Indigenous peoples have their own sports, games, ceremonies and related values that need to be respected, not replaced. Highly meaningful Indigenous youth programs exist and could be the basis for supporting communities to revitalize and restore their own cultures (Project George, Milo Pimatisiwin or the Akwesasne Cultural Restoration program). Such programs are community-led, often politically engaged and driven by cultural restoration and Indigenous resurgence. They were developed by community members, grew gradually out of local partnerships, and only later engaged with external partners and funders. Such programs have evolved slowly by building meaningful land-based projects involving cultural and language-infused apprenticeship that provide opportunities to learn traditional practices such as hunting, trapping, medicinal and healing plant knowledge, fishing, water-use, environmental issues, and politics of land rights. Policy-makers need to ensure that Indigenous epistemologies are at the heart of program development.

Next steps

The results from this research encourage self-critical thinking about Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations at all levels, and amongst all parties, (policy-makers, organizations, academics). This process of introspection can be guided by questions and themes such as:

- Western views see sport, health, youth or education as independent, compartmentalized entities. Indigenous epistemologies see wholeness in balanced, reciprocal, respectful and relational equilibrium with the self, communities, nature, and the spiritual world.
- Western “expertise” in sport and physical activity may not be sufficient for the creation and development of meaningful and sustainable programs for Indigenous peoples.
- Are Western views and ways to understand and measure sport participation reproducing and maintaining unequal power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people?
- Quantitative indicators of sport participation required by the public sector and donors are often in contrast with meaningful and relevant participation appreciation from the perspective of the Indigenous communities.
- Western systems based on funders seeking growth and economic performance outcomes are ill-suited to Indigenous values and ways. They are often at odds with each other, and Western organizations should work on how to really be accountable to Indigenous communities.
- There is a need to be aware of reproducing “white saviour” / “Indigenous at risk” dichotomies, which maintain and reproduce benevolent colonialism.
- Non-Indigenous people should continue to educate themselves on the colonial nature of Eurocentric sports that are being proposed to Indigenous communities and educate themselves in the role sport played, and continues to play, in the history of colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
- Redefine “life skills” based on Indigenous epistemologies.
- Work “with” not “for” Indigenous peoples.
- Fund Indigenous programs, organizations, and academics.
- Practice Indigenous protocols acknowledging territories.
- Resist pan-Indianism by identifying specific tribal epistemologies, and avoid using the Canadian state-imposed homogenizing identity of “Aboriginal.”
- Showing awareness of these issues, questions, and values is critical to building meaningful programs with Indigenous peoples and is likely to increase participation amongst communities and contribute to the success of sport programs in engaging Indigenous youth.

Key stakeholders and benefits

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- All people and organizations in both the public and private sector working with Indigenous peoples
 - Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB)
 - Right to Play
 - Motivate Canada
 - True Sport
 - Sport Matters
 - Feathers of Hope Youth Forum
 - National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation