

## Commentary

## Decolonizing Sport for Development Through Integration of Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy

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### Abstract

Indigenous voices are an emerging area of interdisciplinary research and praxis within sport for development (SFD). However, the growing body of literature on SFD indicate program curriculums can conflict with Indigenous ways of knowing, which can undermine cultural sustainability and revitalization. The purpose of this commentary is therefore to reflect on contemporary SFD programming through the lens of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogical practices. In doing so, we identify strategies and practices to scaffold into existing SFD programs and policy. Such pedagogical strategies and practices accomplish two objectives: (1) adding to the growing corpus of literature on community-oriented praxis and (2) provide recommendations for strategic implementation of Indigenous knowledge to facilitate structuring Indigenous pedagogies in program development. These strategies and practices are informed by our own culture and ethnic backgrounds, an Oglala Lakota and Kenyan-Kalenjin-Keiyo, enculturated into a Eurocentric pedagogy which guides our positionality.

### Decolonizing Sport for Development Through Integration of Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy

The purpose of this commentary is to reflect on contemporary Sport for Development (SFD) programming alongside Indigenous knowledge and pedagogical practices. We rely on our cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Oglala Lakota and Kenyan-Kalenjin-Keiyo) enculturated into the Eurocentric pedagogies. Across decades, we have formed internal dialogues regarding ways in which programs can constitute and constrain ones' sense of self through a specific worldview and pedagogical practices structured around it. This includes, but is not limited to, the Eurocentrism of

meritocracy and neoliberalism. After brief look at the literature on SFD, specifically Indigenous programs, we recommend a set of pedagogical strategies and practices to scaffold into SFD programs. While not comprehensive, the literature was selected in order to provide context for our commentary and situate SFD literature within Indigenous knowledge and pedagogical practices. Such an approach accomplishes two objectives: (1) adding to the growing corpus of literature on community-oriented praxis in SFD and (2) provide recommendations on strategic implementation of Indigenous knowledge to scaffold into programs, especially in Indigenous communities.

By praxis, we mean the ways in which an embodied experience (i.e., action) is created around Indigenous ways of knowing (i.e., reflection and theory) in order to transform (i.e., decolonization). This is important because praxis, as mediating 'theory-practice nexus', "remains politically marginalized by many disciplines due to a lack of acceptance and understanding about other ways of first, knowing and second, knowledge production and sharing" (Hapeta, 2019, p. 490). As such, specific ways to indigenize sporting pedagogies and programming towards cultural revitalization are offered. This is informed by the community-oriented praxis of Austin F.C., which overpoweringly resonated with us and was inspirationally instrumental for this commentary.

In March 2021, three representatives from Austin F.C. shared their pedagogical approach to coaching and teaching low-income youth at a virtual U.S. Soccer Foundation conference. Their approach to pedagogy and youth soccer programming is derived from Indigenous traditions, specifically Navajo, called Restorative Practices. Jordan Johnson, a Navajo and Director of Youth Development for

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the 4ATX Foundation attached to Austin FC, called Restorative Practices “an Indigenous practice, something that’s been done for centuries and centuries” (West, 2021, p. 1). For Johnson, “it’s an approach to a way of living, a way of coaching, a way of being. It’s also a toolkit, it’s a way of handling different things that are going on, whether it’s building relationships or addressing harm that’s been done” (West, 2021, p. 1).

The general idea of Restorative Practices and Indigenous pedagogies is to reposition normative forms of coaching that have focused on discipline and punishment, which have been shown to be toxic (Payne et. al., 2013) and traumatically affect youth athletes’ experiences in sport (Battaglia et. al., 2020). Austin F.C. attempts to subvert those normative coaching practices with ‘nalyeeh’, in Navajo, or talking circles (Yurth, 2020; West, 2021). The practice of nalyeeh is a non-hierarchical approach to conflict resolution, facilitating communication, collaboration, and dispositional empathy amongst peers, and “ideally to feel heard and empowered in the process” (West, 2021, p. 1). The program session usually finishes with a ‘Mindful Close’ of guided breathing exercises as a practice to self-calm and refocus oneself throughout daily life.

