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Power of Play: Is Girls' Empowerment through Sport Social Justice?

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Power of Play: Is Girls' Empowerment through Sport Social Justice?

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A Course Linked Capstone Paper in Youth Leadership Programs

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Social Justice in
Intercultural Relations at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont

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John Ungerleider

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Abstract

Female youth empowerment is a leading theme amongst many youth programs. Organizations and theorists see it as the solution to end teen pregnancy, engage students in the classroom and lead them ultimately to better, successful lives. Furthermore, there has been incredible success for encouraging and achieving female empowerment through sports programs.

However, through my research and exploration of the topic of female empowerment through sports, my focus has changed to more of a focus on play. It is this element of sport that leads to the success of youth sports programs. Therefore, this paper not only examines the effectiveness of sports programs but also examines the elements of play. As noted through observations during my practicum phase working with World Learning Youth Programs and the Mariposa DR Foundation, play is essential to youth programming and to human development in general. What is it about “play” that is so strikingly attractive? Is play just for children? How does play fit into social justice?

These were the questions that arose during my field work; questions that I wished to answer through my capstone. Therefore, the purpose of this case study is multi-faceted. One intention was to approach NGO and youth programming through appreciative inquiry, and to see what works well. The second part is to learn how adults, social justice movements and actors at large can learn from playing. Observations, parent and student focus groups, and program documents are all tools of my case-study analysis of play in youth programming, particularly sports, at the Mariposa DR Foundation.

Introduction

It is safe to say that Non-Governmental Organizations, [or NGOs], exist to provide services and fill needs to populations that otherwise would not have access. They are an attempt on behalf of civil society to solve ills of the world. The Mariposa Foundation, the NGO with which I interned, aimed to eradicate poverty in their community. Their method of addressing such a massive issue was to empower young girls in their community so that together they could collaborate to find creative solutions to break the cycle of poverty and lead their community to a more “successful” future.

There is a current popular movement amongst many NGOs to support this idea of youth empowerment, and even more specifically female youth empowerment. One of the most popular methods is empowerment through sport. The Mariposa Foundation was no exception. I spent over a year with this organization and I was in charge of the majority of the sports programming. As much as I value sports and physical exercise I often wondered what these programs really accomplished long term. What did empowerment through sport accomplish?

In response to this question I found that I needed to see what was currently working, what were the short term changes taking place, and what were the experiences of women from previous generations. There is great success using sports as a method for empowerment. First, there are health benefits which are empowering alone. Also, the girls are engaged, they must work as a unified team; this encourages learning healthy communication and community-building. Furthermore, girls in sports mean that girls get to do things that are normally available only for boys, thus reducing exclusion and

ostracization of girls. This gives girls the confidence and space to be aggressive and learn something new, without threatening men's space.

However, not all girls are drawn to sports. And, once girls arrive at a certain age the expectations change, the same opportunities are no longer available to them as they are to boys. Girls are expected to marry and care for the home and children. In the long term, things do not necessarily change. However, this could change due to this young movement, and the possibility of positive growth in the future. I found that it is not the actual sport that is the most powerful element. There are many things that contribute to the success of sports programs. One of the most influential factors for success is the fact that people are paying attention to girls and acknowledging their presence and value. For adults to invest in their lives- that is what is ultimately empowering.

In addition, the element of play in sport is what engages youth. I have chosen to focus on this aspect, its importance in human development and youth programming, and how play at its core is a form of resistance to the current political, economic system and a tool for social justice. Play supports empowerment and empowerment supports play. Thus, these two concepts are the central focus of this paper, and what they accomplish for youth programming and NGO goals.

It was my experience and time spent with the Mariposa students that demonstrated that a large component of sport was play. Play- my students incorporated it into everything, in fact that is all they wanted to do. They enjoyed coming to the center because they had a chance to play. Board games, imaginary games, Facebook, their relaxed and open dialogue with one another and the volunteers were all forms of play. The play amongst the different age groups varied but they all participated in it and enjoyed it.

At first, this frustrated me greatly. I wanted to cover a range of empowerment topics and do various learning workshops and activities and they just wanted to play. I was forced to do some self-reflection, upon which I realized several things. I began to question my own assumptions. I assumed that I knew what they needed- structured learning activities; when in reality they wanted to play. Perhaps this want was also a need...? I needed to step back and listen to their voices, whether stated directly or not, this was what they wanted and needed. Youth programs should be built around these two principles.

In addition, I realized that I love working with youth because there is a chance to play. Though incredibly challenging, it is incredibly rewarding, and most of all it is fun. I've always accepted the fun factor without analyzing the reasons why I am so drawn to it. Investing in others is always a rewarding endeavor, even if the results are not what I think they should be. Investing in others connects, gets me to think outside of myself, my needs, and the needs of others, the needs of community. I have found that "playing" with others does this. It is fully embraced, no judgment, no questions asked. The girls have a safe space at the center, and during camp, time to play. Maybe just providing this monitored safe space is enough for now. Or, perhaps our programs should incorporate play more fully.

Upon self-reflection, I also began to wonder, what is it about play that is just so attractive? What does play look like for adults? How does this fit into social justice? These questions helped frame the literature review and research of this capstone. The effectiveness of youth empowerment, the characteristics and principles of play, and play as a tool for social justice are the three main pieces of my capstone.

Principles of Play

Play means many things. Quite often it carries the connotation of childishness, immaturity, or laziness. It is important to mention now, that when I use the word play I am not referring to any of the above. What I have observed from the need to play is the need for exploration, a safe place and space to practice and exercise, a need for connection with the surrounding world, a place of joy and levity. Play does not revolve around productivity, it can enhance productivity, but “play” in its purest form is not about producing a commodity.

Play is the antithesis of production. Play, though often seen as silly and “childish” is essential to the human experience, and to life. We develop and grow through play, only the forms of play change over time. For this reason as well, I have also been drawn to play- it is in fact a rebellious act, one that has the capacity to rebel against the political and economic system that currently directs the pace of the world and all of our lives.

