Assessing the Evidence in Sport for Development and Peace: Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) is transforming from a relatively nascent 'movement' into a widely recognized field, with more than 950 organizations registered on the International Platform on Sport and Development (compared with 176 organizations in July 2006)[1] and 2,509 organizations in the Beyond Sport Network operating in 150 countries (as of May 2018), along with increasing scholarship (e.g., 437 articles identified in a recent integrated literature review),[2] funding (e.g., UK Economic and Social Research Council, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, U.S. Department of State Sports Diplomacy Division), and policy activity (e.g., sport within the United Nations 2030 Agenda). However, the questions that plagued the SDP movement early on still exist today, with ongoing concerns regarding the assumption that sport is inherently good, the rigor (and focus) of research conducted within SDP, and isolation within/outside of SDP, with related questions about the inputs, processes, outcomes, and impacts of SDP programs.

Coalter[3-5] has led the field in questioning the 'mythopoeic' status of sport, in which the dominant (and often only) narrative in sport broadly, and SDP specifically, is the unquestioned belief that:

> Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair.[6]

While this narrative has proven to be an effective call to action for those around the world to embrace the potential for sport to transform the lives and communities it touches, resulting in greater interest and support in the SDP movement, this rhetoric has, at times, limited SDP theory, research, praxis, and policy. For example, the assumption that sport is inherently good contrasts with the evidence, which suggests that SDP programs must be intentionally designed to maximize (or even reach) developmental outcomes.[7,8] This has resulted in programs without well-defined theories of change that identify the most efficacious ways to promote certain outcomes and impacts.[5,9] Additionally, SDP researchers have focused on outcomes and impacts rather than the underlying inputs and processes.[9-11] Without this knowledge, SDP programs are magical 'black boxes' whose inputs and processes are presumed,[12] without understanding why specific outcomes and impacts are (not) reached.[13,14] Relatedly, SDP research and praxis have been critiqued for expecting the simplistic solution of sport to address such complex problems as peace and development,[4,15] with the hope that micro-level changes from singular programs will create sustainable, macro-level outcomes.[16] This is partially driven by the assumption that sport will inherently produce positive outcomes, even when operating in isolation from other SDP programs and related fields (e.g., international development), which is a significant flaw in the system.[1,13,15] This is also driven by the wide gap in knowledge about the inputs and processes of SDP programs, with the assumption that positive, sustainable, macro-level changes to complex problems are being realized. Until SDP theory, research, and praxis intentionally focus on this magical 'black box,' the field of SDP will be limited.

Another effect of the 'sport for good' narrative is the infusion of external and hierarchical leadership, support, and structures in SDP, filled with top-down and outside-in approaches.[17] The belief that SDP is inherently good has historically removed any concern that SDP theory, research, praxis, and policy could negatively influence others, with a functionalist belief that individuals, communities, and societies will be transformed in positive (and desirable) ways. However, sport sociologists have rightly questioned this neocolonial and inequitable thinking and practice, identifying the continuation of colonizing processes[4] in which a neoliberal development philosophy is imposed through SDP programs that may not be welcomed by, or address the needs of, the targeted individuals, communities, and societies.[18] Thus, there is a need for theory, research, praxis, and policy that is "relevant, contextual, decolonizing, and postcolonial,"[19(p574)] with some programs already embracing this approach (e.g., Moving the Goalposts, Waves for Change). Finally, the 'sport for good' narrative has biased SDP theory, research, and praxis in that narratives which may question, disrupt, and/or disprove this dominant narrative are overlooked or eschewed, with Massey and Whitley[20] pointing out that the term SDP itself 'creates an inherently biased view that sport lends itself to development' (p. 487). A few researchers are beginning to explore alternate narratives, from the celebration of deviance through sport[20] to increased injury, anxiety, stress, burnout, and substance use as a result of sport participation.[21] These are the first steps toward deconstructing the inherent assumption that sport will lead to positive outcomes and impacts, with a need for intentional, comprehensive, critical exploration of the theory, research, praxis, and policy of SDP around the world.

