Herstory: Toward a More Emic Understanding of Black Girls' Sport Participation

Joyce Ogunrinde, University of Houston

Sport for Development - Other (School Sport)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Session: Live Q&A for Sport for Development (Asynchronous)  
Saturday June 5, 2021, 1:40 PM - 2:40 PM

Sport is lauded as a right for youth and vehicle for personal development (Coalter, 2010; Darnell, 2007). Yet, for Black girls, access to sport, which is concentrated in school-based opportunities, requires navigating ideologies about their race and gender that structurally preclude their participation (NWLC & PRRAC, 2015; Olushola, Jones, Dixon, & Green, 2012). Emerging from research on Black female sport participation is the need to explore the intersections of race and gender and how Black women and girls are marginalized by single axis approaches to creating beneficial sport experiences (Bruening, 2005). As suggested by Carter-Francique and Flowers (2013):

“understanding the representation, participation, and experiences of women of color has the potential to not only transform their cause, but to transcend race and gender categorization and use sport as a platform to address the challenges of others who experience oppression, discrimination, and social injustices within and outside the context of sport” (p. 76).

Therefore, centering Black girls’ voices are key to understanding their experiences and providing insight to creating beneficial sport programs for this population.

Sport can be a space of domination as well as an opportunity to practice certain freedoms for Black females (Armstrong, 2007; Theberge, 1994). The intersections of racism and sexism create a matrix of domination that shapes the narratives undergirding why Black girls engage in sport and limits the resources available to support their participation. Yet, Collins (1989) contends that the spaces created by this matrix also build “richness, creativity, and self-determination” in Black females that allow them to engage in sport as sites of resistance to these hegemonic ideologies (Armstrong, 2007).

The unique spaces Black girls occupy are racialized and gendered contexts that inform their worldview and consequently, their emotional and behavioral responses to engaging in sport (Carter-Francique, 2017). Therefore, to provide a more robust understanding of their lived experience, this case study research employed Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990) to uncover the socioecological factors shaping Black girls’ school sport participation. Group and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7th and 8th grade Black (US) girls (N= 27) using questions based on African-American and sport-for-development literature. Field notes and interviews with teachers (N= 3) were collected to provide context for the girls’ responses.

The study findings indicated that Black girls desire sport participation and require social support from adult relatives, a dedicated (equipped) physical activity space, and (culturally) competent physical educators to receive benefits from doing so. Participants were cognizant of gender stereotypes affecting how they were perceived and limiting the resources available to foster their sport participation. Yet, the girls saw sport’s ability to provide developmental benefits and desired exposure to various sports. In sum, sport can be beneficial to Black girls when organized in a way that is organic to their needs and desires and rooted in core beliefs about who they see themselves to be. These findings also suggest that a more emic understanding of Black girls’ sport participation can be leveraged to redress stereotypes limiting their participation and increase their recruitment and retention in sport.