Youth vs. the Adult World

I also began to question my assumption regarding this newfound praise of play. Did I think play was the answer- the solution to the world’s problems? If we all just play together everything will be great? Of course, my immediate thought was a resounding no. And, my concluding thought is still no, play is not the answer, sports programs are not the answer. But, I like and encourage the results that I have seen from many programs. Play is not a model, it is a tool, and a mentality for encouraging social justice.

Needless to say, youth and adults have different needs. However, both groups still need play in their lives. Still, due to their different needs, stages of development, societal expectations and norms, play amongst adults has evolved differently. Play, while a tool for

uniting individuals and groups, can also be incredibly selfish. It can be manipulated and exploited into commercial form- professional sports leagues, etc.- which only serves to perpetuate the current political-economic system in which we live.

I lived in Cabarete which is teeming with play- especially amongst adults. People work hard to save and come down and kiteboard, windsurf, snorkel, or just plain relax on the beach. People, businesses, and the government have found a way to capitalize on that, market it, and exploit it. But the principles remain, people need time to not worry about production- producing, producing, producing, and explore their environments. Poverty partly strips people of their right to play.

However, this does not mean that the poor do not know how to play, nor that they do not play. Play varies not only amongst ages but also income levels. Dominicans in my community have been accused of being lazy because they are not running around constantly, working, working, working. They work hard as anyone else, but they know when to sit back and relax, there is only so much one can or should do. Not only this, but they are smart and recognize when one's efforts are not rewarded. People kill themselves just to make ends meet, but when one recognizes that the system is rigged, then there is no point contributing to it.

Social Justice Component

I have struggled during my classes regarding social justice. The evils that humans have wreaked upon one another, and the privilege that I enjoy at the expense and exploitation of others kills my soul, and in reality kills and tortures billions of people. At first, I was skeptical about play being a serious social justice change agent. Change in the

current economic and political system requires extreme measures. I understand why people and various movements resort to violence. Those in power pay attention to violence and generally do not agree to secede power otherwise. But, violence kills something inside of me as well. How can one fight injustice with another form of injustice?

Violent resistance does not achieve full social justice. In my research of social justice movements I found several that appeal to me for their form of resistance. One of the reasons why they are so appealing is that their resistance incorporates play. For example, hugging soldiers in barricade, flowers placed in rifles, blowing bubbles and playing stickball with the police. Because of the power of play bridges are created, love is demonstrated; powers are brought to their knees.

I realize the way this sounds- naïve, happy-go-lucky, hippy dippy. While this paper is not groundbreaking in nature I hope that it shows the need to take this idea- the power of play into further consideration. There is not nearly enough academic research about play, and especially not its connections to social justice.

Literary Review

Girls Count

*“A strong economic base cannot be built—**reversing intergenerational poverty**—without building girls’ social and economic assets. Increased female access to and control of resources has far stronger returns to human capital, including intergenerational investment, than comparable income under male control. Investing in girls when it counts is not simply a question of economic justice, but economic effectiveness.” Judith Bruce*

Due to the nature of my practicum and research a fair amount of literature that I absorbed revolved around female youth. Due to the current economic and political world system girls are one of the most marginalized groups, especially in poor and rural communities. In the book *The Uncharted Passage; Girls’ Adolescence in the Developing World* the authors write:

Girls and boys in cultures throughout the world are treated differently from birth onward but at puberty this gender divide widens. During adolescence, the world expands for boys and contracts for girls. Boys enjoy new privileges reserved for men; girls endure new restrictions reserved for women. Boys gain autonomy, mobility, opportunity, and power (including power over girls’ sexual and reproductive lives); girls are systematically deprived of these assets. (Mensch et al 11)

This injustice that adolescent girls experience is enraging. There are so many baffling statistics I could share. A 2010 Unicef report shares some of the most baffling statistics regarding the gap between the sexes.

- Less than half a cent of every development dollar goes to programs specifically for girls, particularly those ages 10-14.
- Girls make up 70 percent of the world’s 125 million out-of-school youth.
- One in seven girls in the developing world marries before the age of 15.
- Girls who receive an education marry later, have fewer children, and are more likely to seek healthcare for themselves and their children.
- The positive impact of girls’ education has been shown to transcend generations, resulting in better health outcomes among women, their children, and eventually their grandchildren.
- Violence kills and disables as many women between the ages of 15 and 44 as cancer.

- Statistics show that women and girls reinvest 90 percent of their income in their families and communities.

Reports, the Millennium Development Goals, and statistics like these are what inspired the Mariposa Foundation to come into existence and continue the work that it started.

Furthermore, these facts have engaged many social change makers to shift their focus to working with adolescent girls.

To further contextualize the situation of my research the following statistics illustrate what girls experience in the Dominican Republic. The Mariposa Foundation conducted a census on one of the streets, Calle 6, in the community where fifty-five percent of our students live. Sixty percent of the women on this street gave birth for the first time before they were eighteen. On this same street sixty-three percent of the households made 6,000 RD (roughly \$160) *or less* each month. Of these households twenty-six percent were directed by single mothers. It is worthwhile to mention that this is one of the more successful and employed streets within the community of Callejon de la Loma in Cabarete. I mention these factors because this is what they see and absorb every day. These statistics represent many of their families and are the norms for the girls of our programs; this is what affects them on a daily basis and greatly influences their futures.

Suffice it to say, the girls in the Mariposa Foundation have many difficulties and challenges within their young lives, and yet, they are far better off than many other girls their same age in various parts of the world. Their background may prove precarious, but as mentioned above their situation only intensifies as they reach puberty and begin menstruating. Their societal role changes, they are seen as sexual beings, and the expectations of acceptable behavior and their future are altered forever.