Another lingering (and pressing) concern in the SDP field is the quality of research conducted within SDP, from questions about what constitutes sufficient evidence and the processes and politics of evaluation to serious critiques about rigor (or lack thereof).[4,13,22-24] This begins with the early SDP research, which focused on the evaluation of singular SDP programs over a restricted timeframe,[2] with these evaluations often critiqued for the following: (a) operating within the 'sport for good' narrative[4]; (b) focusing predominantly on outcomes and impacts rather than the underlying inputs and processes[9,10]; (c) studying simplistic solutions to complex problems[4,15]; (d) overlooking the structural, social, political, and economic realities surrounding SDP programs[19]; (e) using questionable methods and methodologies[25]; (f) taking neocolonial or imperial approaches that reinforce systems of hegemony and oppression[26,27]; (g) cherry picking positive results[15,25]; and (h) underreporting null or negative findings.[15] These concerns have limited the development and influence of SDP theory, research, praxis, and policy, along with the outcomes and impacts of SDP on individuals, communities, and societies.

Recent Reviews

Recent reviews have attempted to address these limitations by integrating and summarizing the existing research, including: (a) an integrative review of sport for development literature by Schulenkorf et al.[2]; (b) an integrative review of sport-based youth development literature by Jones et al.[9]; (c) a systematic map of the evidence of sport for development's effectiveness in Africa by Langer[15]; (d) a qualitative meta-study of positive youth development through sport by Holt et al.[28]; (e) a systematic review of life skill development through sports programs serving socially vulnerable youth by Hermens, Super, Verkooijen, and Koelen[29]; (f) a systematic review of sport-based HIV prevention approaches by Kaufman, Spencer, and Ross[30]; (g) a systematic map of the current state of sport for development research by Cronin[10]; (h) a systematic review of positive youth development in Aboriginal physical activity and sport

settings by Bruner et al.[31]; (i) a scoping review of positive youth development programs using physical activity and sport to serve Aboriginal youth in Canada by Gardam, Giles, & Hayhurst[32]; (j) an analysis and academic literature review of sport for development by Van Eekeren, Ter Horst, and Fictorie[33]; and (k) a review of sport-based programs using the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model by Hellison and Walsh.[34] While different methods and foci have been employed, these reviews have synthesized and reviewed the SDP literature, enabling a better understanding of the current state of SDP research and future directions for the field. However, the results and conclusions from these reviews are grounded in research which is often limited by the critiques cited above, particularly as they relate to methods and methodologies. The majority of these reviews focus solely on synthesizing existing knowledge in SDP without assessing the rigor of the included SDP studies; given that the rigor is likely quite different, this limits the conclusions that can be made. Only four of these reviews included direct assessment of the quality of evidence, with Hermens et al.[29] screening out studies of low rigor and Holt et al.[28] conducting both a meta-method and meta-theory analysis, although all results (regardless of rigor) seem to be equitably included in the meta-data analysis and meta-synthesis. Two more rigorous reviews were conducted by Langer[15] and Kaufman et al.,[30] with the quality of evidence influencing the conclusions made. Specifically, Langer examined the evidence base of sport for development in Africa, with the findings indicating no available evidence which supports (or refutes) the assumption that sport can influence developmental outcomes.[15] Kaufman and colleagues conducted a systematic review on the effectiveness of sport-based HIV prevention approaches, with short-term effects largely based on low-quality studies, highlighting the need for more rigorous research in this area.[30]

Given the need for an evidence-informed[a] approach to SDP praxis and policy,[13,35] we must continue to critically assess the quality of existing evidence for SDP programs before accepting the content of such evidence. Additionally, we need to identify the inputs, processes, outcomes, and impacts that have support from rigorous evidence, thus building an evidentiary base on which SDP theory, research, praxis, and policy can grow. Relatedly, we need to understand what human, financial, and infrastructural resources and policy and funding frameworks are required to enable all actors (e.g., practitioners, researchers, funders, policy makers, governmental bodies) to realize, appreciate, and commit to the integration of research into praxis, funding, and policy in a rigorous, meaningful, systematic manner.

