

Original Article

Live in the moment, educate for life: lessons for life-long participation in structured physical activity

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Abstract:

The purpose of a more comprehensive study was to develop an understanding of what factors meaningfully contribute to an individual's active participation in structured physical activity across the life span. This paper draws on such insights and reports on the factors influencing individuals aged 16-18 years (youngest age cohort in this cross-sectional study of four progressive age categories) that contribute or inhibit active participation in institutionalised physical activity (PA), including sport-related activities. *Participants.* A total of 246 adolescents (49% boys and 51% girls) from poorly-resourced schools participated in the questionnaire. *Materials and methods.* The learners completed questionnaires that captured information related to their lived experiences and current PA practices within the three target communities within the Pretoria and Johannesburg municipalities. *Results.* There are several factors that influence adolescent learners' active participation of which the most influential relate to a sense of enjoyment of the type of activities and engaging with other participants that translate into a sense of belonging and positive social environment. Inhibiting factors include the lack of access to resources and enabling environmental factors. Such factors present a differential gender profile and demonstrate existing gender inequalities. *Conclusions.* Adolescent learners living in impoverished communities are influenced by a myriad of factors that either inhibit or contribute towards active participation in institutional physical activity and sport. Local stakeholders and civic society agents from institutional settings need to harness such insights develop nuanced policies, guidelines and programmes to address to optimise equitable PA practices in the promotion of an active lifestyle.

Key Words: institutional sport; impoverished communities; socialisation; adolescent learners; gender

Introduction

Physical activity (PA) participation creates opportunities for socializing individuals into active living and a health-optimising life style. Health in this instance is , defined as a 'process through which people are taught to be proficient members of society' (Little & McGivern, 2014, p. 100). Healthy living has gained global prominence in view of evidence that physical inactivity has been identified as the fourth cause of early mortality (Gichu et al., 2018). It affects mainly women and children in sub-Saharan Africa. These children are at a greater risk of being obese and suffering from other chronic diseases later in adulthood (Biro & Wien, 2010). This is why global agencies such as the United Nations in partnership with World Health Organization (WHO) advocate for policy and practice reforms regarding active participation in PA, PE, and sport at community and school levels (UNESCO, 2015; WHO, 2018). Such advocacy found traction in the Kazan Action Plan (KAP) as most recent roadmap for development for UN 2030 Agenda as formulated by ministers and senior officials responsible for PE and sport (MINEPS VI) (ICSSPE, 2020). The policy recommendations and prescribed PA guidelines fail to acknowledge the significance of contextual realities and implementation challenges. There is a need for an agenda related to policy recommendation; resource mobilisation and information resources (e.g. programme and toolkits) to facilitate participation in and positive behaviours towards active living and continued participation in structured PA and sport – particularly in the context of poverty. Participation in structured PA and sport-related activities is associated with an individual improving their fitness, learning new sport skills, gaining muscular strength, improving physical appearance and promoting healthy living.

Regular participation in PA provides multiple benefits, including 'significant health benefits for young people such as obesity prevention, impaired psychological well-being, cardiovascular fitness and bone health' (Camacho-Minano, LaVoi & Barr-Anderson, 2011: 1025). Children and adolescents need to maintain and uphold regular PA as it can 'result in increased physical fitness, reduced body fat, favourable cardiovascular and metabolic disease risk profiles, enhanced bone health and reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety' across the lifespan (Eime et al., 2013: 2). Children participating in regular structured PA and sport-related activities is important in the context of this study as active children lead to being active adults across their lifespan (Ha et al., 2019). Continued active participation is a key building block for an individual's quality of life (Joseph-Shehu & Ncama, 2017).

It is still unclear on why active young people become active adults, but it has been suggested 'that a number of factors contribute to the establishment of PA as part of a healthy lifestyle' (Bailey et al., 2013: 293). Individuals perceive various influences as detrimental in contributing or impeding on their choice and continued participation throughout their lives. These factors present differently in various geographic locations and for different populations relating to class (socio-economic), age and gender (Burnett, 2018a).

