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Moving towards social inclusion: Manager and staff perspectives on an award winning community sport and recreation program for immigrants



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ABSTRACT

This case study examined manager and staff perspectives on their local sport and recreation department's role, organizational practices, and challenges faced when developing and sustaining a wellness program for immigrants that received a program excellence award from a provincial recreation association in Canada. Data were collected through a document analysis and interviews with all 10 staff and managers involved in the development and implementation of the newcomer wellness program, an integrated intervention with a physical activity and sport component. The findings revealed that the recreation department largely adopted an assimilation role where newcomers were expected to fit into existing programs and the implications of this are discussed. Managers and staff pointed to four key organizational practices that fostered newcomer inclusion including: having multiple staff champions, using a leisure access counselling approach, developing community partnerships and outreach, and implementing culturally sensitive marketing. Challenges encountered were reducing multiple barriers to program participation, uncertainty about interculturalism, managing partnerships, and a reliance on short-term funding that threatened the sustainability of the program. We extend a theoretical framework on the organizational dimension of social inclusion, suggest ideas for future research, and discuss implications for community sport and recreation practitioners.

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1. Introduction

Rising immigration rates have become a heated topic globally as they are sometimes tied to fears about terrorism, job loss, and the fragmentation of national identities (Ryan, 2010). Counter arguments to such fears are that newcomers bring new skills to host countries, bolster economies, and diversify cultural opportunities, including participation in different types of sport and physical activity (Tirone, 2010). In cities experiencing high levels of immigration, community sport and recreation providers are becoming increasingly aware of how difficult it is for recent immigrants to participate in existing programs. This is because they are largely expected to fit in and find out what is available in a system that they may be unfamiliar with,

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in addition to coping with the stress associated with adapting to a new country while finding adequate employment, housing, and sometimes learning a new language (Cureton & Frisby, 2011; Doherty & Taylor, 2007; Tirone, Livingston, Miller, & Smith, 2010). Yet, a recent study has shown that community centres, where local sport and recreation services are delivered by local governments in some countries, are primary sites for recent immigrants to connect with neighbours to reduce social isolation, participate in health-promoting activities, and learn more about their new communities (Vancouver Foundation, 2012). This illustrates that community sport and recreation can play a role in the settlement and social inclusion of immigrants.

As population patterns continue to shift around the world, questions have been raised about the degree to which sport and recreation organizations are responding to this type of social change through local inclusion efforts (Adair, Taylor, & Darcy, 2010; Allison & Hibbler, 2004). Marcus et al. (2006) reported that few physical activity intervention studies target ethnic or racial minority groups, and few have adopted an integrated approach where physical activity is connected to other aspects of people's wellbeing like nutrition and mental health that could broaden the impact of community-level interventions (Keleher & Armstrong, 2005).

In our case study, we drew on Ponice and Frisby (2010) who conceptualized social inclusion as an ongoing relational process whereby people and organizations are active and collaborative agents in the co-creation of spaces and structures that enable community members to make decisions about how and when to participate in society, including in physical activity and sport. As the International Federation of Settlement and Neighborhood Centres (2005) has argued: "truly inclusive organizations are willing to alter their own structures and practices to meet changing community needs" (p. 20). This requires community sport and recreation managers and staff to actively reflect on their organizations' policies, practices, and programs, including how to address challenges encountered when striving to respond to changing population demographics.

Our case study focused on one community sport and recreation department in a Canadian city that developed a newcomer wellness program that subsequently won a program excellence award from a provincial recreation organization comprised of practitioners. According to the excellence award criteria, the newcomer wellness program was recognized because it was a creative and innovative initiative, demonstrated exemplary customer service, and contributed to the wellbeing and social goals of the broader community. While the newcomer program welcomed those moving from other parts of Canada, as well as from abroad, our case study focused on those who had migrated to Canada in the last five years.

The purpose of this case study was to examine the newcomer wellness program from the perspectives of the managers and staff involved in its development and implementation. The specific research questions were: (i) how did managers and staff understand their organization's role in social inclusion; (ii) what organizational practices did they identify as fostering social inclusion; and (iii) what challenges, if any, did they encounter developing and delivering the program? The next step in our research, that is not reported upon here, is to obtain the perspectives of immigrants who have or have not participated in the newcomer wellness program and community partners to determine the degree to which they correspond to or diverge from those of managers and staff. As Allison and Hibbler (2004) have argued: "The behaviours of management and staff, and the policies and practices of the organization, set the tone for the success (or lack thereof) of the subsequent interactions between marginalized individuals and the agency itself" (p. 262), which explains why we wanted to focus on them as a starting point.

To address the research questions, our paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly review Ponice and Frisby's (2010) social inclusion framework and provide a literature review on organizational roles, organizational practices and challenges encountered developing community sport and physical activity programs for immigrant populations. Next, the research context, including information about Canadian immigration and a profile of the community is presented. The research methods are then described, followed by the analysis of the findings. We conclude with recommendations for future research and discuss the implications for community sport and recreation managers and staff.

2. Theoretical framework

We drew on Ponice & Frisby's (2010) framework of social inclusion that suggested four inter-related dimensions of social inclusion including the organizational, participatory, relational, and psychosocial dimensions. Because our study was based on the perspectives of staff we were particularly interested in the *organizational dimension* that refers to the structures, values, and practices of community-based organizations and the ways they do or do not address barriers, leverage resources responsibly, and adopt an ethic of care. Ponice and Frisby (2010) argued that addressing barriers not only means enabling access to programs or facilities, but also actively attending to diverse needs related to, for example, community members' gender, employment, migration experiences, religion and health status. Leveraging resources responsibly involved mobilizing power and resources to create an organization that intentionally facilitates rather than stifles social inclusion and participation. An ethic of care referred to an individual's desire to be part of an organization that fosters a caring and socially just environment, which can be incorporated into both spoken and unspoken organizational goals, values, policies and practices.

The *participatory dimension* of Ponice and Frisby's (2010) social inclusion framework refers to whether participants have the opportunity to choose to be involved in their communities and the variety of ways that they can do so. Three levels of engagement include participants having opportunities to directly contribute their skills and knowledge to the work of an organization, having a voice by becoming involved in decision-making, and being able to choose to participate (or not) in

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