Systematic Reviews

Recently, I was part of teams conducting systematic reviews on the evidence of SDP programs:

1. **A systematic review of youth-focused sport for development programs in six global cities: Cape Town, Hong Kong, London, Mumbai, Nairobi, and New Orleans**.[36-38,b]
2. **A systematic review of sport-based youth development programs in the United States**.[39-41,c]

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[a] The use of the term evidence-informed, rather than evidence-based, "acknowledges that there are multiple and equally valid forms of evidence" (Langer, 2015, p. 70).
[b] This systematic review was funded by the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation and the Commonwealth Secretariat.
[c] This systematic review was funded by the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation USA.

3. **A systematic review of the efficacy of sport for development programs in the promotion of psychological, emotional, and social health outcomes in youth populations.**[42]

These assessments of our current knowledge contribute to the dialogue surrounding future directions for SDP theory, research, praxis, and policy, with seven critical areas highlighted below: (a) rigor, (b) program theories, (c) systems thinking, (d) complex and multifaceted roles of sport, (e) participatory paradigms, (f) transparency, and (g) access.

Rigor. There is limited efficacy data in both academic and grey literature that is publicly shared, with the quality of methods and evidence largely classified as weak (based on the critical appraisal tools used in the systematic reviews). These findings support the lingering (and pressing) concern about rigor in SDP research.[13,25] This is concerning, as programming, funding, and policy decisions are informed by this growing body of literature. Thus, the quality of methods and evidence needs to improve, allowing for an evidence-informed approach to SDP praxis, funding, and policy. Specific recommendations include:

1. Use systems thinking (see subsection below) to incorporate a holistic approach to SDP research through both instrumental/positivist (i.e., quantitative) and descriptive/critical (i.e., qualitative) research.
2. Assess program quality and fidelity.
3. Utilize multiple groups.
4. Incorporate multi-site comparisons.
5. Pursue longitudinal designs.
6. Use valid, reliable, culturally relevant measures.
7. Account for confounding variables (e.g., maturation bias, selection bias).
8. Measure behavior change directly and objectively, rather than relying on attitude, knowledge, and/or perception.
9. Integrate studies across philosophical, theoretical, methodological, and analytical perspectives.
10. Contextualize research within geographical, social, political, developmental, and historical landscapes.
11. Implement quality training and education for researchers (i.e., academics, measurement and evaluation personnel).

Program theories. Program theories (i.e., theories of change, logic models) are inconsistently outlined, adopted, and tested, with a greater focus on program outcomes and impacts. This aligns with previously cited critiques of SDP research and praxis.[5,9-11] This raises questions about the conditions and mechanisms that are most effective at reaching specific outcomes and impacts, thereby preventing SDP programs from intentionally (and effectively) connecting inputs and processes to intended outcomes and impacts.[13,14] This also restricts the SDP knowledge base, as there is a need to understand whether, how, and why programs may have certain outcomes and impacts. To address this, recommendations include:

1. Outline and adopt program theories (e.g., theories of change, logic models).
2. Strategically and rigorously test program theories through longitudinal studies and/or long-term data collection efforts.
3. Measure change over time.

Processes likely to contribute to the outcomes and impacts of SDP programs are outlined below, although these should be interpreted cautiously, given the limited efficacy data and inconsistent examination of program theories:

1. Design curricula around predictors of ongoing engagement (e.g., safe climate, higher self-worth, lower BMI, leader behavior).
2. Consider most appropriate target population for each program (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, baseline life skill scores, baseline risk levels).
3. Reflect on the following design features:
   a. Climate (e.g., safety, sense of caring/support, trust, stability).
   b. Leadership (e.g., support, adult-youth relationships, training/education).
   c. Youth engagement (e.g., youth leadership, ability to practice life skills).
   d. Activities within and outside the program (e.g., sense of fun/novelty, ability to practice life skills, community service, connections to life/community outcomes).