Institutional settings such as schools and sports clubs are relatively well-resourced social settings for individuals to be socialised and introduced to different activities. Socialisation refers to an active life-long process of learning where social interaction occurs, and individuals make sense of the society in which they live (Coakley and Burnett, 2014). Socialisation extends to how individuals learn and co-construct culture through interaction or observation of others.

Chalari (2017, p. 38) outlines that 'socialisation is probably the first and certainly the most important systematic link between individuals and society'. Coakley (2016) states that individuals' experience the influences from a few of the socialising agents that may influence individuals differently across time. The influence that the socialising agent has may be in alignment with their standing and influence in various institutions. Sport clubs and schools are environments that are conducive to the promotion for participating in and installing positive attitudes for active living (Hollis et al., 2016). Sport and PE practices at school have been identified as one of the most effective and inclusive ways to provide learners with new skills, knowledge, values, attitudes and understanding for lifelong participation in PA and sport (Hollis et al., 2016). The study utilised these insights for determining the main factors influencing individuals aged 16-18 years that may contribute or inhibit towards active participation in institutional PA and sport-related activities.

Material & methods

The study uses a descriptive research design in order to observe and describe the myriad of factors influencing active participation in structured PA and sport related activities for individuals from 16 to 65 plus years, although this paper reports on findings of the 16-18 yearsold school learners in institutional settings within impoverished communities (Williams, 2007).

Participants

This study included 246 adolescent learners (16-18 years of age), who were attending schools in impoverished communities within Pretoria and Johannesburg in South Africa. Participants were randomly selected Grade 10 and 11 learners and consisted of 120 girls and 126 boys. Selection criteria for inclusion in this study outline that the participants reside or have resided in impoverished townships in Gauteng and participate or have participated in structured PA within institutionalised settings in their respective townships.

Measure

A questionnaire was developed as a research instrument to obtain information from adolescents (aged 16-18) on their lived experiences of institutional PA and sport-related activities at their schools and local sport clubs in the community (Creswell, 2013). The questionnaire comprised of several questions pertaining to: section A biographical information; section B school and community club experiences; section C enjoyment; section D factors that influence participation; and section E perceived benefits of active participation.

Data collection and statistical analysis

Schools in the townships were initially approached with a letter requesting permission to collect data via the school principal. The researcher received permission and made an appointment with each of the school principals to discuss and outline what the research entailed. Grade 10 to 11 learners in each school were invited to complete the questionnaire administered by the researcher. This strategy helped the researcher to purposefully sample a wide range of data from individuals living in different communities where different institutional PA and sport-related activities are facilitated. The participants were chosen based on their specific experience that constitute a non-probability purposive key sample (Gratton & Jones, 2010)

All learners participated in the study anonymously; and signed informed consent for their participation in this research. The study was compliant with the requirements of the Faculty of Health Sciences from a university in Johannesburg. The ethical clearance number for this study is REC-01-164-2018. All statistical analyses (including descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation results, percentages, descriptive frequencies, and chi-square tests) were conducted using the IBM SPSS Statistics (SPSS) software.

Results

The results section illustrates the main themes that will be reported deductively as they derive from the sections in the questionnaire. These sections are inclusive of the biographical information, opportunities for active participation, level of satisfaction and enjoyment, as well as inhibitory and contributory factors that influence individual's active participation and future orientation towards continued active participation.

The *socio-economic status* of individuals reveals perceived inequalities as about a fifth (19.6%) of the respondents indicated that their parents were 'poor' (e.g. only grant income and informal income) or that they regard their socio-economic status as 'above average' (21.8%) with at least two adult household members receiving a regular income. More than half (58.7%) of the research participants reported that their parent's financial status was 'average' (e.g. one or more household member earning an income and informal income).

Experiences:

'Experiences' refer to different participation opportunities that adolescent learners have in regards to sport at school or sport-related activities in community club settings. Figure 1 provides a gender split towards formal active participation.

