

Building Back Sport:

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic affected sport programming by restricting in-person activities. Concurrently, global outcry for racial justice for Black and racialized communities promoted calls-to-action to assess equitable practices in sport, including Sport for Development (SfD). This study critically examined SfD 'return to play' programming to include perspectives from racialized persons' lived experiences. We present findings based on data collected from MLSE Foundation's Change the Game (CtG) research, which explored questions of sport inequity to 'build back better'. Outcomes further SfD discourses challenging (potentially) harmful structures affecting participants, including under reported effects of racialization. The study used a mixed-method methodology with quantitative analysis of survey data, and thematic analysis of personal experience within an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and decolonial conceptual framework.

Keywords: Sport for Development, Sport, Racism, Discrimination, Decolonialization, COVID-19

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“Building Back Better”: Seeking an Equitable Return to Sport-for-Development in the Wake of COVID-19

Introduction

The global reemergence from COVID-19 pandemic restrictions focused attention on the structures and systems that were affected by the long-term shutdown of social arrangements, including sport. Critical examination of current practices in many spheres – sociocultural, medical, economic, and political – revealed an inequitable distribution of resources, services, and safety protocols around conditions formed by the extended shutdown. In Canada, returning from COVID-19 restrictions also afforded sport organizations notable opportunities to re-assess their operations and programming in order to gauge progress towards more sustainable and viable outcomes and best practices for re-engaging the public. This, in turn, forced sport organizations to examine what a ‘return to play’ would mean or look like, and in some cases to question the benefits of a return to normal at all, particularly since the structures of normalcy often perpetuate forms of disenfranchisement, especially for racialized communities. Thus, ‘normal,’ at least in the context of return-to-play, is arguably a hegemonic structure that masks and reinforces hierarchies in sport rather than challenging them.

This contestability of ‘returning to normal’ has been especially significant in the field of sport-for-development (SfD), where sport is often positioned as fundamentally beneficial and offering inherently positive benefits, like physical and mental health, social bonding, skills development, inclusion and belonging, and youth engagement (Darnell, 2012). As Hartmann & Kwauk (2011) have noted, such narratives (over)emphasizing its positive benefits serve to reify ‘sport as good,’ and “many sport based development initiatives and proposals have extremely idealized beliefs about sport’s positive, prosocial force” (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011, p. 289). Thus, while sport offers a positive construct to engage participants towards development goals and enhance their overall wellbeing, critical SfD scholars have also drawn attention to the potentially adverse results from sport that tend to be overlooked in the SfD paradigm (Darnell, 2007; Nicholls et al., 2011). Considering this, it has become increasingly important to ask whether participants in SfD programs desire a return to normal sport at all post-pandemic, particularly if it means returning to sporting practices that reproduce systems of inequity for racialized and marginalized persons, and operate as sites for emotional trauma and discrimination (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Joseph et al., 2012).

Against this backdrop, and in order to understand how conditions related to pandemic restrictions might affect ‘return to play’ in practice, Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment Launchpad (hereafter ‘MLSE LaunchPad’)¹ led research to envision changes to SfD delivery in the post-COVID landscape. As such, the purpose of the research reported in this paper was to “examine the impacts of the pandemic on youth sport” and to assess sport access, engagement, and equity with an eye towards improved and more inclusive SfD provision. The research team conducted a survey across the Province of Ontario, based on a robust sample specifically designed to be diverse along intersecting axes of race, gender, age, geography, income, and disability status, and to examine barriers and tensions of returning to participation

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in sport. The overarching goal was to consider “what building sport back better means to youth and their parents/guardians” and to understand the impacts of racism and other forms of discrimination on youth’s ability to maximize the development outcomes of sport, particularly experiences of wellbeing, belonging, and continued participation. Notably, the study also sought to understand such issues from the perspectives of those participating in sport and SfD, as well as those who identify as not belonging within an organized sport setting.

Overall, the results from the study reported here show that racialized youth disproportionately experienced disconnection, marginalization and exclusion in and from sport and SfD during the pandemic as compared to white youth. Therefore, as COVID-19 restrictions lessened, some racialized youth felt a stronger need to re-build sport in more inclusive and equitable ways. These results clearly connect to long-standing forms of racism, trauma, and issues of accessibility which disproportionately impact racialized people and communities (Agyemang & Singer, 2014; Ahmed, 2012; Carrington, 2013) and that were exacerbated by the pandemic. We suggest, therefore, that the post-pandemic context offers a chance to address (finally) the long standing inequalities and hierarchies in sport, and to re-position SfD in a way that it might more effectively realize social development goals of equity, inclusion and anti-racism. In this way, the paper contributes to the burgeoning but still largely under-examined concerns about race and racism within SfD scholarship (Darnell, 2007, 2014; Lucas et al., 2021) through an examination of the lived SfD experiences of racialized persons. The findings, in turn, speak to the need for an intentional and sustained anti-racist praxis in SfD.

