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“Spark Awareness, Brighten Futures”: Raising aspirations to tertiary education in disadvantaged communities through sport

Participation in sport and recreation is increasingly recognised as a path to a broad range of individual and community benefits spanning from health and fitness to education and social outcomes (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006; Jarvie, 2006). In promoting health through sport, health promotion is a process of enabling individuals and communities to increase control over and improve their health (Talbot and Verrinder 2010). Participation in sport and recreation helps “to build communities through social inclusion and a sense of connection” and to “address anti-social behaviour and support education” (Office for Recreation and Sport 2011, p.9). Literature in this field is centred on the concept that playing sport and taking part in active recreation fosters social interaction, reciprocity, trust and recognition that can be conducive to the creation and accumulation of social capital (Seippel, 2006) which therefore promotes health.

Building social capital through sport mobilises resources that contribute to society. In Australia, an example of sport as a vehicle to inclusion, education and development is provided by the Football United® programme. This is an intervention for young people in lower socio-economic status (SES) areas with high levels of cultural diversity that operates in strong partnership with schools, community, sport, government, non-government and corporate organisations (Nathan et al., 2013). The programme was developed in 2006 at the University of New South Wales and it is

currently run across approximately twenty sites in Australia, including New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and South Australia. It is run in community and school settings and aims to promote wellbeing, social cohesion, community engagement, social inclusion, connectedness and education through football (soccer). In South Australia, where it is run by the University of South Australia, local activities are distinctly concerned with the engagement of university students with the programme through volunteering, work experience and study placement opportunities. It also focuses on the promotion of awareness and aspirations towards tertiary education in communities facing significant educational disadvantage.

Social capital and aspirations towards tertiary education

Traditionally, universities have been seen as ‘elite institutions’ and often students from lower SES backgrounds have less educational aspirations than students from more affluent backgrounds (Berger, 2000; Gidley et al., 2010, p.23; Lareau, 1993; Walpole, 2003). There is growing evidence that Australians with low levels of education are at risk of becoming marginalised in an increasingly knowledge-based economy and society (James, 2002). Low levels of education and the consequent vulnerability to unemployment are major determinants of poverty which in turn is a key factor of social exclusion expected to pose

ongoing challenges for Australia's lower SES communities (Healey, 2011, Baum and Gleeson 2010). Causes of low educational aspirations in students from a lower SES background include the low education attainment of parents, the influence of peers and widespread attitudes of disillusion towards tertiary education (Frenette, 2007; James, 2002; Ramburuth and Hartel, 2010).

Students from lower SES backgrounds can be supported to build aspirations for tertiary education and increase awareness of opportunities through the development of connections and relationships which provide motivation and encouragement. Such investment may be seen to mitigate the negative influences that limit or hinder aspiration. To this end, the value of sport as a vehicle to bring people together, develop social networks and accumulate social capital is increasingly appreciated (Nicholson and Hoye, 2008).

Engagement through sport

The Football United® programme is an example of how engagement through sport can be pursued. The programme seeks to promote education by facilitating new connections between members of educationally disadvantaged communities and university students and staff by using football as a forum to share positive experiences, have fun, initiate informal relationships, establish trust and promote health. Participants join in regular, free football clinics and special events and can access additional development opportunities. These include formal coaching education, life skills and leadership development workshops, mentoring and networking with a wide range of partner organisations.

In South Australia, Football United® is active in Adelaide's northern suburbs, which include significant concentrations of low SES communities, which are under-represented in South Australian universities and where participation in and aspirations towards higher education are markedly low (Neville, 2011). For example, while over seventeen per cent of people living in Greater Adelaide were attending university in 2011, in the two largest northern Local Government Areas (the City of Playford and the City of Salisbury) this figure drops to only six and ten per cent. These Local

Government Areas are also among the most socio-economically disadvantaged in South Australia, with markedly lower median household incomes and higher scores in the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage than metropolitan Adelaide as a whole (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Profile.id, 2011).