## Literature Review

### *Sport for Development and Indigenous Knowledges*

Within academia and public policy, sport is an instrumental ideological and practical means for social development (Arellano & Downey, 2019; Hayhurst et. al., 2016). One of the main applications to achieve social outcomes is SFD. The field of SFD can be conceived as a way to harness the hegemony of sport to develop an individual or community through what is considered pro-social objectives. While public health, education, and economic objectives have been at the forefront of pro-social objectives, other areas include coaching, equipment and infrastructure, and community development. Such diverse applications and outcomes of SFD allowed Levermore (2008) to create a SFD typology consisting of five categories. The five categories were: (1) conflict resolution and inter-cultural understanding; (2) building physical, social and community infrastructure; (3) social consciousness, particularly through education; (4) impact on physical and psychological health and general welfare; and (5) economic development. SFD programming, with these pro-social objectives, are often implemented in underserved areas, including Indigenous communities, targeting populations in which sport, educational programs, and other resources are regarded as

scarce. However, within recent decades, various scholars have begun to debate the design, structure, and implementation of SFD programs (Arellano, & Downey, 2019; Hayhurst et. al., 2016; Kay, 2009; Spaaij, 2009). In particular, the ways in which power and knowledge constitute a hidden curriculum of values and beliefs within a durable network of institutions, volunteers, and discursive policy formation that define specific types of behaviors and social capital obtained.

For the most part, it is the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism which constitutes such a curriculum in an attempt to integrate participants into the axiologies, epistemologies, and ontologies of a neoliberal economic system. Critiques of existing SFD practices include, but is not limited to, the socialization and conditioning pro-social behaviors (i.e., education, financial literacy, physical activity) and enculturation into a neoliberal meritocracy (i.e., hard work, personal responsibility) (Arellano & Downey, 2019; Hayhurst et al., 2016). Such a perspective often obscures the systemic structures which exploit or burden communities and their knowledges (e.g., epistemologies and axiologies) (Harvey, 2007; Hayhurst et al., 2016) while referentially reproducing colonial scripts on Indigenous bodies (Hayhurst et al., 2016, McGuire-Adams, 2020). That is to say, imposing a top-down SFD program without community integration, shared ownership, or participatory action, which has specific consequences in Indigenous communities.

Arellano and Downey (2019) noted contemporary issues within SFD programs in Indigenous communities regarding epistemologies and axiologies. First, there have been a general lack of respect for localized Indigenous cultures. For example, SFD reports and activities do not specify any localizable Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is often replaced (or suppressed) with neoliberal paradigms of employment and the marketplace, the latter is merely articulated as a development program in which sport is instrumental (Hayhurst et al., 2016). SFD programming has also in many cases assumed specific Indigenous knowledges are non-transferable skills, and do not enhance integration (or assimilation) or employment in a neoliberal marketplace. Localized Indigenous epistemologies and axiologies related to elder engagement, kinship knowledge, language recovery, ecological renewal and knowledge, ceremonial knowledge are generally not regarded as measurable goals of SFD programming (Arellano & Downey, 2019). The aforementioned issue, for the most part, can be attributable to a phenomenon known as a ‘displacement of scope’ between macro-, meso- and micro-level impacts in which communities (i.e., meso-level) are

regarded as resource poor (Hapeta et. al., 2019). In turn, it is SFD programs, rather than the extant community, that are the crux for pro-social behaviors and resources constituted around the norms of neoliberalism. Such a tautological position produces a ‘deficiency’ paradigm (Hapeta et. al., 2019) which mutes local knowledge in the “flattening of Indigeneity” (Arellano & Downey, 2019, p. 470).

While the exact definition of Indigenous knowledge can vary, Akena (2012) identified the concept as a complex and multifaceted amalgamation of context-driven knowledge that “embraces the essence of ancestral knowing as well as the legacies of diverse histories and cultures” (p. 601). The strategic embracing and implementation of Indigenous knowledge is instrumental in reclaiming context-driven ways of knowing that have deliberately been suppressed by Eurocentric programs. Akena (2012) argued research into Indigenous knowledge, and by extension praxis, should emphasize the systematic deconstruction and overcoming of power relations which “have assured the dominance of particular ways of knowing” (p. 601). The challenge for SFD programming in Indigenous communities is to embrace Indigenous knowledge by scaffolding pedagogies into the curriculum. This strategy repositions SFD curriculums toward ways of knowing and becoming that are outside the contemporary neoliberal paradigms.

