



Commentary: How Can We Use Social Justice Lenses to Conceptualize Contemporary Sport? Continuing to Make Sense of Potential Challenges and Future Pathways

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The purpose of this article is to provide insights and prompt reflections about what social justice promotion through youth sport entails, raise awareness about emergent challenges that undermine this pursuit, as well as point to future steps to infuse social justice within sport systems across the globe. Supporting coaches' efforts to teach social justice life skills may need to occur before social justice permeates the broader youth sport system and society in general as a culturally relevant pursuit. Conversely, if policy makers continue to assume social justice is simply an outcome that does not require explicit strategies from coaches and other sport stakeholders the status quo may remain untouched. Moving forward, more efforts are needed to conceptualize and operationalize social justice and social justice life skills, as well as to tailor changes to the system based on what is sustainable on the long-term across cultures.

Keywords: development; youth; life skills; values

Within the context of youth sport, awareness of and attention to social justice issues have been gaining much needed attention around the globe (Camiré et al., 2021). However, to further this social consciousness, there is a need to actively engage youth in advocacy and activism both in practice and through research. Social work as a profession is grounded on the need to foster social justice and challenge social injustice as key ethical guidelines. Coaches, youth sport leaders and other key sport stakeholders should be supported by social workers in their efforts towards making social justice both a concern and practice within youth sport. Therefore, the purpose of this article is three-fold: (1) raise awareness about emergent challenges that undermine social justice in and through sport; (2) provide insights and prompt reflections about what social justice promotion through youth sport entails; and (3) point to future steps to infuse social justice within youth sport. This research note also attempts to continue to develop the discussions initiated by Camiré et al. (2021) concerning social justice life skills.

Emergent Challenges that Undermine Social Justice

Youth sport appears to be a relevant platform to educate individuals, thereby empowering them contribute to a socially just and equitable society (Darnell & Millington, 2019; Gerstein et al., 2021; Peachey et al., 2019). However, in some cases, the mission of sport in promoting social equity has not been successful (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021; McCoy, 2020; Newman et al., 2016). For instance, some sport settings are extremely competitive environments, which implicitly – and in some instances, explicitly – reinforce social exclusion, racism, gender stereotyping, and homophobia (Love et al., 2019; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2021). These societal issues, which represent critical social challenges, should be viewed as outcomes of sport and education systems and all programming aimed at (at least supposedly) helping youth flourish (Camiré, 2015; Camiré et al., 2021). It is fair to state that, at least, some of the efforts towards creating a more fair and just society through sport have failed because we, as researchers, have struggled attempting to help “... actors have the knowledge, support, and resources to be (and feel) efficacious” (Whitley et al., 2019, p.12).

Within contemporary society, youth sport reflects social unbalances, as well as implicit and explicit racism and discrimination (Petry & Jong, 2022). Further, youth athletes are, in many cases, seen as tools for winning and to quickly achieve social recognition. Colonial values still dominate interactions, social norms and values across youth sport systems (Camiré, 2021). Therefore, activism and social justice are, in some cases, considered less important within the sport culture (Peachey et al., 2019). However, within a market-driven approach, such concepts are, in some cases, used to leverage power relationships and develop a rhetoric that considers sport to be a great platform for everyone, independently of their ethical background, gender identity, among other characteristics. This results in coach education, youth sport and even school curriculums (who deeply impact youth’s values) to be framed around a normalized premise of exclusion that considers social injustice an inevitable consequence of being and existing. Empowering, instead of numbing, youth is needed and approaches to do so are urgent (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2021). The legacy of colonial ways of thinking and experiencing have deep roots in how we frame youth sport, research and all forms of thinking and doing (Camiré, 2021).

Moreover, society faces many social challenges that been widely discussed now within a post-pandemic world, which affects individuals’ freedom of speech and the choices they make. And, in some cases, our contemporary sociopolitical climate does not tolerate those who challenge the status quo and share different viewpoints on politics, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation (Boch, 2020). Taken together, these issues tend to create numerous challenges for those who seek to prepare youth to truly contribute towards social change and become critical, autonomous thinkers, who have a voice in making sure all individuals are included, valued, and able to seek meaning in life (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

Going back to the role attributed to sport participation, researchers – including myself – have, on several occasions, stated, at the onset of a new research project, that ‘sport can promote positive developmental outcomes. However, despite the evidence available that supports these claims (Merkel, 2013), we, as researchers and youth sport leaders, may need to pose the following three questions: (1) Is this always a feasible pursuit? (2) Can sport achieve outcomes such as social justice that other environments cannot? (3) And if so, how? To answer these questions and in alignment with the mission of this journal’s inaugural issue, we need to understand if and how social justice can (or even should be) infused within sport programming.