Upon this change of life several specific difficulties arise. First, their status as sexual beings makes them vulnerable to the sex industry and exploitation. This is an especially grave danger here in Cabarete. There is widespread prostitution and sex tourism readily available up and down the main streets of the North Coast of the Dominican Republic. In a community with little work and resources many girls are forced or resort to selling sex in order to help feed their families and provide basic needs. They are targets for human trafficking and their economic situation forces them to participate in the perpetuation of injustice. This injustice forces women to objectify themselves to the appeal of foreign men simply to survive.

On a less drastic, but equally important note, in adolescence their mobility and decision-making ability are curtailed and limited. They are often regulated to the domestic sphere- caring for the home and sharing the burden of rearing children. This is a way to prepare them for their future as a wife and or mother, to protect them from male attention, sexual predators, or possible damage to the girls' reputations. However, even with these positive intentions, this behavior alienates them from possible and much needed social connections and influences. Again, Mensch et al. mention that "it is necessary to expand girls' social participation, schooling, and economic opportunities [...] these are basic entitlements and that they frame girls' reproductive behavior" (p. 38).

This lack of mobility is problematic for other reasons as well. In Judith Bruce's article, Targeting Adolescent Programming, she also focuses on this issue. She writes, "The absence of girls in public arenas has implications not only for the young women themselves but also for society as a whole, exacerbating poverty and perpetuating disparities in health, education, and economic achievement" (p. 11). This idea that former norms, exclusion and

control of girls are harmful to the overall community is a current theme for many NGOs and activists. In Nikolas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn's influential book *Half the Sky*, the authors tout similar thoughts. They refer to the UNICEF report, giving examples that support that when given an opportunity women and girls will reinvest up to "ninety percent of their income in their families and communities." Thus, the need to invest in healthy opportunities for girls will not only benefit them but the world at large as well.

Empowerment

"Women's empowerment as the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing. Alternatively, women's empowerment is the process by which women redefine gender roles in ways which extend their possibilities for being and doing."
-Women Win

Empowerment is a crucial facet to my research due to my desire to understand NGO effectiveness, the effects of youth programming, and what sport and play are able to accomplish. Thankfully, due to the popularity and attention this one word has garnered over the last fifteen years or so there are many sources for my research. The organization Women Win has produced some very convincing literature. The above quote comes from their article *Empowering Girls and Women through Sport and Physical Activity*. Further explaining this term empowerment they state, "[Empowerment] in this sense refers to the process through which women gain the confidence, strength, and in some contexts the information and skills, needed to make strategic choices to improve their lives" (p.38).

It is this last piece- this ability to make strategic choices and improve their lives- that is the ultimate goal of the efforts of the Mariposa Foundation and many other female youth centered programs. Empowerment encourages this form of development, and

conceptualizes “adolescents as self-directed learners and critical thinkers who are able to make positive contributions to society” (Zeldin et al, 2002, p. 6). All of this theory is well and good, and directs our efforts at the Mariposa Foundation; however, the implementation of empowerment is still a bit elusive. What are the boundaries and delimiters of empowerment?

Judith Bruce aptly describes one area of empowerment which we have adapted for our own programming and that is creating space just for girls. In her article, Targeting Adolescent Programming, she writes, “Creating dedicated spaces for girls is a key strategy for the transformation of girls’ self-concepts, providing social support and functioning as a practical program platform for imparting new skills and the creation of new opportunity structures” (p. 8). Not only have we adopted safe space for strictly girls but also programming that caters to their interests and special needs, thus incorporating their voice and sharing direction with their girls. Thus we are not just serving the girls but rather working with them to understand their lives and options, and take advantage of all opportunities for advancement.

Role of Sports

Existing social constructs of masculinity and femininity — or socially accepted ways of expressing what it means to be a man or woman in a particular socio-cultural context — play a key role in determining access, levels of participation, and benefits from sport.
—Right to Play International

Empowerment can vary in approaches. One of the most common approaches I have found is through sports. Not only do our programs provide young women and girls with “a voice in program design and decision-making, training, and opportunities for leadership and advocacy,” our sport programs also empower and “help equip them to take greater control over their own lives” (Bruce p.4). This greater control over their lives comes from

the many benefits of participation in sports, from an individual level to a community level. What are the benefits that create empowerment? How can these benefits channel social change and achieve social justice for women and the global community at large?

One of the benefits revolves around the fact that women are largely left out of the public sphere. Thus, by engaging in sports they are breaking out into this sphere, their presence acknowledged, voices heard, and talents outside of the domestic and sexual realm are appreciated. Sports provide a platform to transform the ways girls think about themselves, and improve girl's knowledge about their rights, their bodies, and their health.

Another benefit is that sports in youth programming often centers on teamwork and sportsmanship. This provides an opportunity to build leadership skills and to practice said leadership. By participating in sports girls expand their "social support networks, friends, and access to community resources" and are "provided female mentors and role models" (Martha Brady 2). Not only do they provide these opportunities for girls to explore their abilities and realms of support sports provides a platform for delivery of health messages and development of healthy life skills, messages that are not necessarily available in school or at home.

Play is crucial for Human Development

"Play is being able to tell the world that you don't like what it is doing to you, and not harming anyone while you do it." -10 year old child

As previously mentioned, a large component of sport is play. I would even argue that sports empower because it includes play. Youth as well as adults are empowered as they explore their world and learn as they play. It is crucial for development of all stages and at all ages. While the entire world benefits from play, younger children are especially

receptive to learning while playing. Rudolf Steiner provides an impressive body of work around this very topic. His work influenced Waldorf education which believes,

From the very beginning of a child's educational career at a Waldorf school, he or she is supported to play in a variety of different fashions and settings throughout the entire school day. Steiner knew that play is the invaluable foundation for any kind of healthy, human growth, including academic progress. Numerous studies have shown that play at every stage of development improves IQ, social-emotional functioning, learning, and academic performance" (Melrose p.1).

While it may seem obvious to note youth-centered organizations must include play into their programming if they really wish to engage and empower their youth.