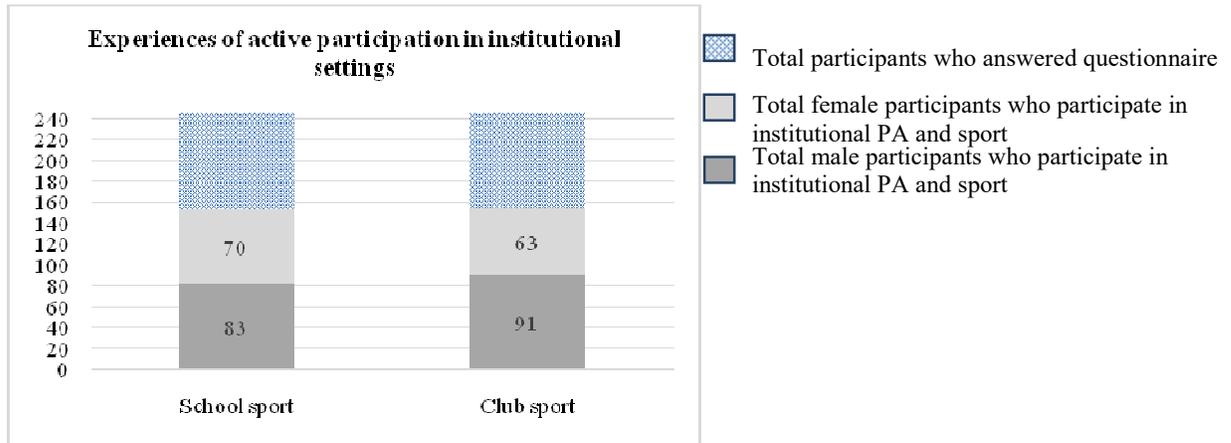


Fig.1. Participation profiles of boys and girls

In Figure 1 a similar picture of formal participation between boys and girls appear with an overall participation rate of 62.4% and 63.4% of the school going in learners in school sport and club sport respectively.

Attitudes

Out of 246 respondents, 83% (N=204) of learners reported that they have fun during their active participation in club sport and 38% (N=93) shared the same sentiment of school sport, whilst percentage (number) found it boring. The focus of PA in the township and rural schools is still strongly dependent on the provision of opportunities for mass participation (Burnett, 2009). However, poorly resourced schools in South Africa lack basic resources related to infrastructure, coaches, information and funding with each creating challenges of their own (Fernández et al., 2017; Meyer, 2016).

Limited resources is directly linked to limited school sport provision which level of satisfaction that causes limited participation opportunities as sports facilitated are limited. Learners may participate in a few sports at school and at community clubs with the latter providing some variation and opportunities to participate with friends from different schools who reside in the same community.

The data in Figure 2 relates to the motivational climate of sport participation in terms of 'having fun' and excitement versus 'finding the activities boring'. The graph illustrates a sense of semantic positioning of motivational factors that are perceived as inhibitory or contributory influences to learner's active participation in institutional sport.

