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Linking Sport Research and Policy: An Exploration of How Traditional Inuit and Dene Games can Support the Goals of Sport Canada

Project Summary

This research was developed and guided by a team of northern Indigenous community members, academic researchers, and government partners, all of whom share a mutual interest in trying to better understand how to support Sport Canada's goal to enhance the participation of Indigenous peoples in sport. Despite acknowledgement that traditional games may provide a unique opportunity to enhance the sport experiences of Indigenous youth, traditional games have generally been overlooked in the vast youth sport literature. As such, to address this noticeable gap, the purpose of this research was to explore how participation in traditional games can enhance the sport experiences of Indigenous youth. Findings from this research suggest that traditional games can enhance the participation of Indigenous peoples in sport by: (a) promoting cultural pride, (b) interacting with Elders, (c) supporting connection to the land, (d) developing personal characteristics, and (e) developing a foundation for movement. The knowledge shared by participants not only advance the sport literature, but provide important considerations for sport programmers and policy makers.

Research methods

This research employed a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach that was guided by a research team of Indigenous community members, academic researchers, and government partners. Conceptualized as a partnership approach, CBPR involves community partners or team members in the various aspects of the research project. Through face-to-face and teleconference meetings, the various team members were involved in the development of the research purpose, selection of participants, identification of processes for data generation, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and dissemination of findings. A total of eighteen participants, including eight Indigenous youth between the ages of 14 and 18 years and 10 adults, including coaches and sport administrators, living in various communities in the Northwest Territories were purposefully selected to participate in this research. Participants were provided with the opportunity to share their knowledge via participation in either a one-on-one interview or a group interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The initial analysis of interview transcripts were conducted by two of the academic researchers and when initial consensus for the five themes was reached, themes and supporting quotes were shared with all of the team members for their feedback and confirmation of the best way to represent findings. An Indigenous Elder and two members from a traditional games organization in the Northwest Territories joined the research team after the data were generated, and these three individuals also shared their insights on the proposed thematic representation of findings.

Research results

This research is significant in that it illuminates the unique ways in which participation in traditional games can support the goals outlined in Sport Canada's Policy on Aboriginal Peoples' Participation in Sport. Specifically, the knowledge shared by participants supports a detailed understanding of how to enhance the participation of Indigenous peoples in sport through participation in traditional games. The knowledge shared by participants are represented by five themes, which highlight how traditional games can enhance the participation of Indigenous peoples in sport by: (a) promoting cultural pride, (b) interacting with Elders, (c) supporting connection to the land, (d) developing personal characteristics, and (e) developing a foundation for movement. While these themes and supporting quotes are presented independently, they were not discussed and lived as separate entities. As such, the interconnectedness of these themes should be acknowledged.

- With respect to cultural pride, this research highlights how participants call traditional games “*their sport*”. This finding may have important implications for researchers, policy makers, and sport practitioners, particularly when considering who gets to define sport, how sport structures operate, and how resources are allocated.
- The important role of Elders within the context of sport was also highlighted within this research. Participants described how Elders hold and share intergenerational knowledge, and how Elders play an important role in sharing teachings regarding physical movement and traditional games. Within the context of sport, it is widely understood that coaches and parents play an important role in the overall sport experiences of youth. However, the important role of Elders in enhancing the sport participation of Indigenous youth is not well documented in the sport literature. It is important to consider the critical role that Elders can play in enhancing Indigenous sport programming.
- Traditional games are embedded in teachings around living life on the land, yet mainstream sporting structures do not typically privilege relationships to the land. When land-based games and learnings are leveraged alongside sport, Indigenous youth may find more value, meaning, and inclusion toward their participation.
- Findings from this research may also provide unique insights for sport programmers, researchers, and policy makers interested in promoting physical literacy. Many of the adult participants used the term physical literacy when describing how traditional games provide a foundation for physical activity and movement. As well, many of the participants described how participation in traditional games can support the development of a number of personal characteristics such as confidence, which is an important component of physical literacy. As such, participation in traditional games could play a unique role in fostering physical literacy and should be further explored.

Despite the many strengths of this research, it also has some limitations. Participants were purposefully selected to participate based on their previous knowledge and experiences with traditional games and, therefore, findings are limited in the extent to which they may be transferable to other Indigenous youth whom have little or no experience with traditional games. While a strength of this research was the inclusion of a range of Indigenous perspectives, including the perspectives of youth and adults, the findings are also somewhat limited in that this research resulted in the production of findings that more heavily emphasized the words of adults rather than youth. The process by which we generated data

through interviews, supported more in-depth results from adults. As such, future research should consider alternative processes for deeply engaging youth in the research process (e.g., photovoice).

Policy implications

This research highlights the unique ways in which participation in traditional games can enhance sport participation among Indigenous youth in Canada. The knowledge shared by participants suggest that participation in traditional games can enhance sport participation by promoting cultural pride, interacting with Elders, supporting connection to the land, developing personal characteristics (e.g., confidence), and developing a foundation for movement. These findings, which are grounded in the voices of Indigenous peoples, facilitate an in-depth understanding of practical ways in which sport participation can be enhanced among Indigenous youth. Municipal, provincial-territorial, and federal organizations and levels of government can optimize on this knowledge shared by incorporating these findings into sport programs and policies. For example, the *Canadian Sport Policy* and *Active Alberta Policy* both outline a vision for sport that is inclusive, whereby sport opportunities should respond and respect the diverse needs, interests, and motivations of individuals, families, and communities. Findings from this research could support the development of traditional games as sport opportunities that could facilitate accessibility and inclusion of Indigenous youth and communities in sport.

Next steps

New questions raised throughout this research project include:

How does participation in northern games contribute to emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual benefits for Indigenous youth? And, what factors specific to northern games can be modified to maximize these benefits? These questions will be examined in a new research project that was recently funded by a SSHRC Insight Grant in the fall 2017 competition.

Key stakeholders and benefits

- Aboriginal Sport Circle
- Alberta Recreation and Parks Association
- Ever Active Schools
- ParticipACTION
- Sport for Life