Systems thinking. Systems thinking and systems change are rare, with linear, isolationist, individualistic planning, implementation, and evaluation of SDP programs still the norm. This aligns with previous critiques of SDP research studying simplistic solutions to complex problems,[4,15] with the assumption that individual programs create sustainable change on the macro-level through cumulative impacts. However, this rarely occurs unless programs intentionally align efforts at the local level to action at the societal level.[43] This can allow programs to maximize human, financial, and infrastructural resources. Additionally, the limited theory development in SDP is largely discipline-specific, with a need for integration across academic disciplines, particularly as it relates to the philosophy of knowledge production, selection of theoretical lenses, and consideration of methodological approaches.[25] Instead of contributing to the SDP knowledge base through inductive or deductive principles, systems thinking and systems change enables knowledge accumulation through planning, action, and learning cycles,[44] which acknowledge the messy, complex, and dynamic social ecological systems in which SDP programs operate. These recommendations should help inform practitioners, researchers, funders, and policy makers about this approach:

1. Consider multiple systems (e.g., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem), levels of influence (e.g., individual, school, community, policy), and influencers (e.g., parents, peers, youth workers, teachers, funders, government, corporations).
2. Consider the interaction of the above factors over time and within an historical context.
3. Use transdisciplinary research teams.
4. Seek strategic collaboration, formal partnerships, and possible mergers with organizations and programs within and beyond SDP.

Complex and multi-faceted roles of sport. 'Sport for good' remains the dominant (and often only) narrative in SDP. Despite a growing body of literature which suggests that SDP programs must be intentionally designed to maximize (or even reach) developmental outcomes,[7,8] combined with alternative narratives beginning to emerge in traditional youth sport,[21,25] research which questions, disrupts, and/or disproves the dominant 'sport for good' narrative is still largely overlooked or eschewed. This is concerning, as theory, research, praxis,

and policy is significantly limited if we do not seek to understand the complex and multifaceted roles of sport. Specific recommendations include:

1. Deconstruct the 'sport for good' narrative through intentional, comprehensive, critical exploration of SDP theory, research, praxis, and policy.
2. Adopt a learning-focused environment.
3. Examine assumptions and biases in methods and methodologies.
4. Report null and negative findings.

Participatory paradigms. Inconsistent engagement with a broad and diverse set of actors through participatory research paradigms. This matches concerns about research paradigms that may embrace neocolonial approaches that minimize the voices of those operating at the ground level, as well as those from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.[45,46] Through the infusion of external and hierarchical leadership, support, and structures in SDP, top-down and outside-in approaches[17] are often taken, which may overlook structural, social, political, and economic realities.[19] Given that systems thinking requires a holistic focus, necessitating knowledge and input from a broad and diverse coalition of actors in the SDP field, there is a need to deconstruct this tradition. Recommendations to actualize this vision include:

1. Incorporate participatory paradigms that work toward flattening traditional power differentials.
2. Engage a broad and diverse set of actors.
3. Gain input from a range of stakeholders.
4. Examine questions about what constitutes data and evidence.
5. Consider innovative and diverse research methodologies that engage with individuals and communities.
6. Consider the structural, social, political, and economic realities surrounding SDP programs.
7. Seek to understand existing systems of hegemony and oppression.