One youth organization, Original Play, has embraced this philosophy as they teach children healthy habits of play. They derive their definition of play from psychologist Dr. David Elkin's work which cites, "play is the unstructured, self-motivated, imaginative, independent kind, where children initiate their own games and even invent their own rules" (pg.1). Furthermore, Original Play designs their programs based on the idea that through exploration of the world "children's play presents them with the fundamental relationships with which they acquire the basic feelings, ideas and capacities to effectively absorb from and adapt to the ever-changing world around them for the rest of their lives," (O. Fred Donaldson Ph D, original play.com). This concept is crucial for "empowerment" to occur.

Social Justice

My end goal in my research is to understand ways of obtaining or exhibiting social justice. I have associated NGO work with the ideals and tools to accomplish social justice. What are organizations and various actors doing to achieve it? How, indeed do they view

social justice? There are various ways to respond to these questions, but it is difficult to answer due to the many different understandings of what social justice is among scholars and academics. Much of the literature that I have consumed during my classroom phase at SIT regarding social justice has been largely influenced by Karl Marx.

A fellow SIT graduate Jonathan C. Barnes, channels Marx throughout his capstone paper- *Shooting the Moon: Social Justice and The Logic of Capitalism*. He soundly captures my understanding of social justice when he writes,

I use the term social justice to denote the concept of equality in all its social forms (economic, political, etc), whereby every human being is seen and treated as equal in all facets of human interaction and experience. While admittedly utopian, any other goal would result in the privileging of one group over another, a result that can only lead to reproduction of the social relations from which we are trying to escape (Barnes p.3)

His summation of social justice is largely centered on the material arrangement of the political economic system in which we exist. This arrangement privileges the few and exploits the masses. It is through this lens that I examine the structure of the Mariposa Foundation, and how their programming serves to accomplish a change in the current exploitative system and how empowerment of these young girls will help to eradicate it.

Another source for understanding social justice that has heavily impacted me is Biblical scripture from the perspective of the Christian faith. The Old Testament and the prophets continuously refer to justice as a state of relationship with God and one's community- a state of harmony and right doing. This touches on the idea on distributive justice, every one having all that they need, those with extra providing for those that lack. This is evident in Leviticus 9:19 where God instructs the Hebrews to leave grain for the poor and the alien, or the law of jubilee which freed slaves and erased debt every seven years and returned land to original owners every fifty years.

Not only is the Biblical concept of justice concerned with distributive justice but also responding to wrongs committed and finding solutions that would restore whatever was damaged through wrongdoing. Restoration of relationships- between the people and God, people groups, families, and the land- are incredibly important. The Gospels story of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection is the climaxing seal of this very concept. These stories and analogies drive home the closeness and importance of justice, the value of each person, and our connection to one another.

Mary Ann Poe succinctly surmises the Biblical definition of justice in her article, *Fairness is Not Enough*. She notes that justice is not just fairness, 'justice is an ideal that reflects that human justice is more than just an even distribution of goods or a fair retribution for wrongs. It is concerned with the quality and nature of the relationships between people longing for wholeness and harmony in human relationships" (Poe 11). This definition of justice is very applicable to the work of community development and to the work of the Mariposa Foundation as they seek to empower groups of girls, and establish right relationships between students and their communities.

Methodology

I used qualitative research in my approach to this capstone. I chose to use case study as my genre of choice due to my desire to more fully understand this movement and belief among NGOs in regards to the belief that sports is a workable solution for empowering women and thus ending or alleviating poverty.

I chose my topic and subjects after working with the foundation for eight months. I had developed strong relationships with many of the girls, and I had gained enough experience to reflect on successes, frustrations, challenges, and room for further study. I wanted to hear from the girls what worked for them in terms of programming and what could be improved. Thus, I conducted a preliminary study for the Foundation asking them those very same questions.

It was after reviewing those results that I decided to interview a few of those same girls as well as a few of the mothers of the girls that participated in the study. Due to the nature of this research it is very important to include adult voices. This voice provides an insight into the generational changes or patterns and further insight into their environment. This served to further help me understand the role of play in human development and the role of sport in terms of empowerment and lasting change.

After several revisions, I decided it was best to use to the format of focus group to interview the girls, so as for them to feel the most comfortable, least coerced, and able to answer questions. I limited the questions to five (see Appendix A), so as not to tax the children, nor stress them and take too much of their time. I performed two focus groups with students: one with between the ages of nine and eleven, and another between the ages

of thirteen and seventeen. I also decided a focus group would work well with the mothers, instead of various one-on-one personal interviews.

The girls that participated in the focus group were students that frequented the center throughout the week and Saturday programs. These were students with whom I had worked closely for a year, knew me well, and exhibited signs of trust. All subjects agreed to take part in my study, knowing that at any time they were free to leave or refuse to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

Likewise, I chose mothers using these same criteria. The mothers that participated were chosen for several reasons. First, I chose mothers with which I had already established a rapport. Secondly, I chose them due to availability; when I was free to conduct the interviews they were also free. Thirdly, they showed an interest in their girls through their attendance and upon explanation of my project showed an interest in the theme and wanted to help as best as they could.

Rationale

At the beginning of my practicum I had a swirl of ideas for a capstone in my head- the power of play in human development, female empowerment, empowerment through sport, effectiveness of NGOs, etc. I realized that I wanted and needed to focus on the positive. Overwhelmed by the many things I have learned and observed during this practicum phase I drew out a mind map, and at the center of all these topics was play and its relationship to female empowerment through sports.

As previously stated I love to play. I have often felt guilty for this, as though I am a child that will never grow up. I constantly feel pressure to be “productive.” But, there have

been times when I have felt most productive when I am at play. I feel like I understand the true meaning of life. Through the girls responses I heard echoing sentiments. I started to think that perhaps we are onto something. That is when I began to sit down and think about all the characteristics of play. I wanted to explore the connection between play and social justice. This connection could help answer my question- Does girl's empowerment through sports really reflect Social Justice?