The remainder of the paper proceeds in five main parts. In the next section, we provide a brief overview of recent SfD scholarship in order to illustrate the importance of and need for anti-racist research. This is followed by a description of the theoretical framing employed, and the methods of the larger research study from which this paper was drawn. The findings are then presented, before a Discussion/Conclusion is presented.

Trends and Gaps in Sport-for-Development Research

SfD research has flourished in recent years, across a number of sub-disciplines within sports studies. While a full review of the current state of the SfD research literature is beyond the scope of this paper, some notable trends (and gaps) are evident. First, and rather logically, there has been a focus, or even preoccupation, within SfD research about whether sport is effective or not in meeting the development goals set out by SfD. This has led to research (both exploratory and critical) focused on issues of Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E), program theories and theories of change, and attempts to document the development outcomes and changes experienced at the individual and/or community level as a result of SfD programs or interventions (see Lyras and Welty-Peachey, 2011; Coalter, 2010; 2013, Langer, 2015). Overall, the results of this research have been largely equivocal, with most SfD scholars concluding some version of the idea that sport can make a positive contribution to meeting development goals for some participants under some conditions (Coakley, 2011, Coalter, 2015).

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Second, there has been a trend towards understanding SfD within its historical and political context, particularly the different understandings of development to which sport has been connected, and ways in which advocates and reformers alike have looked to sport to make a positive social contribution (Hasselgard and Straume, 2015; Darnell, Field and Kidd, 2019). This research literature has shown that SfD is not politically neutral but often constructed and implemented within a particular socio-political vision of what development and change should look like. For example, the increasing organization and mobilization of sport for health and HIV/AIDS awareness in the 1990s was driven by broader political and economic forces that sought softer, behavioural-type responses to health promotion (Darnell, Field and Kidd, 2019). In this way, the organization of SfD is itself always illustrative of a particular politics of development. Third, scholars have sought to understand how the SfD field or sector is organized in practice, as a burgeoning profession (Shin et al, 2020; McSweeney et al, 2021), as a series of intersecting 'facts,' (Webb and Richelieu, 2016) and/or as a loose yet intersecting and shifting amalgam of organizations and stakeholders (Svensson et al, 2020). In this sense, SfD is part of the broader sport sector but characterized in part by its organizational diversity.

For the purposes of this paper, however, we were most concerned with previous SfD literature from the sociology of sport specifically, in which scholars have raised questions about unequal relations of power in SfD and the ways that these tend to confirm intersectional hierarchies. This work has primarily focused on relations and structures of gender (Hayhurst, 2016), whiteness (Darnell, 2007), settler colonialism (Arellano and Downey, 2019), and the construction of the preferred subject of SfD interventions (Darnell, 2014). What is arguably still under-examined in SfD, however, are the constructed identity(ies) (see Ahmed, 1998; Butler, 2006; Jackson, 2012) of racialized SfD participants' and the implications of their experiences for SfD programming. Indeed, the study of race as a lived experience is crucial for understanding the role of sport for SfD participants, but requires placing race and racism into context:

Understanding how race is lived necessitates an interrogation of race not as a biological fact or an essential component of identity, but rather as a historically constituted and culturally dependent social practice, one that is complicated, in this case, by the particularities of the development context, including global politics, economics and the history of colonialism. (Darnell, 2007, p. 561)

Thus, the data presented in this paper afforded us an opportunity to reflect on the lived experiences of racialized SfD participants and connect these findings to understandings and recommendations about how to 'build back better' post-pandemic.

Theoretical Framing

Anti-racism, Decolonialization, and Sport for Development

The theoretical framing of this project was informed by the historic events regarding racial understandings and social activism. Black Lives Matter protests and public outcry for racial justice as a direct result of the murder of George Floyd by police in May 2020, and historical, systemic racism and inequity gained global attention. Sport emerged as a forum to engage the public and mobilize support for racial equity and social justice on a global scale.

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Sport professionals, led by players in the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), demonstrated defiance to voice critical perspectives and drew attention to systemic racism (Evans et al., 2020; Tannenwald, 2021). Their actions mobilized others (i.e., players from the NBA, MLS, WNSL) to join a movement to raise awareness of traumas emanating from a history of racial abuse, violence, and discrimination within Black communities, and more subtle affectations of racial hierarchies (i.e., colourism, microaggressions, unconscious biases). Such conditions dictated a need to explore new critical framings to address present conditions of oppression charged through racial classification and gender.

