Sport is not enough: why outdoor education can make a valuable contribution to the field of sport for development

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Sport for development (SFD) is an emerging field in academic research. Within the last few decades, sport has been seen more frequently as a vehicle for change, especially since the United Nations named 2005 the Year of Development and Peace through Sport (Levermore, 2008). After the apartheid in South Africa, Nelson Mandela argued that sport is crucial to aiding countries such as South Africa and that it even “has the power to change the world” (Sharwood, 2017). The outdoors, having slightly less lofty goals than SFD, are perceived as a vehicle for learning and leisure (Humberstone, Brown & Richards, 2003). Outdoor education, specifically, is defined as an experiential learning method with the use of all senses that takes place primary in the natural environment (Collins, 2000). The use of outdoor education (OE) as a learning strategy has been shown to lead to personal development goals such as increased self-esteem (Barak, Hedrich & Albrechtsen, 2000) and feelings of empowerment (EU congress, 1996). Although both SFD and OE have shown positive developmental outcomes, SFD researchers deem their field to be controversial and poorly defined. Additionally, OE focuses more on personal, small-scale development whereas SFD projects seem to be interested in global, social development. OE’s focus on the individual, while simultaneously being able to reach a wide range of cultures, may give reason to merge it with the often top-down approaches of SFD. Throughout this paper, I will argue that OE and SFD have many commonalities and that more research needs to be done on both fields together in order to test their effectiveness as a unit.

I will first begin with an analysis of sport for development. Many authors in the SFD field argue that it can result in positive social outcomes in a variety of areas. Though there are many SFD goals that researchers have explored, in this paper I will focus on three themes; youth development, female empowerment and social cohesion. The vast majority of SFD literature and
SFD corporations focus on youth development rather than on adults (Hayhurst, 2013; Kidd, 2008; Mwaanga, 2010). Although most SFD studies repeatedly mention youth and youth development in their work, they fail to explain why youth are the main focus of SFD initiatives. It is likely because SFD organizations are using a preventative methodology in an attempt to avoid social problems in the future, by focusing on young people’s personal potential (EU congress, 1996).

The focus on youth in SFD initiatives varies from HIV/AIDS education through soccer in a program called Kicking AIDS out (Mwaanga, 2010) to simply giving youth a sense of accomplishment through skateboarding (Laureus, 2009). Regardless of the specific sport, or the methodology, the goal is always to create social change in young people.

Another focus-group in SFD organizations is women. Young girls in particular are subjects of SFD programming, with the goal of achieving gender equity and bringing girls into the public sphere (Brady, 2005). Martha Saavedra (2009) argues that sport is profoundly gendered, creating strict definitions of what is means to be male and female. With these defining features of femininity, women are often considered to be secondary to men in sport, and are seen as frail and elegant rather than strong and powerful (Wilson, 2007). Although sport creates this bi-gendered environment, some scholars argue that it also has the power to affect gender norms within society (Saavedra, 2009). With a continuous increase in female participation and feminist perspectives in sport initiatives, various SFP organizations are now focusing on female empowerment and gender equality as their main objective (Hancock, Lyras & Ha, 2013). The Girl Effect for example, is a campaign created by Nike, which invests in female health and education, arguing that these resources will allow them to be agents of their own change (Hayhurst, 2013).
The final component of SFD initiatives that I will mention, is the assumption that sport plays a large role in social cohesion. In 2004, the UN called sport “the universal language”, claiming that “it can bring people together, no matter what their origin, background, religious beliefs or economic status” (as cited in Darnell, 2012). This position is taken by the UN, as well as by many SFD practitioners, claiming that sport is a powerful tool of social integration (Guilianotti, 2004). Schulenkorf (2012) agrees that sports tournaments and special events can contribute to social cohesion and communal pride through increased community development. While sport is seen as a universal human right, it can also be used to achieve human rights, as mentioned previously in the example of the apartheid in South Africa (Donnelly, 2007). Overall, sport has been used, and continues to be used, as a method to bring people and communities together.

Unfortunately, the researchers in the field of SFD have also found an outstanding number of issues with the SFD framework; pointing out that there is insufficient instruction on how it should operate and be evaluated (Black, 2010; Hartman & Kwauk, 2011; Jeanes & Lindsay, 2014; Levermore, 2011; Nicholls, Giles & Sthna, 2010). The idea of sport as a universal language has especially led to disagreement in the SFD literature, with many researchers arguing that it leads to sport evangelism, or the idea that sport is innately good (Guilianotti, 2011). Certain universal values can indeed be promoted with the use of sport participation, but they are not inherent to sport itself (Darnell, 2012). Furthermore, Guest argues that different cultures adapt sport practices to their own needs, values and meanings, so the idea that sport has universal values can lead to neo-colonialist implications (2009). The competitive aspect of sport gives rise to additional problems in the social cohesion argument for sport’s benefit. According to Donnelly (2007), “competitive sport is based on principles of social exclusion; and sport may be used to
promote ideological conformity, nationalism, militarism and inequitable attitudes about gender, race and disability”. In other words, sport may lead away from the ideals of social cohesion and universal language that it is trying to achieve.

As mentioned earlier, it has been argued that sport can lead to female empowerment, but unfortunately, only 34 of 264 projects in the International Platform for Sport and Development targeted girls and women (as cited in Saavedra, 2009). Not only is there a lack of SFD programs that focus on girls, but there is also a shockingly small amount of literature that focuses on mixed gender SFD programs and how they affect the perception of gender norms (Chawansky, 2011). Additionally, Hayhurst (2013) reminds us that regardless of the success of programs such as Nike’s Girl Effect, women still have to navigate through physical and social barriers that prevent them from having complete agency.

