

OPINION EDITORIAL

Partnership is Not Ownership: Indigenous Peoples' Right to Self-Determination within Sport for Development in Canada

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Self-determination and reconciliation remain highly contested in the paradox of sport used to promote health and Indigenous rights. Since the 94 Calls to Action on behalf of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), there has been considerable political momentum in making amends with Indigenous people. Although federally funded sport for development (SFD) programs have increased opportunities in particular for Indigenous youth, they have done so by undercutting a rights-based argument for Indigenous self-determination. This essay will examine a SFD program called Promoting Life-Skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) delivered across Canada by Right To Play, an international non-profit organization (NPO). Considering the inequities in provincial and federal funding SFD organizations collaborating with Indigenous communities may not be the most appropriate delivery agent.

SFD is a broad term that encompasses physical activity programs to foster individual and community development by confronting a variety of social, health, and cultural issues [1]. However, residential schools promoted sport and recreation under similar guises used by modern SFD organizations [2]. Sports were introduced to exert control and power over Indigenous children and assimilate them into “mainstream” Euro-Canadian culture in the Canadian residential school system [2]. Hence why the use of sport and recreation to attain particular outcomes has created a controversial lasting legacy. Today, Indigenous children and youth, a target population for

Canadian SFD initiatives, represent one of the fastest growing demographics in the country. Low levels of physical activity are a significant factor to the widespread health issues of Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth alike [3,4]. Preventable lifestyle diseases such as type two diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity are significantly higher among Indigenous youth than the general Canadian population [3-5]. Therefore, the basis for implementing SFD initiatives is to foster healthier Indigenous youth who in turn can contribute to healthier communities at large [6].

Official political apologies have addressed past wrongs and sparked meaningful social projects in promoting reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. In 2015 TRC report, Calls to Action 89 and 90, recommend policies that “promote physical activity as a fundamental element of health and well-being” and, “in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, stable funding for, and access to, community sports programs that reflect the diverse cultures and traditional sporting activities of Indigenous peoples” [7 p10]. In 2016, the Trudeau government finally announced its full support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Although a non-legally binding resolution, this declaration states that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination to pursue their form of cultural, economic and social development [8].

Funding for Right To Play's SFD initiative in Ontario has gained public controversy in recent years. In the

2018 federal budget, the Government of Canada invested \$9.5 million annually, to expand the use of sport for social development in more than 300 Indigenous communities [9]. This investment made in response to the TRC, was directed to SFD initiatives that strive to help Indigenous youth engage in their community culture, keep them out of the criminal justice system and address pervasive issues such as mental health and childhood obesity [10]. Right To Play received large portions of these funds; \$1.5 million to offer PLAY programming just within Ontario and an additional \$2 million from private sponsors [11]. However in the 2017-18, the Aboriginal Sports Circle (ASC) and its provincial and territorial partners received only \$800,000 from Sport Canada to offer similar sport initiatives throughout the country [11]. While the massive allocation of federal funds may indicate a commitment to supporting Indigenous sports, it is of question as to how serious the Canadian government is about achieving reconciliation with regards to the prioritization of non-Indigenous, international SFD organizations.

When the Government of Canada announced its funding for the ASC, it claimed to be “determined to make a real difference in the lives of Indigenous people by supporting self-determination through reconciliation” [11 p10]. While Right to Play’s efforts to support marginalized communities in Canada, as well as the Global South are certainly important, it is questionable if it is the best and most appropriate delivery agent in Indigenous communities. PLAY is designed and delivered by an NPO – it was not created by Indigenous peoples like the ASC. Government and far reaching NPOs use the word collaboration with regard to SDPs joined with communities, however it still does not provide ownership. Through ownership comes financial control, which the federal government has not prioritized amongst Indigenous sports organizations to deliver their own SFD programs.

Since Eurocentric culture has deeply influenced sport and recreation practices in Canada, scholars have argued for the need for Indigenous people to implement their own recreational pursuits and programs [12-14]. In Arellano and colleague’s

evaluation of PLAY, which included Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff members, a need for community ownership was a central theme [15]. Kent explores a multilevel mosaic model, which shows promise for promoting ownership of health governance within Indigenous communities [16]. In this system, communities with greater needs receive more support, while high-capacity communities are able to maintain more control [16]. If this model is applied to the PLAY program context, whereby communities could directly manage the program as they develop capacity.

Essentially, SDP programs should be led by Indigenous Peoples and fundamentally shaped by “Indigenous voices, epistemologies, concerns and standpoints” [17 p1]. Ideologies related to Eurocentrism, neoliberalism, good citizenship and health are often disseminated through educational tactics implicit in SFD programs. Indigenous pedagogies of health are starkly different from Western conceptions of the utility of physical activity as a precursor for productivity and longevity. Arguably, SDP programs are often based on Eurocentric beliefs and thus often marginalize and suppress participants’ knowledge [17]. SDP programs have the potential to be used in ways that can promote Indigenous peoples’ self-determined goals and values in order to take better account of the Indigenous identities of the young people they target. Indigenous knowledge holds a separate value system from Western ones [17]. In that sense, placing Indigenous people at the helm of leadership positions is equivalent to allowing communities to make decisions for themselves without ethnocentric interference.

As sport can play an important role in the development of Indigenous communities, it is crucial that the Canadian government recognizes Indigenous Peoples’ right to self-determination within SFD initiatives. Indigenous people have and continue to use sport to assist their broader goals for self-determination, which is not only a basic human right, but also a fundamental component of well-being. Meaningful self-determination in the form of greater individual and communal life control is a contributing factor to improved levels of Indigenous

physical and mental health, and, conversely, that control and domination by others is a contributing factor to ill-health and elevated levels of mortality in Indigenous communities [18]. Indigenous people should not be held in a position of dependence and subordination thereby denying them of their fundamental human right and basic psychological need for autonomy.

Ultimately, Canada's implementation of the UNDRIP's transformative capacity depends on how it is interpreted, especially whether self-determination is allowed to trump partnership. It can be discerned that recent federal funding schemes have undermined Indigenous-lead sport organizations, like the ASC, towards enhancing youth development through sport and recreation programs. Canada should discontinue the rapid growth of non-accountable NPOs representing forces of neoliberalism, which undermine the future scale up of national, Indigenous-lead sports organizations.

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