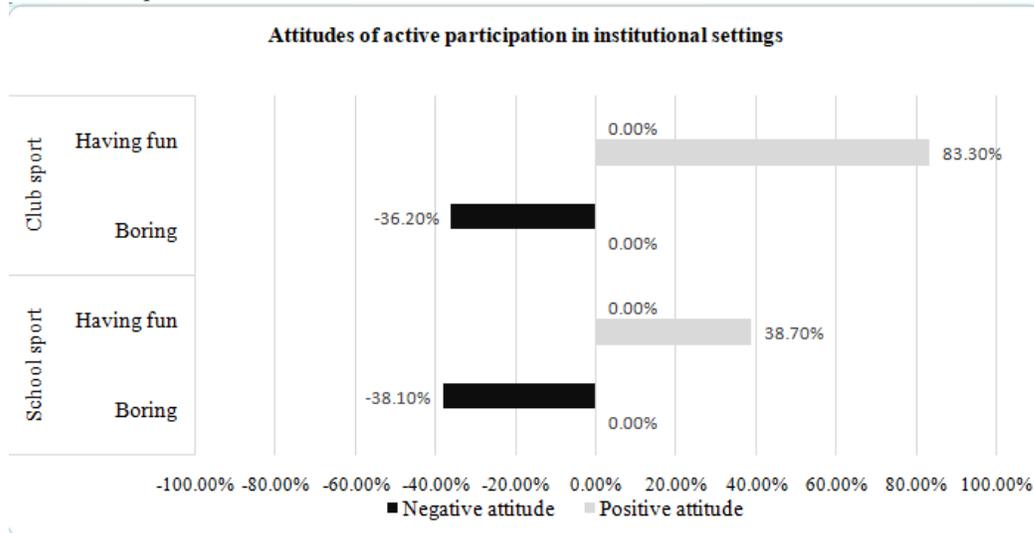


Fig. II. Attitudes of active participation in institutional settings

It is evident in figure 2 that adolescent learners find club sport relatively more enjoyable and less boring. This finding may have bearing on more teams in different age divisions taking part at club level as there are usually more coaches, whilst teacher-coaches are associated with academic performances and less personal freedom for participants.

Factors influencing participation

In impoverished communities in South Africa, participation in institutional sport is complex as a result of several variables. These variables include socio-cultural factors associated with gender roles and children’s labour commitments (Bray & Moses, 2011; Kubayi, 2015). Participation is also limited due to lack of different types of resources – particularly facilities and qualified coaches (Burnett, 2018a). PA participation is directly and indirectly associated with a sense of belonging, the experience of being included, community integration and bonding evident in social cohesion (Skinner et al., 2008). The social environment where PA is facilitated, particularly at school level may not be conducive in delivering outcomes on all these social dimensions.

Figure 3 report on several factors that either inhibit or contribute to adolescent learners’ active participation in both contributing and inhibitory factors influencing the level of active participation in institutional PA and sport for boys and girls. This graph provides an overview of what factors influence active participation in institutional settings.