Anti-racism, as a modality of action, grounded by theoretical underpinnings from Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, 2012), requires extensible action directed to emancipate those most affected by systems that uphold dominant, colonial, and repressive traditions (Mignolo, 2008; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). As such, sport, as a social arrangement informed within such hegemonic ideologies, requires informed, intentional critique to expose factors which reify structural inadequacies, and facilitate or reinforce systemic inequity leading to racial and other forms of discrimination (Hylton, 2010). A vital tenet of CRT is the use of personal narratives as empirical data or forms of knowledge to counter the rigidity of western scientific standards for research (Carrington, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), which tend to devalue and underrepresent contributions of those Othered in society. Notably, lived experiences offer a depth of understanding which highlights racialization in practice and shows how an overemphasis on sport's positive outcomes complicates addressing the impact of systemic racism and discrimination on opportunities to participate, and a sense of belonging within sport spaces (Carrington, 2010; Nicholls et al., 2011; Razack & Joseph, 2021; Singer, 2005a). Further, notions of race/racism offered by Crenshaw's (1989) work on intersectionality suggests that systems of power appear and intersect through individual lived experiences with particular affect depending on how identities manifest. Intersectionality provides an often-overlooked critique of how lives of those deemed marginalized must be examined through multiple perspectives, not simply to show complexity of identity, but to indicate modes of oppression only made evident in combination.

In addition, marginalization of racialized persons must be contextualized within the historiography of colonial practices within settler colonial states as it dictates notions of race within a national construct (Mignolo, 2002; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Theoretical scholarship emphasizing racial categorization, colonialism, and white supremacy benefit from specific historiographical expressions that contextualize how anti-Blackness is reified in varied cultural instances (Taylor, 2016). Reframing racial complexities within historiographical alignment attends to the general exclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized groups in narratives of Canadian society, including sport (Grande, 2004; Paraschak, 1989; Taylor, 2016). Moreover, equity often inhabits a "point-in-time" context, moving forward from the present state (Cooper, 2016; Shaw & Frisby, 2006; Singer, 2005b), thus, denying historical context vital in dismantling discriminatory structures. SfD scholarship has been critical of how race has been presented as a central premise, upholding notions of the 'white saviour' (Forde, 2015) and extending colonial projects and legacies (Darnell, 2007, 2014; Harris & Adams, 2016), and privileging empirical, quantifiable evidence that centres Western traditions of knowledge creation (Nicholls et al.,

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2011). Expanding notions of race applied to SfD to include deep learnings from the lived experiences of racialized individuals within sport contexts is required. As such, the theoretical framing for this study – anti-racist, decolonial, and critical SfD – offers a perspective to decipher systemic barriers experienced by racialized persons, and contextualize in relation to dominant culture, and its histories, and contention of a return of sport from COVID restrictions.

Methods

The insights from this paper were developed from a larger project led by the MLSE Foundation and undertaken to understand the current state of sport and SfD offerings in Ontario, Canada in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through its Change the Game campaign, MLSE Foundation set out to raise and invest over \$30 million in order to identify opportunities to address the systemic barriers that prevent youth from recognizing and reaching their potential through sport. Included in this was a broad commitment to sharing data and advancing SfD research aimed at understanding intersectional barriers and best practices for supporting priority populations to thrive – including Black, Indigenous and racialized youth, girls and young women, youth from low income households, and youth with disabilities. The study used survey data from MLSE Foundation’s Change the Game (CtG) research project to gain a better understanding of how Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) individuals imagine sport, with attention to the extent to which those sports exhibit anti-racist elements and whether/how these sport systems are inclusive. Beyond assessing the demographics, geography, and context for ‘return to play,’ this project looked at equity in Canadian sport along several axes of identity and their intersections, including gender, age, class, and geographic location. The survey was completed by either youth (defined broadly as those aged 6-29) or the parents of youth in Ontario, with the goal of better understanding return to sport factors, enablers, and barriers through three thematic lenses: access, engagement, and equity, including a sub-focus on race. The project was also evaluated for ethical practices by the Community Research Ethics Board.

The survey sampled responses from 6987 youth and parents. Of the original sample set, the study selected 5752 candidates that provided additional demographic data to allow for deeper analysis related to race, gender, and other subjectivities. The demographic breakdown of our survey sample is found below with consideration of Ontario averages for the same demographic characteristics as total population average, not youth specific (Census of Canada, 2016). Each racial category was well represented in the sample relative to Ontario averages. The intentional inclusion of race-based data captured as part of the CtG project led to the racially diverse sample. From the analysis, impacts on the provision of sport were identified and encouraged recommendations for improving provincial and national sport systems. The research contributes to an identified deficiency in publicly available race-based data for sport (Grant & Balkissoon, 2019).

