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A Cultural Approach to Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation: Observations from Year One

Janice Forsyth, Michael Heine, and Joannie Halas

Introduction

In the early 1990s, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) consulted with Aboriginal youth throughout Canada about the context of their lives and what they needed in order to flourish. The youth consulted spoke passionately and intelligently on a wide range of social issues, including the need for more sport and recreation programs in rural and urban settings. A holistic perspective emerged from their concerns, emphasizing the important ways organized sport and recreation contribute to individual health and community well-being, and reflecting their frustrations with existing delivery systems, in which access and equity issues severely limited the positive role sport and recreation played in their lives (Government of Canada 1996).

In the final report, published in 1996, the Royal Commission praised Aboriginal youth for the quality and relevance of their input, and for energizing the political struggles of Aboriginal peoples in Canada:

We were encouraged to see that Aboriginal youth, when presented with a problem, immediately tend to look for solutions that are practical and feasible and that will work at the community level. It became clear that for young Aboriginal men and women, community development is not about infrastructure, but about people and about building a stronger community. (Government of Canada 1996, 148)

These statements, while calling attention to the positive potential in Aboriginal youth, also highlight two key weaknesses that impede advances in the organizational structure of Aboriginal sport and recreation programs in Canada. First, Aboriginal youth have limited involvement in the development and implementation of programs designed to meet their needs. Second, existing delivery systems generally do not meet the needs of Aboriginal youth. For example, the Aboriginal youth consulted for the RCAP identified the need for a cultural basis to sport by incorporating Aboriginal youth perspectives in program development and delivery. This lack of understanding and awareness of a cultural basis to sport ensures that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizers will continue to be frustrated with their inability to engage Aboriginal youth in physical activities and serves to extend and legitimize paternalistic attitudes when designing policies and programs for them.

The Research Project

We are currently entering the second year of a three-year study, based in Winnipeg, to explore how the positive potential in sport and recreation can be mobilized to provide Aboriginal youth with opportunities to participate in physical activity programs that will improve their overall health and well-being and expand their leadership skills in ways that respect and enhance their cultural identities. At the completion of the three-year study, our ultimate goal will be to have fostered relationships across groups that will strengthen the long-term efficacy and sustainability of a culturally relevant Aboriginal sport and recreation community in Winnipeg.

Underpinning the practical implications of the study are four academic and policy objectives. Currently, the research literature identifies barriers to participation (e.g., Reid, Tremblay, Pelletier, and McKay, 1994), and provides *atheoretical* examples of successful practice that are too often short term and unsustainable. In this project, existing sport, recreation, and education groups collaborate with a research team to apply theoretically driven models as a means to effectively engage Aboriginal youth in culturally relevant ways. A description of the process to initiate and develop such collaborations is one of the intended outcomes and will be used to inform policy directives that can be used in other jurisdictions and social contexts.

Next, the research literature informs us of the important health and wellness outcomes of daily physical activity, yet it provides very little information on how to design culturally relevant interventions that will increase physical activity levels, particularly for Aboriginal youth. While there is some evidence concerning the design of meaningful and relevant sport, recreation, and physical education programs (Fox et al. 1998; Halas 2002), research in this area tends to raise more questions than it answers.

Third, the incorporation of Indigenous research methodologies is rare in the research literature, although it holds the potential to add much to the knowledge base of qualitative, community-based, action research. Finally, development of a model for delivering a culturally relevant sport and recreation program in an urban environment will empower Aboriginal youth to exert control over their own health and wellness issues, thus providing a “counter story” (Solorzano and Yosso 2002) to the discourse of pathology that pervades much of the research literature on Aboriginal youth.

Framework

We recognize the obstacles that constrain the participation of Aboriginal youth in sport and recreation, and to offset the debilitating implications of the discourse on pathology, we have chosen to work from a “strengths” perspective. It is based on the premise that “disadvantaged” or “at-risk” groups possess strengths that often

go unrecognized and underutilized by researchers engaged in community development initiatives (Saleebey 1996). In their review of health and wellness programs in urban Aboriginal communities in Canada, Davidson, Brasfield, Quressette, and Demerais likewise conclude that projects initiated from a deficit perspective “failed to provide holistic and culturally appropriate solutions” (1997, 38) for Aboriginal peoples because they tended to neglect existing structural barriers that limit Aboriginal people from gaining access to human and financial resources that could help them to build better lives. The pervasiveness of this approach should not be underestimated. As Chapin (1995) points out, the findings of research projects founded on deficits are regularly translated into social policies that directly affect people’s lives. Often, the results can be devastating, as complex social problems are reduced to individual pathologies that identify individuals (and their families) as the sole cause of his or her own failings (Halas and Hanson 2001).