Analytic framework

I am a social justice concentration, and throughout my entire practicum experience I consistently reflected back on my time at SIT. Two influential professors, Dr. Janaki Natarajan and Dr. Ken Williams, as well as the voices of SIT peers, consistently echoed through my mind, thus contributing to my theoretical lens of the programs and functions of the Mariposa Foundation and its programs. Several theories have shaped my critique more than anything else, and that is Marx's historical and dialectical materialism, appreciative inquiry, and Biblical scriptures. These theories have shaped my conceptual understanding of social justice, and I use these as I examine what role girls' empowerment and sport/play enact in social justice.

Population Selection and Sampling Strategy

I chose 25 females from the Cabarete community, all connected to the Mariposa Foundation. Eighteen were students in the foundation, and seven were mothers of these surveyed students. Due to the nature of my questions, the surveyed students were chosen mostly due to attendance and their level of involvement in the foundation's activities.

For the other students and mothers I conducted privately-held interviews in the Foundation's center. In all focus groups I used an audio recorder to record the focus group interview, as well as written notes of subject responses, all of which I destroyed upon analysis of the data.

The questions that I included in the focus group were all directly related to play-how the students felt about it, what did they like to play, how they felt about sports, etc. These questions were designed to gather the ideas and opinions of the girls. Not only was I interested in learning their thoughts, I wanted them to have a voice in my project. My assumption was that they all liked to play, but how did they really feel about sports? These questions were designed to help measure whether these students felt empowered by sports. I began my focus group with five simple questions, the questions serving as a guide, and following the students' lead in their responses.

In doing this, I would not require much of my subjects' time or cause undue stress, and allow them to exercise their voices. The confidentiality and protection of the youth was a primary concern and I employed all methods possible to ensure that they felt safe and supported. Their involvement was voluntary. I conducted the focus group in a familiar and safe space, and amongst others that they already knew and trusted. Furthermore, the subject matter was one that they enjoyed and engaged in fully.

In regards to the mother focus group I asked the very same questions I asked their daughters but with a few additional questions regarding their own feelings of empowerment. For example, I asked if they feel people listen to them, if they felt powerful, etc. I chose to ask the same questions so as to serve as a foil to the daughter's responses. Also

I asked these few additional questions because of their level of maturity and understanding of language.

Limitations

I encountered limitations due to the population sample I decided to research. Because my subjects were minors I had to take extreme caution in protecting their well-being. This is extremely necessary and good, but it limited the number of questions I could ask as well as the themes I could address in my questions.

Also, due to the age, and level of development, I could not ask these girls direct questions about their ideas of social justice, etc. My inability to do so was not due to any fallacy on their part but rather the depth of this topic has implications that could possibly jeopardize their emotional and mental well-being. Their background, education, and lack of familiarity of various social justice theories prevented an effective and quick discourse on the subject.

Similarly, I was interested in comparing programs with other NGOs but of course the only materials that I found from other NGOs were success stories. I do not doubt their successes, but after working for an NGO myself, I know that there are additional complications and frustrations behind the scenes. I wanted more information on the implementation of their programs, but I found mostly reports with charts and theory for their existence. However, the nature of my paper is not an expose, thus this missing information was not crucial to my research.

Findings and Analysis

Presentation of survey results

Of all the subjects asked, each and every one agreed that they enjoyed to play and incorporated it into their life. Perhaps this commentary sounds trite however, this is worthwhile to note due to the fact that while not everyone plays sports, all of the respondents agreed to “play.” Their observations as to why they like to play varied, their reasons and reactions to playing varied, but inevitably everything revolved around “feeling good and better about oneself.”

Similarly, every single group mentioned the physical development benefits of playing and participating in sports. The vocabulary varied in that the younger girls mentioned growing stronger bodies while the older girls and mothers used phrases like “keeping in shape” or “getting in shape.” The mothers group also mentioned that play helps one develop mentally thus allowing for social benefits as well such as developing and maintaining healthy friendships and staying concentrated on the family.

One interesting note was a differing opinion between two groups of students. Of the group of thirteen to seventeen year olds that I interviewed all of them mentioned that they saw sports as separate from playing. When I asked them about this difference they mentioned that playing is relaxing and stress free. There is no pressure to perform, and the focus is on sharing and making light of life. Their examples included games played at recess or during camp, games that they learned to play at a younger age but still enjoyed. On the other hand, they mentioned that sports in their opinion required focus, discipline, and a more serious mindset. The only way that sports could be seen as play depended on the context. For example, surfing could count as play if the goal was not to compete.

The middle group of girls however did not share this same perspective. They immediately connected play and sports as the same thing. When asked what they liked to play all of them began to shout out different sports like softball, surfing, soccer, circus and basketball. All of their examples were very structured activities while the older girls were more focused on less disciplined activities. Knowing these girls I also attribute their answers to having participated in the sports programs at the Mariposa Foundation. They were exposed at an earlier age to swimming and other organized sports, whereas the older girls had already passed a certain threshold and their overall interests had shifted.

The mothers group provided more articulate and detailed answers. Regarding sports their mentalities echoed the middle group in that sports count as play. But, they also mentioned various other forms of play that did not enter either group's mind. Some mothers mentioned music, television, dancing, consumption of substances such as alcohol, and gambling as forms of play. This would reflect the idea that the older girls mentioned-play is about relaxing and or relieving stress. Each form of play carried its own connotation. Alcohol and gambling of course were not seen as healthy forms of play but they still acknowledged these forms as ways to relax the mind and body. They mentioned that sports are more aggressive amongst adults, and that dancing is more sensual. One mother stated that children's forms of play are the healthiest and that everyone needs to play more with their kids for this very reason; that somehow adults have lost sight of what it means to play. Additionally, the mother's group also mentioned their own involvement in sports when they were their daughters' ages. Some even acknowledged current involvement in sports; only one mother had not participated in anything.

Constraints

I would have loved to have delved deeper into the answers that the students and mothers provided. However, due to the nature of empowerment and the very real and serious issues that these women face there was a threat to their well-being by bringing up some sensitive topics. I would have preferred a deeper history, challenges that they have encountered and whether or how they have overcome them. This would certainly allow me to compare and evaluate to what extent empowerment came into play.