As for issues in SFD in general, there is some miscommunication in the literature about what the term development actually means (Black, 2010). Specifically, what kinds of development does SFD target? Is SFD only related to societal development or can it also contribute to personal development goals? What constitutes improvement through development and how do we measure this improvement?

Sport is another topic of debate in the SFD field; with a fairly loose definition. The International Working Group on SDP defines sport as “all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction, such as play, recreation, organized or competitive sport, and indigenous sports and games” (as cited in Mwwanga, 2010). In fact, Coalter (2013) argues that sport has a mythopoeic status, meaning that it is reified and distorted; representing reality rather than reflecting it. Not only does this definition underpin sport
evangelism, but it also creates a blurred line between what is sport and what isn’t. This leads me to my next question: is outdoor education a sport?

Outdoor education (OE) is understood differently depending on its cultural context and on what exactly it is trying to achieve. It has also been called adventure education, experiential learning, and frilufts liv in Norway. There are intercultural differences within the ways people perceive outdoor education and how it can benefit them specifically. In frilufts liv, for example, being in the outdoors has to do with a way of life rather than a skill, and is connected to a sense of nationality (Tordsson, 2007). In contrast, in Western outdoor education and recreation, being in nature is connected more to the idea of conquering the challenges of the natural world (Tordsson, 2007). Although the various definitions of OE can lead to some confusion about what OE actually is, it is also constructive to have a variety of ways in which OE is understood cross-culturally. This way, OE can benefit different populations which may have a variety of values and needs.

Although it was difficult to find literature on both OE and SFD together, OE literature showed some common themes to SFD including the three already mentioned above: youth development, female empowerment and social cohesion. It is sensible that youth are the main focus of outdoor education since age is strongly and inversely related to recreational activities that require physical strength and endurance (Manning, 1999). Being outside and learning through experiential learning may be especially important for today’s North American youth due to rising rates of inactivity and screen time indoors (Active Healthy Kids Canada, 2014). The EU Congress on youth and social work in the outdoors was in held in Austria in 1996. It was the second of its kind, with the aim of heightening awareness for the potential that lays in social work through
outdoor physical activities and sports (EU Congress, 1996). Although these sorts of ideas are common in Europe, there does not seem to be as much of an interest in social work practices through OE in North America or elsewhere in the world. This may be due to the commercialization of outdoor activities in Canada and the United States, making OE something that is only available to the “exclusive” North American population (Vikander, 2007). Perhaps, making OE more accessible in North America could give rise to more social work projects run in the outdoors, allowing for youth to further benefit from it.

Although there is a vast amount of research written on women in OE settings (Allin & Humberstone, 2006; Gray, 2016; Humberstone, 2000; Mcneil, Harris & Fondren, 2012; Warren, 1996), a plea was made at the 1996 European Congress conference on youth and social work to make more workshops focusing on young women (Collins, 2000). Multiple researchers have mentioned how outdoor education can improve the self-esteem of young women by allowing them to identify the competencies and abilities that they possess (Barak, Hedrich & Albrechtsen, 2000; McNiel et al., 2012). Loeffler (1997) believes that it may be even more beneficial for women to spend time in the outdoors on their own in order to discover their ability to be solely responsible for route finding, navigation and decision making (as cited in Carter, 2000). Carter has a more nuanced argument on the subject, suggesting that the issue may not necessarily be surrounding gender, but lays in the lack of appreciation for different philosophies and values in the outdoor industry (Carter, 2000). She believes that if OE adopts an open-minded approach, it will allow each individual, including women, to “value their own experience and their own unique way of working outdoors” (p. 79).
Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the outdoors is its ability to bring people together. Prof. John Rex mentioned at the 1996 EU congress that outdoor challenges can offer fulfilling possibilities, encouraging an environment that is different from the seemingly meaningless and alienating modern society (1996). Participation in outdoor activities has also been argued to increase social solidarity as well as ethnic and cultural assimilation in America (Cordell, Bergstrorn, Hartmann & English, 1990). Burch conducted a study on outdoor recreation in 1996, finding that one’s participation in outdoor activities is influenced by their social circles (as cited in Manning, 1999). An important distinction to make between sport and OE is that OE doesn’t necessarily have the competitive aspect that is often crucial to sport. The lack of competition in OE creates a much more open and inclusive environment as compared to that of competitive sport. Additionally, the ways in which different cultures understand and use OE, as mentioned in the introduction, can allow for a more diverse application of development programming. This can be contrasted with the Western ideals that are brought into SFD initiatives via mainstream sport.

After reviewing the literature on both OE and SFD, I found many similarities in terms of their goals. Both fields attempt to use a variety of physical activity as a vehicle for change. Although SFD focuses mainly on large-scale, global change while OE does more work in personal advancement, both fields mention ideas of youth development, female empowerment and social cohesion in their literature. Despite there being a plethora of research in both OE and SFD separately, there is a lack of literature that focuses on merging the two fields. Considering some of the issues in SFD that were mentioned in this paper, including its inconsistent definition and evangelization of sport, it is possible that OE that could ameliorate SFD initiatives. By revising the definition of sport to include OE, it may be possible to merge both of these fields. In order to find
out whether OE could truly benefit SFD, there is also a need for more research on organizations that bring OE methods into SFD programs.
References


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