## DISCUSSION

When reviewing literature on Indigenous education practices (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008; Madden, 2015) as a source of praxis for SFD, there are six themes in which Indigenous pedagogies can be focused: identity, relatedness, inclusiveness, reciprocity, nurturance, and respect. These six themes underscore many of the strategies mentioned in Levermore’s (2008) typology of SFD programs and addresses the displacement of scope (i.e., Indigenous knowledge) identified above. The following discussion will focus on three inter-related forms of praxis involved in Indigenous ways of knowing and becoming.

First, talking circles can be mediated by a symbolic artifact known as a ‘talking feather’ or ‘talking stick’. The importance of the talking stick is instrumental to a talking circle. It provides a material symbol that defines ‘who can speak’ and ‘who is listening’. Often, in group settings, some individuals have a tendency to dominate dialogue, and, at worst, talk over others. The latter of which is a form of bullying. People also have different intra-personal communication comfort levels (i.e., introverts and extroverts, or affective or controlled) in group settings. The

talking stick, as a strategic intervention, mediates the different comfort levels of intra-personal communication as a material arbiter for group-based dialogue. The talking stick practice connects back to inclusiveness, reciprocity, nurturance, and respect (Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008) since it structures a social environment in which there is a clearly defined ‘speaker’ and ‘listener’ towards a non-hierarchical encounter with peers. The non-hierarchical approach (i.e., talking circles with talking stick or talking feather) disrupts the latent power dynamics amongst peers and a social environment oriented toward inclusive reciprocity, nurturance, and respect.

Second, the next aspect of Indigenous practice is storytelling. The practice of storytelling is a functional cultural practice that attempts to situate a community of learners in the past as a way to have a renewed relationship with the present. Such a practice has been mentioned in Auger (2021), Hapeta et. al. (2019), and McGuire-Adams (2017; 2020). Storytelling can take many forms (e.g., songs, music, poetry and dance) which reaffirm connections amongst members of a group and a way to actualize their history. However, storytelling is much more than repositioning the past in the present or reaffirming a collective identity. For example, alongside sharing circles, it can be a conduit for self-reflection and critical consciousness (McGuire-Adams, 2020). The practice of storytelling and its connection to cultural material or non-material praxis, such as a talking stick or talking feather, is a monole into an entire worldview that is produced, reproduced and, to an extent, preserved in a narrative form. This situates storytelling as instrumental in cultural revitalization.

Sports and games have already been shown to “strengthen language skills, listening skills, and judgment skills” in Indigenous communities (Lyoka, 2007, p. 353). However, storytelling adds an additional layer within the scope of community-oriented praxis and SFD. For example, in the Indigenous Keiyo community of Kenya, ways of thinking and knowing are grounded in evidence-based storytelling with technical and rhetorical language intended produce and reproduce knowledge, guide behaviors, and constitute a localized social reality (Chepyator-Thomson, 1990). Similar to sports and games then, storytelling, based on localized Indigenous knowledge, can serve three functions: (1) socialization, (2) cultural preservation, and as a (3) non-material historical record of the community (Chepyator-Thomson & M’mbaha, 2013).

Fernández-Llamazares and Cabeza (2018) argued cultural revitalization through storytelling is a highly valuable

scaffolding praxis towards sustainability and conservation for practitioners: in this case, for SFD. Specifically, the authors identified five key themes from focusing on storytelling, as articulated through policy, that can be beneficial to SFD. First, storytelling connects development into Indigenous worldviews. Second, storytelling can encourage meaningful connections between people and their landscapes. Third, a SFD policy focused on Indigenous language and storytelling could assuage the transfer of intergenerational Indigenous knowledge. This is immensely important considering many Indigenous languages are in danger. In the United States, there are around 575 federally recognized tribes, most of whom languages are near extinction. The Esther Martinez Native American Languages Preservation Act (2006) has attempted to counteract that by providing financial resources to help preserve languages. However, it is a highly competitive grant process with few actually receiving funding (Nagle, 2019). For example, 29 percent of all applications received funding in 2018 (i.e., more than two-thirds projects towards language revitalization were left without funding (Nagle, 2019). SFD can fill in the gap of inadequate funding or programming initiatives to counteract language extinction. Fourth, storytelling promotes local participation in dialogues with Indigenous communities. That is to say, go to the elders of local tribes and form a collaborative dialogue on Indigenous literacy. Last, storytelling is done through collaborative dialogue with which a connection to the last theme is established: localized epistemologies.