(Table 1 here)

Organization and analysis of the data was done by the second author. Questions with ordered response data (e.g. “how often do you play sports?”, with answers “less than once a

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week”, “once a week” and “more than once a week”) were transformed into ordinal quantitative data, while questions where respondents could answer with more than one option (e.g. “where do you play sports?” with several different options and an “other” option) were transformed into individual dummy variables, where each response option was coded as 1 if the respondent listed this option and 0 if they did not. This data was analyzed quantitatively with R, using Pearson correlation and logistic regression analyses to assess whether certain demographic characteristics or responses to questions predicted other responses. For example, logistic regression was used to assess whether respondent sense of belonging was statistically correlated with any demographic characteristics (or combination of characteristics) or with a respondent’s level of sport participation. This quantitative data was also organized to provide the simple count, percentage, and summary statistics data found below. Responses to open ended questions were left as textual data, and were qualitatively analyzed by authors with quantitative specialities, as well as by a team of qualitative coders hired by MLSE. Responses were then analyzed by the same group using MAXQDA software to determine key themes. To identify themes, the coders looked for recurrences in responses, experiences, and in the language and emotions used to describe respondent experiences (Rathus et al., 2019; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Findings

The main finding from the overall study was a desire amongst participants to simply return to sport, which either avoided mention of how to improve sport systems or explicitly stated that nothing needed to be changed. In questions regarding how sports could be built back better or about barriers to sport, some stated that only COVID and government restrictions were a barrier, and the way to ‘build back better’ was simply to let youth play again. However, responses by youth that identified as racialized highlighted issues of racism and inequities in sport systems. Their experiences indicate various ways that sport delivery systems can be built back in a more anti-racist and inclusive way, and thus assessing characteristics from the qualitative responses was crucial to add depth and understanding to what the quantitative measures were indicating. Respondents that identified as racialized discussed issues regarding access, racism, discrimination and exclusion, and the need for more inclusive sport systems and communities.

Sport Participation and Access

One of the most prevalent considerations for return-to-play concerned access to sport. To build more inclusive and anti-racist sport, the research indicated a vital requirement for racialized youth to have increased access to sport in the first place. While nearly 80% of youth in the sample participated in sports in the last two years, these results were highly stratified by income level. Only 57.7% of low-income respondents participated in sports over this period, compared to 86.9% of high-income respondents.

(Figure 1 here)

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While race was not directly correlated with income, racialized youth respondents were more likely to be from low- and middle-income households compared to White youth. Further, in controlling for other demographic factors (including income), South Asian and Southeast Asian youth were also less likely to have participated in the last two years.

Responses from racialized youth also indicated that the cost of sport is often prohibitive. Racialized youth were 13.6% more likely to list cost as a major barrier to sport access and were more likely to list transportation as crucial for their participation compared to white youth. As one 20-year-old Indigenous woman explained, “cost and transportation are the main barriers for me, before and during COVID”. A mixed race respondent from Windsor-Sarnia echoed this point, explaining that sports “cost a lot of money” and often she had “no ride” to get there. Controlling for all demographic factors, including income, Black, South Asian, and Southeast Asian youth were more likely to list cost as an important sport participation factor.

(Figure 2 here)

(Figure 3 here)

It was clear that racialized youth were more affected by barriers such as cost and transportation. As such, the remedies to address inequities within sport must attend to such barriers to offer a fair starting point for the delivery of sport. Moreover, the inability of racialized and lower-income youth to access sport further exacerbates existing gaps related to tangible and intangible benefits of sport.

Lack of access was relevant to financial capabilities but also geographical barriers. Transportation issues, including cost, were especially acute for those living in rural communities. As one 18-year-old White female from Muskoka-Kawartha explained:

I see a lack of opportunity for rural communities to offer sports as a recreational activity. Transportation is also an issue for locational reasons, both being a setback or determining whether I can afford to include sports into my daily routine [gas money].

Issues of remoteness often point to lack of accessibility for sport, and thus, considerations for the ability to participate in activities. This point was also made by an 18-year-old Indigenous woman living in a rural community in the Northwest of the province, who explained that her biggest barrier is “having to leave my community to play in tournaments and that's usually costly if taking a whole team as I'm in a fly-in community way up north”. As such, remoteness requires specific measures to ensure youth have opportunities to participate. Further, for Indigenous communities, remoteness requires equitable solutions to counter these conditions but also to address lack of infrastructure to accommodate sport. Thus, addressing issues of participation cannot solely be attributed to desire or motivation and requires troubling of a generally urban-centric understanding of access to offer sustainable opportunities in communities that are historically underserved. As distances and remoteness increase, transportation and infrastructure are increasingly essential to sport delivery.