Far from denying existing realities, a strengths-based approach offers a different starting point for asking questions, engaging in strategic partnerships, and finding appropriate solutions. Projects such as ours are founded on the premise that Aboriginal youth possess many *strengths* that adults need to recognize and respect—they are passionate, driven, and highly committed; they want to help, but often need the opportunity to express their ideas and display their skills in a positive and supportive environment, that is to say, what is really required is a strategy for seeing what is already available (Weick et al. 1989, 354). Within the context of our study, the strengths approach begins by inviting the participants to identify meaningful physical activities in which they may already be engaged or wish to pursue. Pre-existing strengths are thereby identified and can be built upon. The strengths perspective provides a positive means to evaluate, enhance, and (re)construct sport and recreation opportunities because it encourages people and communities themselves to identify their greatest assets and to recognize what they already do well. They are not merely asked to improve their lot by fitting better into the mainstream system.

Furthermore, our understanding of the various ways in which power relations can influence research practices, combined with our interest in collaborating on relevant undertakings with Aboriginal community members, has led us to adopt an Indigenous research methodology so as to privilege Indigenous concerns and practices in the research process (Smith 1999). We connect our interpretation of Indigenous methodology with traditional Native educational practices as described in the “Circle of Courage” (to name but one relevant example), which promotes belonging, independence, responsibility, and generosity as the central, unifying values from which to frame educational and youth work (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and van Bockern 1990). We use these values to guide our pedagogical interactions with young people in the study, as well as to inform our analysis of the cultural meaning of sport and recreation, particularly when Aboriginal perspectives are compared with mainstream approaches. For example, in one after-school physical activity program, we engage with and learn from Aboriginal high school students

who have volunteered as mentors to design and deliver once-weekly recreation programming for early-years' students at a nearby school. As ethical research practice, this mentorship program (along with the after-school programming in our second school) provides immediate, tangible outcomes (enhanced access to physical activity opportunities) for all our research participants.

Context

The timing of this study coincides nicely with the convergence of growing public interest in the quality and quantity of daily physical activity programs available for youth in Winnipeg. Three documents, in particular, shaped our understanding of the field in which we are operating. First, the *Public Use Facilities Study* (Economic Research Associates 2004) provides an inventory of facilities in high- and low-income neighbourhoods, and examines several options for improving local recreation programming. Second, a detailed report on this study appeared in the *Winnipeg Free Press* in the winter of 2005. The findings of this public investigation clarified the possible ramifications of the various policy options identified in the *Public Use Facilities Study*. Third, the Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures Task Force, established in 2004, included a large-scale community consultation process, in which Manitobans were asked to provide their views on how to keep children and youth active and healthy into their adult lives. The *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures Task Force Report* (2005) outlined the need for more quality, daily physical activity among youth and identified community strategies on how to achieve that goal.

In addition to its contemporary relevance, this study is strengthened by already existing relationships between education officials in two school divisions and one of the researchers (Halas), as well as graduate and undergraduate students who have been working with Aboriginal youth on a participatory action research (PAR) project since 2004. Results from this study have identified some key barriers that inhibit Aboriginal youth participation in high school physical education and sport (e.g., lack of cultural understanding between mainstream teachers and youth, students "opting out" of participation based on perceptions of exclusion, minimal opportunity to compete with other groups of Aboriginal youth). To offset the constraints on effective youth engagement represented by issues of race, class, power, and privilege (Halas 2004), our research team works as allies (Bishop 1994) with school officials, who are deeply committed to improving the educational lives of their Aboriginal students through physical education.

Year One activities focused on re-energizing our relationship with the two school divisions, familiarizing school officials with the current project, and establishing after-school physical activity programs at each research site. Year Two activities will focus on data collection with the youth at the two schools and building relationships with community partners. Year Three will include another round of data collection at each school, as well as hosting a large forum in which student

participants will work with local allies and share their ideas on how public policy can better meet the sport and recreation needs of urban Aboriginal youth. Using a participatory action research model, a community-based, youth-driven sport and recreation agenda will be identified as a means to address barriers and enhance access in an important Canadian urban environment for Aboriginal youth.

Methods

A number of different information-gathering approaches, including participant observation, individual and small group interviews with Aboriginal youth, social mapping, and photovoice (participant visual auto-ethnography), have been incorporated into the project. A broad range of methods was selected in order to help illuminate the complex social experiences that shape Aboriginal youth involvement in sport and recreation. For example, the graduate, undergraduate, and older high school students who run the after school programs keep daily journals in which they record their observations in the gym and reflect on their own practices as mentors. As such, the journals function simultaneously as a form of participant observation and as means for critical reflection.