Transparency. While more than 10,000 distinct records were screened in each of these systematic reviews, very few reported enough methodological details for critical appraisal, and the results shared were largely positive. Given existing concerns related to the rigor of SDP research and the dominant 'sport for good' narrative,[4,13] cultivating a learning-focused environment[47] in which methods, methodologies, and findings are openly shared would support the growth and development of SDP theory, research, praxis, and policy. Additionally, many more studies have been conducted than what could be assessed in these systematic reviews, due to gaps in study methods and methodologies reported, likely underreporting of studies conducted, geopolitics of knowledge production, and institutional gatekeeping.[23] Specific recommendations to address these concerns include:

1. Report research methods and methodologies in research-focused records (e.g., academic articles, research reports) in a comprehensive, transparent manner.
2. Outline research methods and methodologies in non-research-focused records (e.g., annual reports), with links and references to documents with more detailed information.
3. Examine questions about what constitutes data and evidence.

4. Report null and negative findings.
5. Examine inconsistent and/or contradictory findings.
6. Discuss practical significance.

Access. The majority of the records critically assessed in these systematic reviews were inaccessible to a wide audience due to presentation and/or dissemination. This corresponds with a common concern in SDP related to access, with research often presented in an inaccessible format (e.g., empirical research article) and in inaccessible outlets (e.g., peer-reviewed journals behind paywalls).[2] To cultivate a learning-focused environment where the entire SDP field is benefitting from the growing body of evidence, it is critical for the methods, methodologies, and findings to be shared in accessible and user-friendly ways. To achieve this, these steps are recommended:

1. Create and use public outlets beyond peer-reviewed journals.
2. Present methods, methodologies, and findings in alternative formats (e.g., presentations, newsletters, videos, news articles).

Conclusion

To activate the recommendations outlined above, all actors in the SDP field need to reflect upon and envision a future in which research is integrated into praxis, funding, and policy in a rigorous, meaningful, systematic manner, with a set of changes for each group of actors (e.g., practitioners, researchers, funders, policy makers, governmental bodies) as well as contextualized action items for each actor and program. This certainly requires a set of resources not currently available to the vast majority of actors and programs in the field. For example, many of the recommendations for SDP programs necessitate a greater number and more specialized human, financial, and infrastructural resources, along with rethinking hiring, retention, and professional development practices, (re)allocating budgets, and pursuing new (or revising existing) funding schemes. SDP programs would also benefit from reimagining collaboration and partnership norms, as informal collaborations, formal partnerships, and possible mergers may maximize program reach and impact and unlock access to rigorous, meaningful research through shared practices (e.g., hiring trained and experience staff to oversee research efforts for multiple programs; forming research collaborations with external researchers to study program and collective impact). For researchers operating in this space, creative solutions should be pursued to overcome barriers to enacting these recommendations, beginning with a critical examination of the geopolitics of knowledge production along with advocacy for support (both institutional and funding) to pursue rigorous, longitudinal research that may result in fewer (but hopefully more impactful) publications. Researchers should also carefully consider sharing results in accessible forms/formats (rather than solely in peer-reviewed journals) and reporting null/negative results that may complicate relationships with other actors (e.g., funders, programs). To support these efforts, funders must set expectations (with associated funding and support) for rigorous, (frequently) resource-intensive research, with the cultivation of a learning-focused climate over longer funding cycles to allow for the application of systems thinking and comprehensive examination of program theories. Funders should also consider how they communicate their expectations about null and negative findings with grantees; positioning these as learning opportunities for the program, funder, and SDP field (rather than threats to funding) could help shift norms around research and reporting. Similarly, policy makers should consider lobbying for and/or developing an overarching policy and funding framework to guide actors in

the SDP field and the research supporting these efforts. It would also be beneficial for policy makers to support the development of program theories, broaden the conceptualization of what counts as data/evidence and whose voices should be heard, and reimagine collaboration and partnership norms within/beyond SDP.

In sum, this requires all actors in SDP to realize, appreciate, and commit to the integration of research into praxis, funding, and policy in a rigorous, meaningful, systematic manner, with the understanding that this may require significant changes to the systems, levels of influence, and influencers – and the interaction of these factors – within/beyond SDP.

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