Transportation was not solely an issue for rural respondents. While those in urban areas tend to be physically closer to facilities, racialized youth often lack access to transportation,

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including cars or affordable and reliable public transportation, restricting their ability to participate in available programs. The parent of a 9-year-old Black boy from the GTA summarized three crucial factors in their child's ability to participate in sport: "the equipment [is] too expensive, and I have to travel long distances sometimes to play sport with the people I know. Moreover, in my community we lack sport variety". Their response identified a need to offer activities locally in historically marginalized or disenfranchised communities and to expand the types of activities offered. For many, access was linked to lacking local facilities and thus opportunities to participate in sport overall but also the range of sports available. As one parent of a 14-year-old mixed-race boy explained, building sport back better requires "bring[ing] the cost down [and having] better and more community-run facilities and programs." Specific locational challenges limit access, where some lack local opportunities and others require transportation regardless of the facilities present.

Substantial regional differences also emerged in examining responses from Black youth to questions of affordability. There were large disparities in response to affordability factors between Black youth in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and outside of the GTA. 64.7% of Black youth in the GTA listed "affordable sport opportunities" as important to 'build back better,' compared to 47% of Black youth outside of the GTA. These regional differences point to the importance of gathering race-specific data at the regional and municipal level (region to region comparisons not possible due to sample size). The need for local, site-specific, and multiple sport infrastructure illustrated a need for solutions designed for local populations and conditions affecting communities, which also change over time.

(Figure 4 here)

Health and Safety

In light of high rates of COVID-19 illness and hospitalization in racialized communities in Canada (Cheung, 2020; Chung et al., 2020; Jones, 2020) as well as general health gaps between Black and White Canadians (Grant & Balkissoon, 2019), racialized youth and parents focused more on health and safety as key factors in returning to sport. Controlling for gender, immigrant status, region, and income, youth across all racialized groups were more likely to list health and safety compared to white youth. Lower-income youth were also more likely to list this factor. As one 24-year-old East Asian woman explained, building sport back better means that we "make it more accessible and safe for everyone to participate in. Health and safety measures should continue to be maintained". Justified concern for the health and safety of sport, both post-COVID and more generally, could once again become an access issue for racialized youth. The conditions for safe provision of sport have been profoundly altered by by COVID-related restrictions. Such changes affect not only the activities but also the infrastructure and systems to support a safe return to sport. Bringing back sport must attend to specific community and racial conditions that manifested during the COVID-19 lockdown, but also have historical precedence of discrimination and mistrust (Bajaj & Stanford, 2021; El-Mowafi et al., 2021; Nuriddin et al., 2020). Therefore, accounting for COVID-related and other safety concerns must include racial sensitivity and historical mistrust of medical systems to counter existing biases and tension and allow for a safe and more equitable return to play.

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Better Experiences in Sport

A critical finding of the study indicated that although access to sport was vital for participation, the quality of the sport experience was essential in fostering enjoyment and sense of belonging. Questions of racism, discrimination, and exclusion indicated what experiences were important to racialized youth and those marginalized by society. Many respondents discussed their personal experiences of exclusion, racism, and discrimination in current sport systems. While over half of the sample stated that they had not experienced racism or discrimination in sports, there were important discrepancies for racialized respondents. Over 1 in 4 Black youth said they did experience racism or discrimination in sport, and one 16-year-old Black girl from the GTA noted that:

To me, 'bringing sport back better' means to fix the issues some sports and teams have like racism, discrimination, and judgement, and to make everyone feel needed and wanted especially in times like now, when people could be suffering.

Another mixed race South Asian and White woman from the GTA noted that racism is treated as less important than sexism or gender inequality in sport: “[t]here are great initiatives for respecting gender, but not as much for culture/race. There is still racial discrimination in hockey”. Some White youth also mentioned the need to reduce incidents of racism in sport.

Issues of racism and discrimination were found to affect the quality of sport experience. Unsurprisingly, those system barriers and potentially discriminatory conditions existing in the previous state of sport provision were vital to address; otherwise, participants were less motivated to continue to participate. Thus, creating safer space and conditions becomes a foundational aspect of any return to play activities, and simply offering the existing programs and activities within the same framework would be problematic for racialized participants.

(Figure 5 here)

One consideration for the study was to understand the characteristics racism embodied for different participants. Respondents interpreted what constitutes racism in a variety of ways and demonstrated different understandings of what constituted racism as opposed to discrimination. Thus, it is important to consider the nuances of the questions asked and how respondents interpreted them. For example, when comparing experiences of personal discrimination rather than racism, percentages for Indigenous and racialized youth grew slightly. Again, the determination of complex terms like discrimination carries significance. One Indigenous youth from the Kingston-Pembroke area noted that their community center may have been discriminating against certain populations by only allowing athletes in specific sports to use the facilities:

[Building back better] means making sure all sports are important. We have a community center with three arenas in it and a pool and a gym. They are letting swimmers go and hockey players, but they aren't letting basketball players book the gym. I think that is discrimination.