Still, due to my year of experience at the Mariposa Foundation and the Cabarete community I was able to fill in some gaps with simple observations. For example, one mother that I have grown to know very well was one of eight children and neglected by both parents. After giving birth to her first son, the child's father abandoned her, and his family verbally abused her. She was left on her own to provide for her and her son. Thankfully, she had a loving neighbor that helped her through this difficult time and through the subsequent tragic loss of her second husband three years later.

This woman is a leader in the community. She works hard and makes sacrifices for her daughter so that she can have opportunities for a better future than that which she was afforded. I have the privilege of knowing that this woman participated in sports growing up. She is a baseball fanatic and the sister of a professional pitcher for Licey, one of the country's professional baseball teams. She credits sports as being an influential experience in her life and waxes nostalgic every time she talks about playing ball with siblings and neighbors. However, this is only one story out the eight mothers that participated in the study. I do not have these details for all of the involved.

In addition to lack of personal observation I noticed a level of group think taking place during the focus group. Granted, conducting group interviews certainly had its benefits, but one of the drawbacks that I noticed was a tendency towards dominant voices overshadowing or influencing the less gregarious voices. For example, some of the more outspoken respondents tended to dominate the dialogue, and when I specifically asked the respondents that had been withdrawn what they felt about the others' statements they agreed and offered no additional statements or ideas.

Analysis and Contextualization of results

Knowing statistics of the community, and the household dynamics of the majority of the Mariposa girls, I was genuinely surprised by the number of mothers that participated and continue to participate in sports. Of the eight mother participants only one claimed to not have played sports when they were younger. This finding demonstrated several things for me. First, it became even clearer to me why these girls were enrolled in the Foundation's programs. These mothers wanted their girls to have the opportunity to play. They were empowered to help empower their girls.

Secondly, I wrongly assumed that the previous generation of young women did not have a safe space or that they were not encouraged to play or engage in sports. They not only played sports but as I asked this question the room erupted with happy, feisty laughter and shouts of confirmation. So often I had heard stories from the mothers of early pregnancy, of marrying and taking care of the home. I assumed that their priorities would no longer include organized sports, and due to cultural expectations were never allowed to participate.

This mentality, embracing sports, supports the other finding that play is important, and that these adult women will play however they can, whenever possible. They are fortunate to be part of a culture that values relaxation and knows how to pursue happiness, no matter what the situation. This also supports my theory that anyone can play, and that everyone needs play in their lives. Its characteristics clearly connect people to one another, and offer a chance to build, strengthen, and reconcile relationships. This relationship piece is incredibly instrumental in achieving social justice.

Due to the differing age groups the answers to the questions followed various trends. The youngest students, ten and under, connected play to imaginary games, free time, and unstructured exploration. The middle group of girls, twelve to fourteen connected play to more structured and disciplined activities like team sports. The oldest group of girls, fifteen to seventeen years of age connected play to camp activities, yet all group in nature. These differences vary partly due to developmental needs, but they also show the influence of the Foundation's programming. The older girls have not had as strong of sports programming as the younger ones. This is due to the age of this organization. It is not yet three years old and so it is still changing at a fast pace, its focus shifting from a more academic focus to one that includes more physical activity and sports. The older girls have been involved since the organization's inception, thus their programming norms have been different, whereas the younger girls have had more exposure to sports emphasis and structure.

After conducting the research and reflecting upon this process I realize now that my sample population was a biased one. I chose girls that participate in programs. Thus I left out a vital group- the girls that were not being reached. I made this decision partly due to

availability. But on the other hand I also chose these girls because I knew that something about our programming was working for them, and I needed to hear their voice. Besides that I also had an established connection and level of trust, which is extremely helpful when interviewing adolescent. However, I really needed to include girls that were harder to reach, to see why they were not coming, or why the programs might not be reaching them. I need to know how they are not being empowered, or if outside forces, instead of their own volition, are keeping them from sports programming.

The mothers' inputs provided an extra depth of understanding which helped connect the girls' answers to the theme of empowerment. They noted that after returning home from sports the girls always have more "animo" or energy, encouragement, excitement. In sharing this observation all the mothers were smiling, pleased with this reaction among their daughters. This observation alone proves the findings from other organizations that sports helps provide empowerment.

Not only did the mother's group provide support for sports female empowerment, but also the need for female space. The mothers at first showed some signs of discomfort answering the questions and sharing their opinions. From body language as well I noticed a level of distrust and alienation. Those more apt to include their voice were women that already knew one another. For me this was a strong example of women that have maintained the presence in the home and still need support from other women. The need for empowerment amongst adult women is still very prevalent.

Conclusions

From my research with the Mariposa Foundation and other youth empowerment centered organizations I have found several results. For one, sports programs are working. They are empowering youth, especially young women. I see it in the girls I work with at the Mariposa Foundation. I heard it in their interviews, I have seen positive changes in their behavior over the year that I have volunteered in the Dominican Republic. The girls have gotten physically stronger, and absorbed skills like swimming and surfing. There are set norms- such as discipline, following rules, functioning as a team, and exhibiting sportsmanship. It is clear that sports reach people, and that play reaches people. Through these two concepts the girls experience healthy and supportive interactions not only with each other but also with the adults in their community, both Dominican and foreigner. Positive environments are established and productive learning is taking place.

From a gender perspective the effects are also incredible. The confidence these girls have gained from being allowed access to male spheres is phenomenal. I have seen the men and male peers of the community demonstrate interest in these girls' programs. By making our organization dedicated to strictly girls their level of importance has risen in their homes, on their streets, and in their neighborhoods. When we play softball their male counterparts watch and encourage the skills that they observe. Male family members have become more supportive of their daughters through our support of them and their involvement with the sports programs. I have not seen much resistance from males to these girls' involvement in sports.