The importance of local epistemologies in SFD has been argued for elsewhere (e.g., Chepyator-Thomson et al., 2021). According to Tom et al. (2019), such epistemologies (i.e., worldviews, languages and cultural practices) are crucial for cultural sustainability, and, in the case of Indigenous populations, an important collective source for self-determination. For example, nalyeeh is a specific cultural practice to the Navajo which is communicated through a local language. However, this practice can go by different epistemologies based on bands, tribes, and local legends. For example, ‘Legend of the Talking Feather: Kanati and Asgaya Gigagei Bestow the Gift of The Talking Feather’ from Cherokee is from the practice called ‘Donelawega’ meaning “a coming together of people for a special purpose” (Wilbur et al., 2001, p. 369). That is to say, as an outcome of this position, staff designing SFD programs should collaboratively co-create a program that is situated in localized knowledge.

Third, an emphasis on localized epistemologies would place SFD staff members into communication and collaboration with Indigenous communities (i.e., dialogue) as a community-oriented praxis towards cultural sustainability.

One must understand, in the planning and implementation of programs and policy, that nation-states throughout the world have historically had programs and policies which suppressed Indigenous language and culture. Language is instrumental in retaining the epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies of local Indigenous culture and storytelling, especially in talking circles, and effective cultural practices for language and culture to be ‘alive’. In this case, through SFD, program and policy should attempt to be structured around Indigenous language and practice.

Inclusion of Indigenous pedagogical approaches and epistemological content benefit both Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities considering such approaches can enhance interpersonal communication and collaboration within and across cultural differences (McInnes, 2017). None of the aforementioned strategies based on Indigenous knowledge and practices are at odds with Levermore’s (2008) typology of SFD programs. In fact, the typology intersects with Arellano and Downey’s (2019) issues of minimal localizable Indigenous knowledge and Fernández-Llamazares and Cabeza’s (2018) cultural revitalization through storytelling. Most of the strategies address conflict resolution and inter-cultural understanding as well as social and community infrastructure (i.e., cultural sustainability). Specifically, the strategies emphasize connecting people with their landscapes, promoting cultural consciousness of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews, targeting the improvement of physical and psychological health, and enhancing the general welfare of the community through sport.

## CONCLUSION

This commentary offered our perspective on SFD programs structured by pro-social behaviors (e.g., education, financial literacy, physical activity) and enculturation into a neoliberal market capitalism and meritocracy without attention to the ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies of the communities in which programs are implemented, specifically as it relates to Indigenous communities. These practices have produced a phenomenon known as displacement of scope which regards communities as resource ‘deficient’ while muting local Indigenous knowledges. In doing so, SFD programs have tended to work against rather than with Indigenous communities and local knowledge.

While not working exclusively with Indigenous populations nor a traditional SFD program, The Restorative Practices initiative by Austin F.C. highlight potential strategies to incorporate Indigenous epistemologies and axiologies

regarding conflict resolution and inter-personal and cultural understanding into SFD program design SFD programs can begin to work collaboratively with local Indigenous communities towards cultural revitalization. This includes, but is not limited to, a focus on material and non-material Indigenous culture, storytelling, and language as a form of community-oriented praxis rooted in localized epistemologies and axiologies.

‘Maybe I’m not working with a Navajo population, but these are the pieces I’m bringing from my own family and my own culture,’ Johnson told the *Navajo Times*, “I keep who I am at the forefront of what I do and how I do it” (Yurth, 2020, p. 1). We finish the commentary with this specific quote from Johnson for a reason. Similar to Johnson, we, at the time of this special issue, are not actively working with Indigenous communities, but write in accordance with our cultural and ethnic backgrounds and ways of being that ground our existence while trying to address challenges derived from neoliberal ideology in sport, development, and society. We continue to keep that aspect of our identity at the fore of other aspects of our life: family, friendships, teaching and research. As Indigenous voices are increasingly seen as important, attempts need to be made that create dialogues with Indigenous populations rather than against, while being aware that many may perceive SFD through a critical monocle. This is especially relevant for those who have participated in development programs that are conflicting with the Indigenous component of themselves and begin to advocate for more indigenized forms of programs and policies that may be antithetical to the predominate neoliberal paradigm in SFD.

### Conflicts of Interest

We do not have any actual or potential conflicts of interest of note.

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