As such, the qualification of discrimination requires further investigation to understand if that quality of discrimination is related to identity construction, qualities identified under human rights code, or other forms of exclusion due to mitigating factors. While it is not possible to know how respondents conceptualize racism and discrimination and the differences between the two, the response prompt regarding discrimination was worded as “I have experienced

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discrimination based on who I am.” This broader definition can account for any mistreatment based on a person’s identity, including religion, culture, sexuality, or life choices. In turn, the discrimination may not be solely directed at an individual but indicate deeper systemic mechanisms that exclude due to a range of factors. As one parent of an East Asian 10-year-old girl commented:

It is time for youth sport to have a good look at systemic sexism and racism. Look at the makeup of the youth teams; most do not represent the local community even when cost is removed from equation.

Issues of exclusion often tend to render sports out of reach for communities ostensibly being served. As competition reaches higher levels, exclusivity becomes greater. Respondents’ comments indicate systemic inequities that cover a broad spectrum, including race, gender, and representation. Incidents of racism or discrimination also were found to be explicit for some of the respondents. A parent of an 11-year-old East Asian youth from the GTA said, “racial slurs were directed to my child by a member of an opposing team during a tournament hockey game.” One South Asian male from the GTA noted that their barrier to sport was “being called racist names”, while another Black and South Asian female from the GTA explained that “because of my mental health challenges people often discriminated against me.” Discriminatory behaviour indicated forms of ingrained culture within sports as the incidents of racism and discrimination were not isolated to direct attacks on racialized individuals but rather indicated a broader invasive condition including language within sport environments. As one 19-year-old White male from the GTA explained, “racist, sexist and homophobic language seems to be common in all dressing rooms.”

One of the critical questions in solving issues of racism and discrimination in sport revolves around the process of reporting incidents. Several youth and parents mentioned that they fear calling out racism or discrimination because of the potential adverse impact on their or their child’s sport experience. As one parent of a 16-year-old Black male youth from the GTA explained, “[i]t is hard to call out racism when it happens, [I’m] afraid it will prevent him from getting ice time. This needs to stop... skills [are] not what gets you on a team, it is who you know and who can offer sponsorship for things on the team.” A parent of a 15-year-old white youth echoed this point, saying that “[i]n a high-level team you have to keep quiet or you could risk losing your spot.” Additionally, challenges in youth comprehension of “discrimination” rather than “racism” may be indicative of the bias introduced from the types of questions asked within the context of an external survey. Indicating racism as mistreatment based on identity may not resonate with a respondent and thus miss an opportunity to hear experiences that may indicate discrimination or racism. Interpretation of what identifies as race is an important characteristic. For some, consideration of race may not be associated with their identity, and as such, they may not report mistreatment as racism. Further investigation of these subtle differences is required to understand how participants understand racism versus discrimination and present a more holistic picture of mistreatment based on identity.

There were also differences in experiences of racism throughout the racial categories. Middle Eastern, South Asian, East Asian, and mixed-race youth were also more likely to experience racism in sports compared to other youth. An East Asian parent in the GTA mentioned that “another parent called me the racial slur ‘chink’.” Some East and Southeast Asian youth also expressed fears of being further singled out due to racist rhetoric regarding COVID-19. As one 18-year-old Southeast Asian and White male youth from the GTA explained:

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I'm half Filipino, so I look Asian and have had comments made to me. I am a little worried about what I might experience when we return to in-person sports thanks to COVID and some referring to it as the China Virus, I might be a target.

Another 20-year-old East Asian youth from Toronto expressed similar fears and believed that they had been cut from their team this season because of their race.

I feel I have been cut from a team because of my race. Coach posted racist things on his Facebook about the Corona Virus, and I am Asian. He cut me from the team and all my teammates did not understand why as they said I was a good player. No one questioned why I was cut and that really hurt me a lot.

The internal indicators that reporting is often frowned upon within sport culture points to a broader systemic issue overall, reflecting challenges at all levels of sport, not just for youth participants. Further exacerbated by the role of competitive streams in sport and fear of being excluded from these streams, racialized people often fear reporting racism or discrimination, being too “visible” or seen as problematic or “difficult” (Brown & Jones, 2013; Deem & Morley, 2006).

Fostering an Inclusive Culture

In terms of other important ways to improve sport experiences for BIPOC youth, Black, South Asian, and Southeast Asian youth were more likely to list “[t]eammates who accept who I am” as an important way to build sports back better.

(Figure 6 here)

Parents responding to the survey were less likely than youth to list “teammates who accept who I am” as an important way to build sports back better. This may point to parents’ focus on factors related to cost, competition, and performance rather than social factors that are important to their children.