Drawing on social capital theory (Lin et al., 2001), Football United® aims to strengthen intra-community ties to develop bridging networks between community and the university. These newly-formed links endeavour to challenge negative attitudes towards academic achievement and provide effective, friendly and readily accessible information about further education opportunities. To do this, the programme is delivered by coaches, coordinators and volunteers sourced from both communities and the university (particularly undergraduate students) activities including visits to university campuses, formal life skills and fitness workshops delivered by university students, as well as carnivals bringing together local community and university teams. Opportunities to share stories and experiences are also an important feature of the programme and often involve undergraduate students with similar backgrounds of the programme participants (e.g. who went to the same high school, share the same nationality or lived through challenging childhood experiences) sharing their journey to tertiary education and working with participants to increase their awareness, confidence and interest.

The Football United® programme works in partnership with a broad spectrum of organisations, both internal and external to the university. These include local councils, sporting clubs, state and federal government agencies, schools and a variety of university programmes, which often involve students undertaking a study placement and spend time working with the community. One of these, Participatory Community Practice (PCP), is a course within the university's occupational therapy undergraduate programme. Through PCP, two occupational therapy students were involved in a pilot project, "Spark Awareness, Brighten Futures", to address low aspirations

among students from a northern Adelaide high school who took part into the Football United® programme. While focused on developing aspirations towards university, the project served as an important example of the role that sport can play in promoting health and education.

Spark Awareness Brighten Futures (SABF)

The SABF project aimed to create a more supportive environment for low SES secondary students to enhance their awareness and understanding of university at Para Hills High School (PHHS). The school is situated in the City of Salisbury, has over 500 students and a very diverse student population. This includes six percent Indigenous students and twenty-three percent English as Second Language (ESL) learners. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) places the school below national average, with a score of 948 versus the average 1000. The ICSEA index is calculated using information on family background such as parental vocation and educational attainment (ACARA, 2013). While the school and its immediate surroundings are not characterised by either extreme educational or socio-economic disadvantage overall, it caters for a community characterised by pockets of significant disadvantage, including low socio-economic status, culturally and linguistically diverse, Indigenous, newly-arrived migrant and refugee households. Students who took part in the SABF project were all from low SES backgrounds.

Methods and process

The project involved five key project cycle objectives comprising: needs analysis; plan development; implementation; monitoring /evaluation and dissemination (Talbot and Verrinder, 2010). It was confirmed that the need for the project was felt amid the PHHS community and revealed a lack of awareness of higher education among PHHS students. Consistent with a community development approach, a number of different needs analysis activities were undertaken. This allowed the project to adapt to the community, promoting participation and ownership in decision making. Key activities included surveys of PHHS staff

and students, meetings with key staff members, interactive workshops with the Football United® participants, informal conversations aimed at building ties with the university, and weekly communication of progress to stakeholders.

The need was addressed by facilitating workshops and discussions during Football United® trainings, building rapport with the community, and connecting key staff members from the university with the school. Evaluation strategies were applied throughout the project to ensure actions were consistent with a community development approach. Throughout the project, the process, outcomes and recommendations reflected a commitment to building social capital, and promoting health and education within the school and the wider community.

The project's process was informed by the 'building capable communities for health promotion' practice framework (Labonte and Laverack, 2001). This aimed to support collaborative problem solving with project facilitators and the community, to develop leadership and to encourage partnerships between organisations. To establish trust and reciprocity, a great deal of attention was placed on ensuring that the voices of the PHHS community determined the direction of the project and that the PHHS community were an integral part of every stage of the project.

Key findings

The key findings of SABF relate chiefly to issues of awareness, motivation, self-esteem and access to resources. Surveys and informal conversations during the needs analysis stage of the project showed that most students did plan to attend university. The main barrier identified was the students' lack of awareness and understanding of university and pathways towards it, rather than simply poor aspirations to university.