One of my favorite examples of a change in sex dynamics is the story of the Mariposa that learned to kiteboard. One of our girls joined the kiteboarding community this past

May; she learned to kiteboard and then competed in a local fundraiser in August. She is one of two Dominican girls in the entire community, and perhaps even on the entire North Coast, that participates in Kiteboarding. This is a male saturated sport, her male neighbors, family members and friends participate in this sport.

Once she began to train, show her dedication and her skill, these same men in her life began to take notice and support her as a peer, helping her with equipment, providing tips and verbal encouragement. I saw signs of respect. Her father filmed her on the beach with a neighbor's video camera, beaming with pride, and holding back tears. She started out hesitant, self-conscious, and lacking confidence. However, through our programs, with our support and encouragement she mustered up the strength to face her fears and perform to the best of her abilities!

I have so many anecdotes that I could include from my experience here. I have read similar stories from other volunteers and workers in other organizations around the globe. I know this works from my very own experience participating in sports and physical activity. Their previous attitudes of "I can't" have shifted to "I could" and now some "I can." For these girls to have a safe, supportive place to explore and prove their capabilities to themselves and to each other provides amazing support. Thankfully, this attitude that they have during sports spreads to other facets of their life. This is proof that empowerment is real and takes place, with or without this organization.

However, empowerment is a difficult unit to measure. It varies according to each individual and will take more years of research and observation to really see to what extent it is really accomplishing the social change that so many NGOs tout as the solution to sexism, classism, poverty, etc. I would love to return to this group of girls ten and twenty

years down the line and see how their lives have changed and developed, and wonder what role did empowerment play for them?

Additionally, empowerment accomplishes little if the girl dies or struggles from malnutrition. Empowerment does not necessarily change the options available to her. When the sex industry or domestic work is the most readily available economic opportunity, girls will resort to that just to survive, and ensure the survival of loved ones. I fully support these sports programs as a way to reach these youths and engage them in their communities. However, I will not join the movement that claims that sports are the magical solution that will forever change the girls' lives for better. Sports are not the end to poverty in the community. Sports do not change the political economic structure. Sports do not cancel out all the other negative images and voices in some of these girls' lives. Sports do not reach everyone.

This organization has great sports programs that are changing these girls' lives. But, at this point, it is not a sustainable solution to ending poverty. The girls participate in sports they cannot afford; they get a taste of luxury (a sports sphere they cannot afford) only to be reminded that that is not their reality when they go home. Furthermore, we rely on funding from mostly outside of the Dominican community. Funding that comes from wealthy benefactors: wealthy benefactors that benefit from a system of exploitation. I share the sentiments of my SIT colleague when he writes, "To think the nonprofit industry is not beholden to the economic, political and social agendas of its funders, is to blatantly disregard history. No one in their right mind would give large sums of money to an organization that directly undermines one's own source of wealth or privilege – be it social or political. (Barnes 13).

Furthermore, we rely on donations from [mostly foreign] volunteers. There are many volunteers and educators that have been a part of these girls' lives that do not speak Spanish- their native tongue. Nor have many been through the same things these girls have experienced. It is difficult to use these volunteers as purported examples for the girls, when they have not experienced the same system of discrimination, ostracization, and limited opportunities.

Thankfully, this dynamic is changing. The staff is now mostly Dominican; only one staff member (the English teacher) does not speak fluent Spanish. She is helping train the Dominican staff learn English, so that in this way they can assume critical tasks that were formerly occupied by foreign English speaking volunteers. Furthermore, the Dominican women have begun leading the sports programs, developing along with the younger girls to serve as models of success, empowerment, and positive, powerful women in the community.

In true approach to appreciative inquiry, despite shortcomings and contradictions I believe in the girls in these programs and the abilities of the community to rally and meet their needs. Most importantly, I believe that this organization has the potential to develop into the institution it strives to be, and that the current students will be the ones to lead it in that direction.

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Appendix A Interview Guide

Questions for Students:

1. ¿Ustedes les gusta jugar? ¿Por qué si o no?
2. ¿Que les gusta jugar? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
3. ¿Como se sienten cuando juegan?
4. ¿Les gustan los deportes? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
5. ¿Cómo se sienten cuando juegan deportes?

(English translation)

1. Do you like to play? Why/why not?
2. What do you like to play? Why/why not?
3. How do you feel when you're playing?
4. Do you like sports? Why/why not?
5. How do you feel when you are playing sports?

Questions for Mothers:

1. Al escuchar la palabra *jugar* ¿que viene a la mente?
2. ¿Cree usted que el juego es importante?
3. ¿Tiene la oportunidad de jugar?
4. ¿Juega con sus hijos? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
5. ¿Participa usted en el deporte? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
6. ¿Tiene un interés en los deportes o actividad física? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
7. ¿Cree que usted es fuerte? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
8. Cuando usted habla ¿cree que la gente preste atención a sus palabras?

(English translation)

1. When you hear the word *play*, what comes to mind?
2. Do you think play is important?
3. Do you ever have a chance to play?
4. Do you play with your children? Why or why not?
5. Do you participate in sports? Why or why not?
6. Do you have an interest in sports or physical activity? Why or why not?
7. Do you think that you are powerful? Why or why not?
8. When you speak do you believe people pay attention to your words?

Appendix B Informed Consent Form

Formulario de Consentimiento Informado

SIT Graduate Institute
Un camino de Kipling
Brattleboro, VT 05302

Fecha:

Estimada _____

Soy una estudiante de posgrado en SIT Graduate Institute (Brattleboro, VT). Como parte de mi carrera en la justicia social en las relaciones interculturales, estoy internada en la Fundación Mariposa (Cabarete, República Dominicana) y completar un proyecto de investigación necesaria para la graduación. Los invito a participar en esta excitante oportunidad para ayudar a mejorar la programación de la Fundación Mariposa. Estoy interesada en saber lo que funcionó hasta el año 2011/2012 de los programas.