Social Justice Promotion through Youth Sport

Social justice has been the topic of many iterations and investigations (Camiré et al., 2021; Love et al., 2019). Achieving a just and equitable society with individuals that are tolerant, respect the rights and feelings of others, take ownership for their decisions, and embrace the role of helping others – among other important skills – may be achieved with sport-based youth programming (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Such skills that can contribute to social change and make youth active participants in social justice issues have been defined as *social justice life skills* (Camiré et al., 2021). These skills are the ultimate objective of any sport-based youth program that seeks to educate and empower youth contribute to social change. Thus, social justice life skills should be viewed both as a process and an outcome. Concerning the first, social justice life skills may be part of a holistic approach to coaching that includes an explicit social justice focus. For example, coaches may discuss with athletes the importance of tolerance and infuse this social justice life skill in their coaching practice. In relation to the second, social justice may be also envisioned as an outcome reflected in individuals' ability to contribute to a more socially just society now and in the future. Coaches may assess their impact on athletes by understanding how they are becoming (or not) activists and sharing/applying social justice principles across other life domains such as school, family life and interactions with peers outside sport.

Within contemporary society and sport, the need for all stakeholders, including youth sport coaches, to foster social justice has been acknowledged (Lee & Cunningham, 2019). However, how can we foster social justice life skills through the means of sport? Before attempting to share insights concerning this question, it should be noted there are numerous challenges that impact this objective. Therefore, researchers and policymakers, as well as those attempting to use sport as a platform or tool for social justice need to be aware of the status quo. We generally live in a society where competition (in sport and elsewhere) is taken to the extreme. Professional misconduct and unethical behavior from individuals with high responsibilities and social significance (i.e., power and privilege) have become normalized (e.g., O'Brien, 2021; Philippou, 2021). These outcomes reflect the will to attain results at all costs and use resources to satisfy immediate needs with no regards for ethics and values. Sport also reflects the same reality whereas exploitation, as well as physical and psychological abuse, are widespread even amongst world-renowned athletes (e.g., Simone Biles, Kyle Beach). Unfortunately, these issues exist within all sport systems, from Olympic and professional sport to high school athletics and community leagues.

Future Steps to infuse Social Justice within Youth Sport

Such a reality does not mean social justice is unattainable; however, it may help researchers and social justice advocates bear in mind how the (lack of) cultural relevancy of this framework is impacted by the current values, social norms, and failures in the system (i.e., the status quo). As discussed in previous research with regards to taking an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), infusing social justice into youth sport coaches' conceptions about learning and education will take concerted effort (Petry & Jong, 2022). Moreover, if sport systems position social justice as both a process and an outcome in their policy statements, time will be an important aspect to consider. Such systemic change will not likely occur in a short period of time and may require innovative policies (macro-level change) and intentional

practices of key sport stakeholders (micro-level change) to facilitate change throughout sport culture. To make a sustainable change, this paradigm shift must involve all stakeholders, from policymakers and coach educators to sport coaches and key community gatekeepers (Dorsch et al., 2020).

However, yet again, sport systems need to clearly define if social justice is a process and an outcome aligned with their mission, principles and motivations and weigh the positive and negative consequences. For instance, positive consequences of including a social justice approach involve having youth become empowered for helping others either in or outside sport with impact across life domains (long-term objective). In contrast, negative consequences include the fact that infusing a social justice narrative within sport organizations is time-consuming, demanding and may not translate into immediate youth athlete outcomes and fit within the current status quo.

Within each unique sociopolitical sport culture, before discussing social justice as an approach for sport-based youth programming, there is the need to discuss what sport should achieve in the 21st century. For example, in contexts where performance and winning are the main objectives, social justice may be completely unattainable if immediately introduced as the primary goal. For example, if a sport organization values a ‘winning at all costs’ perspective and social justice is presented by researchers simply as a needed objective for youth coaches may see no relevance and meaning in this approach. Researchers and social workers, among other stakeholders, may need to gradually make efforts to change sport organizations’ philosophies and connect social justice with their neoliberal way of thinking and conceptualizing youth sport as a context where coaches are dispensable and cannot lose, and athletes only need to win to succeed. At this stage, efforts may need to be initially directed at helping sport organizations and coaches envision sport as developmental experience that has long-lasting effects on youth participants (Camiré et al., 2021). We need to consider that sport may not foster social justice at the same pace in every context, as there are conflicting realities and pedagogical challenges that may need to be developed before a social justice focus is implemented. To mediate macro and micro-level change, coach education could be pivotal to help disseminate concrete strategies and actionable items derived from policy across the sport system and embed social justice into coaching practices.

Without discussions about these issues that should involve researchers, policymakers and as many stakeholders as possible sport will continue to be positioned as an intrinsically great platform to change society when in fact it is only a clear reflection of the negative outcomes of the system with no real power to change the status quo. Understanding what social justice means to the youth sport system needs to be considered. Moving forward, researchers could help bridge the gap between resistance to social justice and the need to change the youth sport system in a way that prompts coaches to value youth’s developmental needs today.

Final Thoughts

Social justice may need to be positioned as a process variable before being postulated as an outcome one. In other words, supporting coaches’ efforts to teach social justice life skills may need to occur before social justice permeates the broader youth sport system and society in general as a culturally relevant pursuit. Conversely, if policymakers continue to assume social justice is simply as an outcome that does not require explicit strategies the status quo may remain untouched. Moving forward, more efforts are needed to conceptualize and operationalize social

justice and social justice life skills, as well as tailor changes to the system based on what is sustainable on the long-term.

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