Furthermore, students demonstrated poor motivation and low self-esteem. This was anticipated by key stakeholders at the school as a potential issue and confirmed through workshops and surveys. For example, students found it extremely difficult to identify personal strengths and were not proactive in learning more about university, preferring to be

provided with the information through interactive methods.

Another challenge was the lack of appealing and readily available resources at PHHS to assist students in gaining knowledge and understanding of university. School staff pointed out a need for more structured and individual support for students to plan for their future and develop pathways to further education. The indication was that students do not generally have a clear plan beyond school and rely on information and advice from teachers they share a good relationship with. However, despite teachers providing information and advice to the best of their knowledge, this is often beyond their role and they are generally not equipped with the necessary resources. As a result, students often do not gain access to adequate information.

Families and parents were not involved in this project, but school staff highlighted that family situation and expectations of parents have a strong impact on the students' outlook for their future and suggested that this may play a role in their students' poor motivation. Literature supports the family influence on students indicating that parents from low SES backgrounds tend to have low expectations for their children with regard to higher education (Coleman 1988, Bradley and Corwyn 2002, and Frenette 2007).

Outcomes

The project was successful in challenging negative attitudes, limited awareness and minimal interest about further education. PHHS students demonstrated increased interest and improved attitudes towards further education. In particular, and in stark contrast with what emerged at the beginning of the project, upon completion SABF students were more enthusiastic about the possibility of attending university. Students showed increased self-belief in their ability to participate in higher education and increased interest in specific university courses while in earlier weeks they believed no courses would be appealing. One student actively sought out information on university by attending a university-run information seminar outside the Football United® programme.

Adding to the interest generated in students, the project also brought about the development

of a stronger relationship between PHHS and the University of South Australia, reported by key stakeholders from both organisations. It is expected that this connection will help to facilitate further change among PHHS students. For example: fostering aspirations; making resources and information more accessible; and building longer term relationships between secondary and tertiary students. Through participation in this kind of initiative, students can communicate, via purpose-made online social network groups, even after the completion of the project.

Conclusion

The potential of sport to bring people together can be harnessed to contribute to society in various ways, and the SABF project adds to the relevance of using sport for community engagement and broad development purposes to mitigate educational disadvantage. The project used sport as a tool to build social capital and promote health. Football United® provided a platform for this project to work with a community and begin to address needs in response to the community.

The concept of building social capital, its relevance to sport and its importance in educational aspirations and achievement are of particular importance. The dynamics that facilitated the engagement of students through sport and endowed them with increased resources to consider a journey towards tertiary education, are typical of social capital theory and practice and deserve further attention and research.

Social capital is central to social inclusion as it is seen as a vehicle to empowerment, wellbeing and community development. Furthermore, the establishment of new connections through sport participation can work to enhance self-confidence, self-esteem and trust among participants (Skinner et al., 2008). Participation in the football programme provided a sound forum to develop personal connections between lower SES students and university students on one hand, and to strengthen cross-institutional (i.e. school-university) networks on the other. Building these 'social infrastructures' facilitated the establishment of trust between key school and university actors, which in turn helped to

promote collaboration. The process resulted in an increased ability for the school to access specific resources (e.g. to promote further education and career options) and for the students to access a network of support that helped to challenge issues of low self-esteem, poor motivation and lack of awareness. This is consistent with the framework of 'bridging' social capital, referring to connections between members of different social groups, which are particularly useful to make resources and information available across networks and are associated with the process of 'getting ahead' in life (Putnam, 2000, p.23).

This paper highlighted that projects like "Spark Awareness, Brighten Futures" and the Football United® programme offer important opportunities to build relationships encompassing disadvantaged secondary school students that can be conducive to increased educational aspirations and awareness, increased self-esteem and motivation. These findings further support the already well-recognised value that sport can play in building social capital and promoting health (Nicholson and Hoye, 2008).

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