BIPOC youth were also much more likely to list “organizations that respect my culture” as an important way to ‘build back better.’ Controlling for all other demographic factors, BIPOC youth were 237% more likely to list this factor.

(Figure 7 here)

The findings from this response prompt once again point to the importance of race and culturally specific research and analysis. Looking only at the full sample, “organizations that respect my culture” would seem to be a comparatively unimportant factor in how to build sports back better (listed by only 18.37% of youth). However, more than 30% of Black (37.6%), Middle Eastern (35.1%), South Asian (34.4%), and Southeast Asian (32.3%) youth listed this factor as important. It is also important to reiterate that BIPOC is not a homogenous community. While having “organizations that respect my culture” may be important for different racial and cultural groups, organizations must understand and acknowledge the various cultures and cultural differences that exist both in Ontario and in their more local contexts.

Respecting the culture of racialized groups participating in sport or with a particular sport organization plays a factor in retaining youth and is vital to ensuring equity in youth sport and

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improving sport experiences for all. To properly respect, acknowledge and create a welcoming environment for different cultural communities, it is imperative that organizations and policymakers do not treat BIPOC youth in a one-size-fits-all way. Black and South Asian youth were more likely to list “coaches that look like me” as an important way to ‘build back better,’ and Black youth were 370% more likely to list this factor compared to White youth. While better coach and leadership representation for BIPOC youth cannot on its own solve access, equity, and inclusion issues, it is fundamental to improving BIPOC youth experiences in sport as well as performance (Bains & Szto, 2020; Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Druckman et al., 2019).

Representation maintains a critical role in the sense of belonging and enjoyment related to sport; as such, the presence of racialized persons throughout the sport landscape is critical in ensuring more positive outcomes, as corroborated by a CBC report finding that of the 400 top staff in Canadian university athletic departments only 10% identified as belonging to a racialized group (Heroux & Strashin, 2020). The lack of representation noted by racialized participants in the study points to a need for more critical analysis and deeper investigation of the link between positive sport experiences and the environment that supports youth activities. As such, the theoretical framing of the analysis becomes vital to understand what the responses indicate for programming. For example, 1 in 3 Black youth and 1 in 5 South Asian youth stated that having “coaches that look like me” was an important factor in their return to sport, as compared with approximately 1 in 8 youth overall, indicating a need to have representative coaching and overall support to build sports back better.

(Figure 8 here)

Backlash Against Social Justice and Anti-Racism

Anti-racism in practice establishes pathways towards equity and facilitates accommodation of racialized perspectives within the provision of service. However, as the goal seeks to disrupt and challenge existing structures, implementation can be met with resistance, especially by those most characterized as dominant in society. Additionally, the narrative of sport as benefit can be identified as belonging to this dominant cultural setting. For many parents and youth respondents, questions of how sport could be improved were unanswered, supporting the overall position that sport does not require change. However, several respondents demonstrated hostility towards questions about racism and discrimination, barriers to sport, and ways to ‘build back better.’ Their responses concerned bringing sport back in any capacity and implied that no other changes needed to be made, or explicitly stated that they thought questions about racism and “inclusion/gender identity nonsense” were misplaced. The following two quotes, from two White men from Toronto, are indicative of these statements:

Sports were always great, there is no systemic racism in sport. I am a white person who plays competitive table tennis, an Asian-dominated sport. Does this mean I experience racism or am not welcome? Of course not, and the same is true for everyone else, regardless of race. The term sports comes from a word originally meaning ‘break’ as in a break from everyday life. A break from work and the stresses of day-to-day life - among those stresses, is politics. So please do NOT attempt to bring politics into sports, because people will stop playing them. As far as I am concerned, ‘bringing sport back better’ means bringing it back. Period.

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It's not about racism/not feeling welcome - stop that inclusion/gender identity nonsense!
If all the kids play together - and I mean all - good, bad, funny looking, black/white or
Greek - even the freckled faced red head - they will all learn to get along fine without the
powers that be thinking they can mandate inclusion and happiness! It's BS!

The challenge for this study was to understand the motivations around how those respondents related to dominant cultures within sport and how they viewed sport as a positive outcome, but also to understand the position in relation to systemic discrimination related to race and inequity throughout society. The views offered by those respondents often tended toward notions of “not seeing colour”, but also a degree of sensitivity or frustration when asked about racism and potential barriers that make sport participation more challenging for racialized communities. The responses reflect sentiments of privilege, demonstrating a lack of awareness attributed to dominant cultural expressions of identity – race, gender, sexuality, class – and as such, an explicit or implicit denial of systemic injustices that omit racism (or other discrimination) as not applicable, and therefore, an unnecessary or misguided focus. Exploring this phenomenon is especially critical for sport contexts with predominantly White participants (i.e., hockey, tennis, swimming), as well as power structures, leadership, and governance.