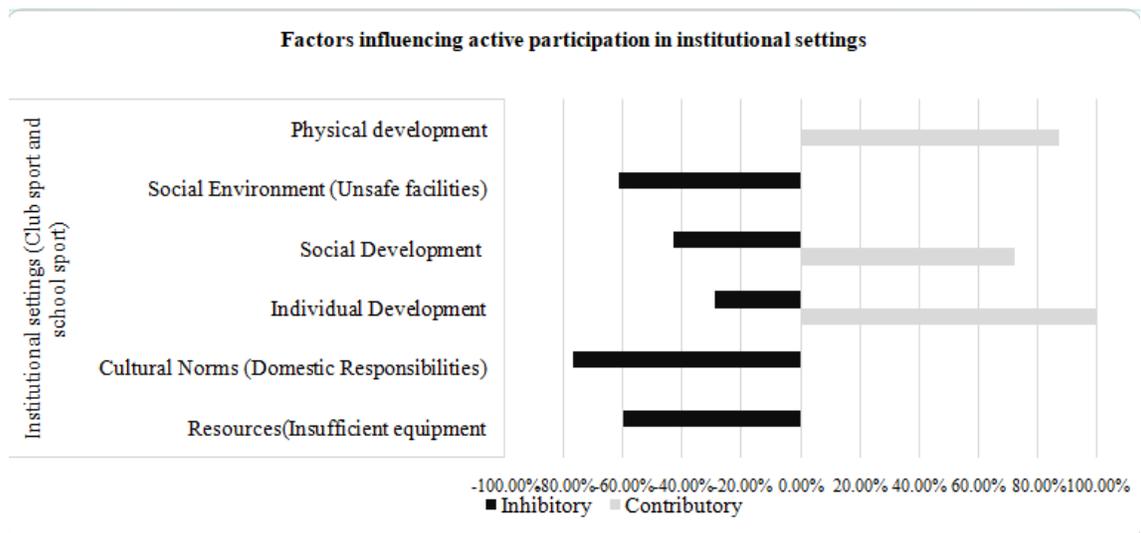


Fig. III. Factors influencing active participation in institutional settings

Figure 3 consists of several themes that have been grouped into a mini-index to depict key themes that feature as factors influencing formal active participation. Cultural norms or ideology is an overarching influence as it finds expression in the gender division of domestic responsibilities, the availability of free time and negotiating safety issues within in the environment. In disadvantaged communities, parents allocate more and different work to girls within the private space of the home than their male siblings who enjoy more freedom to access public spaces where sports are practiced (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). A high percentage of respondents, (76,9%) indicated that they have domestic responsibilities at home that inhibits their participation. Of these respondents, more girl respondents (50%) reported that they have domestic responsibilities at home in comparison to less than a quarter of boys (21.9%). The two themes grouped for social development relates to perceptions of relative inclusion and social acceptance (Struthers, 2011). Feeling excluded is a factor contributes to high levels of non-participation at the school or sports clubs. The social environment pertains to unsafe facilities and transport arrangements that inhibiting participation (Lee & Thomas, 2010). As earlier mentioned, infrastructure and the lack of quantity and the poor quality of equipment are deterrent factors (Meyer, 2017). Another emotive factor is expressed as by the sentiment of ‘not being good enough’ that inhibit competitive sport participation. Social recognition and development of sporting talent is highly regarded by adolescents during their developmental years. In the context of this study, physical development refers to one’s overall health and fitness.

Future perspectives

Adolescent learners who participate in either sport at school (84.3%) and club sport (86.2%) indicated the intention to continue with active formal participation once they leave school. This aspiration may or may not play out in real life, but it demonstrates a positive orientation towards future institutional membership and active engagement sport and/or PA.

Discussion

It is evident that from the data presented in Figures 1-3, that there are several, unique factors that influence adolescent learners' active participation in institutional PA and sport. Based on the biographical data obtained in this study (Figure 1), adolescents perceive their household's financial status as poor or average and are living in a context of poverty. Households struggling to survive socio-economically have concerning levels of unemployment and poverty that directly affect people who reside in the communities as they do not have the financial means to afford paid-access for PA services or necessarily the means to pay for transport to reach a PA facility (McHunu & Le Roux, 2009; Scheba & Turok, 2020). Adolescents whose parents are poor, only take part in sport at school rather than in the community as sport at school is free and less time-consuming. School children are dependent on public transport at school and this inhibits them from being able to participate in club sport after school. Poverty is a complex concept deeply embedded in the social environment with multiple manifestations related to access to resources and influenced by personal and socio-political dimensions (Meyer, 2017). Although there is a drive to facilitate institutional sport for mass participation, opportunities for participation are still relatively limited as the institutional settings are competitive clubs that are soccer dominant and cater primarily for males. This finding is supported by recent studies (Burnett, 2020).

In South African communities, many sport facilities are dilapidated, of a poor standard and not maintained at all (Burnett, 2020). 60% of the learners reported that insufficient equipment at their respective institutional settings inhibits their participation. Impoverished communities have limited financial means that restrict them being able to purchase additional equipment. As a result of the social environment, equipment is of poor quality and does not last, is vandalised, or is stolen and not replaced (Burnett, 2020).

Social environments in impoverished communities are notorious for being unsafe (Lee & Thomas, 2010). Facilities being unsafe are linked to poor service provision, limited public amenities such as shops, health care and a lack of infrastructure such as street lights or running water directly to homes which are related to poverty. Many public spaces have become the gathering place for youth to engage in anti-social behaviour similar to the phenomenon of street corner gangs (De Wet et al., 2018). More than half of the adolescent learners (61.7%) reported that the facilities where they participate in institutional PA and sport are unsafe and presents an additional risk for bodily harm inclusive of sport injuries. Individuals reporting on unsafe facilities also reflect on falling victim to criminal activity (such as assault) either at their facility or (Koraan & Geduld, 2015; Shields et al., 2008). Participation in institutional sport is double bound and the concept of poverty is layered that negatively influences households and the public as there are poor facilities and poor service provision (such as poor maintenance and management of facilities). The competitive nature of club sport results in there being more competitive teams which create additional challenges for individuals who do not participate or enjoy competitive sport. The findings indicate similar overall percentages (62.4% and 63.4%) for adolescent learners who participate in institutional sport at school and institutional PA and sport at a club setting. Gender differential activity profiles emerged as more boys (69.9% school sport and 75.3% club sport) participate at both school sport and club sport in comparison to girls (55.3% school sport and 50% club sport). The context of impoverished communities leans towards a male bias that is suggested by the types of sporting opportunities that are facilitated. In South Africa, soccer is the most popular sport. This popularity is transparent as soccer is predominantly facilitated across institutional settings in impoverished communities as it is a popular team sport where more boys participate in comparison to girls. Individuals learn how their bodies and behaviours fit with existing cultural norms through interaction and socialisation (Lloyd & Gaither, 2018). In poor communities, girls face multiple challenges despite being taught about their right to equal access to sport participation (Burnett, 2018b). Gender inequalities and lack of equal opportunity are prevalent for girls from a young age in poor communities (Kahts et al., 2017). Girls have domestic responsibilities at home to attend to and do not have free time to participate (Vambe & Saurombe, 2019). In support of this argument, mother figures tend to instil gendered roles onto their daughters, such as domestic responsibilities and an ethic of care (Walter & du Rosa, 2011).