Social mapping and photovoice form the cornerstone of our data collection methods. Maps can be used for a wide variety of reasons. In this study, social mapping—that is, developing visual representations of community-use patterns and social dynamics in an urban setting employing cartographic metaphors—will be used to communicate important social information in an effort to “reclaim the commons” and depict “strategies of resistance” (Aberly 1993, 4): “What you are being encouraged to do is honestly describe what you already know about where you live in a manner that adds momentum to positive forces of change” (5). Maps that depict this type of social information show the “flow of life,” which is seldom examined before it is disturbed (27). Thus, “a map becomes more than a series of lines; it becomes a visual agenda for action, a turf to defend, a series of memories that remind of action and pleasure and history” (73). Maps visually demonstrate that boundaries, far from being fixed and permanent, are always evolving and can be pushed back or changed. Researchers who seek to help local populations reclaim communal spaces and offer alternative visions for the possibilities of public policy development might find social mapping of benefit:

If images of our neighbourhoods, our communities, and our regions are made by others, then it is *their* future that will be imposed. But if maps are made by resident groups and individuals who have quality of life as a goal, then images of a very different nature will predominate. Locally made maps will hang on the walls of community halls, town offices, and in school corridors. They will communicate layers of interconnected alternatives that can be implemented by persistent and courageous local action. The wisdom that this alternative vision speaks—sustainability, self-reliance, social justice—an incorruptible, decentralized power that is almost impossible to divert: the first step toward abandoning a status quo based on globalized corporate control, the commoditization of life, and institutionalized exploitation. (130–31)

There are a number of different ways to do social mapping. The method varies depending on the desired outcomes. In our study, for example, we are using 1) large- and small-scale maps of Winnipeg to plot physical spaces, 2) a sketch mapping technique with youth to plot their personal physical biographies in map form, and 3) photovoice to add visual representations and narrative meaning to the maps (Wang and Burris 1997). In addition to identifying the “active spaces” where youth engage in healthful physical activities, the maps call attention to the symbology of “empty spaces,” those areas youth cannot access for a variety of reasons (e.g., costs, safety, regulated times, private interests, etc.).

Social mapping fits well with the underlying assumptions of the strengths perspective in that it does not merely provide a site inventory, it creates a dynamic visual representation of the strengths and experiences of Aboriginal youth (Strack, Magill, and McDonagh 2003). A map cannot change the neighbourhood, but it can be a window, rendering visible the options for change. The purpose of this research study is to demonstrate, visually, where urban Aboriginal youth, in their own view, spend time engaged in healthful recreation practices. The overall goal is to improve access to those spaces in order to encourage greater physical activity among urban Aboriginal youth.

Training and Mentorship

At the foundation of the entire research project is the training and mentoring of graduate, undergraduate, and high school students. At present, the project consists of an **11-member research team, including one coordinator, four graduate students, four undergraduate students, one high school student, and one community member.** Ten of the team members are Aboriginal (First Nations and Métis) and one is non-Aboriginal. The team is divided evenly by gender. The demographics are important because of the need to build capacity among Aboriginal people as they work to rebuild their communities and establish new ones in urban environments. Consistent with the ethics of a participatory action research model, we also view our many youth participants and adult partner groups as co-researchers within the study. Through our collaborations, we seek to promote the value of community-based research as a tool for capacity building.

Not only do the student team members who carry out the day-to-day operations of the project have to be able to coordinate after-school programs, interact respectfully with urban Aboriginal youth, and liaise with non-Aboriginal administrative and educational personnel, they are also required to apply the broad range of qualitative information-gathering methods described above, carry out data coding, and assist with analyzing findings using computer-based tools. Beyond such pragmatic concerns, they should be sympathetic towards the political intents of community-based, participatory action research, and be positively interested in the uses of academic research for purposes of social activism and community empowerment—in other words, in the principal goals of Indigenous methodology

capacity development and the enabling of political empowerment and self-determination.

Such a wide array of objectives and intents tends to place considerable stress on the human and material resources of any research project. Considerable personal commitments on the part of all concerned, and not inconsiderable material resources as well, are required to sustain such ambitious project goals. The objectives of the recently launched SSRHC Aboriginal Research Grants Program map well to the intents of our present project. The SSHRC support has enabled us to define—and, for now, sustain—the (perhaps) bold scope of our project. Our project's ultimate acceptance in the Aboriginal community remains to be determined, but to the extent that the intent of the SSHRC Aboriginal Research Grants Program is to increase the relevance of university-based research for Aboriginal communities, it has, we believe in our case, already proven its value.

Conclusions

Communities can be a tremendous source of strength, even if they lack the financial and material resources that are often taken for granted in less marginalized areas (Banerjee 1997). Aboriginal youth have acknowledged the importance of resolving issues and empowering people from community-based perspectives. Collectively, their ideas on the important connection between the individual and community led the RCAP to describe the process of empowerment as a holistic endeavour in which everyone participates and benefits. Empowerment tends to create an awareness of individual agency and power that, in turn, can have positive implications for the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of people who come to recognize themselves as valuable members of the community. They work to make their community stronger, and in doing so they help other members of the community empower themselves (Government of Canada 1996, 149).

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