Su participación implicará una entrevista dura alrededor de diez minutos en un acuerdo mutuo sobre la ubicación de su conveniencia. Se le entregará las preguntas de la entrevista antes de la entrevista comienza de modo que usted puede completar la información de su elección y obtener información preliminar sobre lo que se discutirá. Me gustaría grabar en audio las entrevistas sólo si se siente cómoda con este procedimiento. Si decide que no lo hago de audio a grabar la entrevista, voy a tomar notas sobre los temas tratados.

Te daré una copia de mis notas (una vez escribió a máquina) o las transcripciones de la entrevista para su revisión y que le brindará la oportunidad de verificar la información que usted proporcione. Le pido que lea la información y se sienten en libertad para añadir, borrar o cambiar cualquier parte que sea necesario y devolver el documento a mí. Voy a utilizar la información que verifique lo más preciso en mi informe.

No voy a soltar notas o transcripciones y cintas de audio de cualquier otra persona. También voy a triturar los documentos y cintas de audio de borrado en la terminación de mi informe.

Si lo desea, voy a proteger la identidad de los participantes a través del uso de seudónimos en esta y cualquier otra publicación o presentación en el futuro. Si usted está interesada, usted puede elegir su propio seudónimo. Los participantes deben entender que podría ser citado directamente, pero que sus nombres no serán utilizados en cualquier parte del informe, a menos que de concederse la autorización. Todos los datos serán almacenados en un lugar seguro y las transcripciones serán destruidas después de seis meses. Por favor, comprenda que usted puede negarse a participar en todos los aspectos del estudio o se retire completamente del estudio en cualquier momento y sin prejuicios.

Firma de la estudiante: _____

Firma de los padres: _____

Aprecio su voluntad de dar su tiempo a este proyecto y para ayudar a mejorar los programas de la Fundación Mariposa de los futuros estudiantes. Si usted tiene alguna pregunta, no dude en preguntar (ver mi información de contacto más abajo) o póngase en contacto con el SIT Graduate Institute Junta de Revisión Institucional (IRB): irb@sit.edu

Gracias,

Victoria Jones
victoria.jones @ mail.sit.edu
(829) 921-2162

"He leído lo anterior, entiendo su contenido y estoy de acuerdo en participar en el estudio."

Firma: _____ Fecha: _____

"Yo doy mi consentimiento para grabar la entrevista."

Firma: _____ Fecha: _____

"Yo doy mi consentimiento para que mi hijo participe en este estudio y de participar en una entrevista grabada."

Firma del Padre: _____ Fecha: _____

(English Translation)

Informed Consent Form

SIT Graduate Institute
1 Kipling Road
Brattleboro, VT 05302

Date:

Dear _____

I am a graduate student at SIT Graduate Institute (Brattleboro, VT). As part of my degree in Social Justice in Intercultural Relations, I am interning with the Mariposa Foundation (Cabarete, Dominican Republic) and completing a capstone research project required for graduation. I am inviting you to participate in this exciting opportunity to help improve the Mariposa Foundation's programming. I am interested in learning what worked/was learned through the 2011/2012 year of programs.

Your participation will entail one interview lasting about five to ten minutes in a mutually agreed upon location of your convenience. You will be given the interview questions before the actual interview begins so that you may complete information of your choosing and gain preliminary insight into what will be discussed. I would like to audio-record the interviews only if you feel comfortable with this procedure. If you choose that I do not audio-record the interview, I will take notes on the topics discussed.

I will give you a copy of my notes (once typed up) or the transcripts (if the interview is audio-recorded) for your review and to afford you the opportunity to verify the information you provide. I request that you read the information and feel at liberty to add, delete, or change any part as necessary and return the document to me. I will use the information that you verify as accurate in my report.

I will not release notes/transcripts/audio-tapes to any other person. I will also shred the documents and erase audiotapes at the completion of my report.

If desired, I will protect the identities of participants through the use of pseudonyms in this and any future publications or presentation. If you are interested, you may choose your own pseudonym. Participants should understand that they might be quoted directly, but that their names will not be used in any part of the report, unless consent is given. All data will be stored in a secure location and transcripts will be destroyed after six months. Please understand that you may refuse to participate in any aspects of the study or withdraw fully from the study at any time, without prejudice.

Student Signature: _____

Parental Signature: _____

I appreciate your willingness to give your time to this project and to help improve the Mariposa Foundation programs for future students. If you have any questions, feel free to ask me (see my contact information below) or contact the SIT Graduate Institute Institutional Review Board (IRB): irb@sit.edu

Thank you,

Victoria Jones
Victoria.jones@mail.sit.edu
(829) 921-2162

"I have read the above, I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study."

Signature _____ Date: _____

"I give my consent to have this interview recorded."

Signature _____ Date: _____

"I give my consent for my child to participate in this study and to partake in a recorded interview."

Parent Signature _____ Date: _____

Please initial: _____

Appendix C: List of NGOs focused on female youth Empowerment

Afghan Institute of Learning <http://www.afghaninstituteoflearning.org>

Asha Trust- Job training for at-risk young people in Sri Lanka
<http://www.ashatrust.co.uk/>

Daraja Academy for Girls <http://www.daraja-academy.org>

Food for Life Vrindivana <http://www.fflvrindavan.org>

Girls and Football South Africa <http://www.girlsandfootballs.com>

Lotus Outreach International- The Blossom Bus Project <http://www.lotusoutreach.org>

Mariposa DR Foundation <http://www.mariposadrfoundation.org/>

Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project <http://www.nyakaschool.org>

Pratham <http://www.givewell.org/international/charities/pratham>

Right to Play International <http://www.righttoplay.com>

Shining Hope For Communities <http://shininghopeforcommunities.org>

Soccer Without Borders Grenada <http://www.soccerwithoutborders.org>

Solar Sisters <http://www.solarsister.org>

Swabhiman- for Girls' Safety and Awareness
http://smilefoundationindia.org/p_a_swabhiman.htm

Vacha- Life Skills Training of 300 Girls in Mumbai Slums <http://www.vacha.org.in/>

WEAVE <http://www.weave-women.org/>