Figure 3 illustrates the attitudes that adolescent learners have regarding the institutional PA and sport that they participate in at school and in their club settings. The results in figure 3 outline that just over one third (38.7%) of learners who participate in sport at school actually have fun whereas 38.1% of learners reported that school sport is boring. This supports the notion that suggests that adolescent learners do not enjoy institutional sport at school. In contrast, 83.3% of learners who participate in institutional PA and sport in club settings reported that they have fun at their clubs. Nearly half (46.2%) of the learners reported that they find club sport boring. Being involved and participating in institutional sport extends beyond the activity itself and instead is encapsulated by social dynamics and involvement in popular youth culture.

The level of enjoyment, personal satisfaction and fulfilment of social needs and aspirations are determining factors for participation. The attitudes reported by adolescent learners in impoverished communities is alarming as these are imperative years for individuals to develop habitual behaviours that may influence future or continued active participation. If adolescents are not socialised into PA and sport activities that are fun and enjoyable, adolescents will seek other activities that they enjoy which may lead to them engaging in anti-social behaviours (De Wet et al., 2018).

Individual development mostly relates to positive learned behaviour transferred into everyday living and improved self-efficacy for participants. However, nearly one third (29.1%) of adolescent learners reported that they are 'not good enough' and do not have the appropriate sport skills to participate. The perceived feeling of not being good enough inhibits active participation. Whereas on the other hand, 85.2% of adolescent learners are driven to participate in institutional sport as learning new (sport) skills is a contributory influence to active participation. Adolescent learners are in the process of trying out new things and identifying if they are talented in various activities in which they participate. Adolescents are at an impressionable age and seek acceptance as they construct their identities related to gender, healthy lifestyles (quality of life) and citizenship within and through formal sport participation and PA.

Active participation in structured PA and sport-related activities creates a platform for experiencing a sense of belonging, feeling included in a team setting, and exploring social cohesion in a community setting (Skinner et al., 2008). Nearly half (42.9%) of the learners reported that they feel excluded at their institutional setting and this feeling inhibits their active participation. Adolescent learners are sensitive to feedback from others and easily internalise feelings of inadequacy. Interestingly, 72% of adolescent learners reported on 'feeling included' in institutional sport where 47.4% of these respondents were girls. 'Feeling part of the group' is a key attractor for female adolescent learners and this contributes to their active participation as they feel included and accepted by their peers. This finding is supported by Coakley (2006) who outlines that adolescents need to feel a sense of belonging when they take part in sport.

The betterment of health is one of the most documented research topics that was associated with participation in PA (Kohrt et al., 2004; Samuelson, 2004; Warburton et al., 2006). During adolescence, individuals who participate in structured PA and sport-related activities have high levels of physical function related to their age (Tomás et al., 2017). A high percentage (87%) of adolescent learners reported that they participate in institutional PA and sport as it contributes to their health and fitness. The benefits of PA and sport-related activities in relation to one's physical development is well documented in literature (Hunter et al., 2018; Tomar Scholar et al., 2018; Yi et al., 2020). The findings of this study report this as adolescents perceive active participation in PA and sport as being a highly contributory factor to their overall well-being.

Research shows that during adolescence, children create the blueprints for their lives through their habits and through activities to which they are exposed (Nurmi, 2013). However, literature tends to focus primarily on childhood and early adolescent but neglects how these experiences pave habitual behaviours as one ages across the lifespan. Future perspectives are depicted by the intention of adolescents wanting to continue with habitual active participation and institutional membership which forms the cornerstone of projected life-long participation in institutional membership.

Conclusion

Although there is a global emphasis on 'taking care of health, ensuring proper levels of physical fitness and general well-being is now integral to a balanced lifestyle' addressing these factors in a context of poverty need practical policy implementation relevant to the context of the environment (Topolewski & Topolewska, 2020, p. 2937). Research shows that 'low PA and PE class participation may largely be a function of the lack of motivation for exercise amongst inactive children and adolescents' (Kuśnierz et al., 2020, p. 575), however this study presents several direct and indirect factors that inhibit active participation in institutional settings in impoverished communities. Childhood and early adolescent are prime years to expose and socialise individuals into healthy living behaviours that can set the tone for life-long active participation.

Based on the results of this study, it is evident that there is a dire need for local stakeholders (e.g. schools, community clubs, local governing bodies) and civic society agents (e.g. NGOs, NPOs) to have a contextual understanding of what factors influence active participation in institutional PA and sport. Literature outlines that individuals living in impoverished communities tend to be overlooked pertaining to PA and sport policy (Yi et al., 2020). This notion of individuals from marginalised communities being overlooked is supported by global policies that provide recommendations and guidelines that cannot be implemented with a 'one size fits all' approach. There is a need for school sport to be linked to community clubs. In school, PE can be sport focused and authentic sport experiences such as intra- and inter-school challenges and afford participation during breaks or before school. In turn, making participation inclusive and accessibility for all school going learners.

The findings of this study suggest that institutional settings need to facilitate a variety of sports and PA in order to provide opportunities for girls and boys who do not enjoy soccer. Additional activities will translate into individuals being able to learn new (sport) skills, feel included and have fun. Institutional sport and PA needs to be programmed with objectives in order to keep adolescent learners engaged and committed to the activities. In impoverished communities, certain factors such as limited resources and unsafe facilities are greater than the institutional setting itself. However, sports clubs and schools in conjunction with stakeholders and civic society agents can develop strategies with local community members to safeguard the institutional settings. Sports clubs and schools can develop the platform for early socialisation into institutional PA and sport by addressing the factors that influence active participation and adapting their facilitation to address the factors that they can in order to promote life-long active participation.

Local stakeholders and civic society agents who facilitate sport and recreation need to align their strategies and programme objectives in accordance with the lived realities and experiences of individuals residing in impoverished communities. There is a need for a collaboration between stakeholders, civic society agents and institutional settings to develop meaningful policies and strategies for meeting the needs of adolescents from impoverished communities. Institutional settings need to facilitate the provision of PA and sport in safe environments that allows adolescents to enjoy ‘living in the moment’, to have time out from the stressor evident of a life of survival, escape from their reality and serve as a coping mechanism for individuals in everyday living. As individuals age, friends become the most important significant other which may translate into enduring friendships. Adolescents have an intense need to socialise, enjoy shared experiences and explore new activities with their friends and team mates. Programmes need to facilitate institutional sport that are developed around social dimensions that allows individuals to act as a group, feel apart of a group whilst still being able to compete amongst friends. Creating safe environments with structured programmes are acceptable with the adolescent parents and can contribute to positively influencing a healthy youth culture.

Institutions that facilitate institutional sport has an institutional culture that intersects with the dominant youth culture and create pockets of safe and exciting spaces within a community. Institutional settings are in a prime position to have a life-long positive influence on creating the environment and facilitating PA and sport that educates and transfers into active life-long participation as individuals age. However, institutional settings need to capture and implement these mechanisms in a meaningful way for the community, the target population (e.g. youth and women) and allow for individual experiences of enjoyment within the protection of the group.

Perhaps it is not the learners that need to be educated in this regard, but the policy developers who have the potential to educate for life through applicable policy development that meets the needs of individuals in impoverished communities?

Conflicts of interest – The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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