Another insight was the conflation of the messaging ‘build back better’ with an overall ideology that was more bureaucratic or political. For several, the slogan was met with mistrust or skepticism as to what the outcomes would be for the sports their children were associated with. Respondents mentioned that ‘bringing sport back better’ “sounds like more bureaucracy and propaganda” and is “a bullshit phrase created by government to make us think it would be safer,” “a buzz word phrase brought forward from a liberal agenda,” “political jargon,” “a political statement,” or a “corporate slogan”. One White woman from the London area claimed that asking questions about how to ‘build back better’ “tells me there is a bias in this survey.” Another White male said that “[b]ring sport back better’ was a garbage catchphrase that was just as meaningless and aligned with Trudeau's ‘build back better’ nonsense.” The respondents focused on the opportunities that sport offered coming out of COVID-19 lockdown conditions and expressed beliefs that sport provided environments to uplift youth physically, emotionally, and mentally and was crucial to counter the difficult conditions experienced throughout lockdown. For some, lifting restrictions and getting youth back was the focus, and organizers should be wary of “keeping the social justice warrior morons out of organized and casual sport for kids.” Again, overall political agendas from the federal or provincial governments were linked to what some saw as “government overreach into sport systems.” Even the intent of the study was questioned along similar lines, challenging the need to have surveys related to increasing equity, diversity, and inclusion in sport.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using an inclusive, emancipatory, and anti-racist lens, the preceding analysis taken from the CtG survey identified several gaps relevant to the reintroduction of sport programming in Ontario and other jurisdictions throughout Canada, as well as the implications for reforms to SfD

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post-pandemic. Importantly, the research largely confirmed existing sport scholarship indicating inequalities in access to sport programming based on income, race, gender, and geographic location, and further illustrated by intersections of multiple identities. These inequalities were not simply related to access to programming but also indicated a strong need to investigate the nature of sport provision itself. On the one hand, racialized participants described that their enjoyment of sport experiences was negatively impacted by the sense of discrimination that they experienced at a subjective level. On the other hand, it was also clear through this study that sport was often unavailable within racialized communities or in those communities considered to be marginalized in society. And even when sport programs were available, the experiences were often considered to be lacking and had the potential to further alienate racialized participation. As such, experiences tended to be less enjoyable or served to reduce participants' sense of belonging, or feeling welcome, seen, or safe. This result requires sport practitioners to interrogate how such experiences indicate shortcomings in the way that sport is offered and also indicates a need to critically reexamine foundational assumptions of SfD - most notably, the notion that sport, in and of itself, offers a universal benefit regardless of the application.

In turn, and based on this study, COVID-19 restrictions have clearly been a challenging period for many, and the return to sport is a crucial part of a return to normalcy. The challenge now becomes how to dislodge existing notions of what constitutes 'normal' and to understand better how to return given the structural inequities that exist for racialized and marginalized participants in sport. The results from the study indicate that youth and parents still generally view sport as beneficial, but that sport programming should focus on enjoyment and fun, social bonds, and positive mental health effects. Since these outcomes were not felt equally by all participants, critical reflection on sport activities within the context of 'return to play' offers an opportunity to address inequities towards a more socially-minded, sensitive, and inclusive construct. The responses show sport to be a site for exclusion, racism, and discrimination, and that an approach geared only at 'bringing sport back' the way it always has been done not provide the same benefits for all. Thus, assessing sport delivery and outcomes in historically underserved communities requires deeper thought to address systemic imbalances.

Two main implications emerge from these conclusions. One is the need for public, private and philanthropic funders of SfD programming and practitioner organizations to critically evaluate the extent to which their allocation strategies and community investments into sport and SfD are reaching the youth they intend to impact, and whether the resulting interventions are delivering quality, inclusive experiences. Indeed, the results emerging from the broader Change the Game initiative are already informing how MLSE Foundation engages public policy makers concerning youth in sport, approaches community grant programs, develops trust-based partnerships with racialized constituencies, and invests in inclusive opportunities for Black, Indigenous and racialized youth in programs, education and coaching development. One example is a new relationship initiated between MLSE Foundation and Ontario's Ministry of Addictions and Mental Health – an area of government that has not typically engaged with sport providers. To date, this relationship has focused on sharing research results and exploring collaborative funding solutions in order to support research focused on the role of SfD in the

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equitable recovery of youth mental wellness post-pandemic, and a large-scale knowledge translation event to encourage the broad implementation of best practices for inclusion and psychological safety in youth SfD. This is one example of the partnership approach being taken to recover from COVID-19.

Two is that organizations like MLSE Foundation and LaunchPad need to adapt their programming in response to the systemic racism within youth sport and SfD. Several examples of this are currently being implemented: MLSE LaunchPad is preparing to launch a new basketball program in collaboration with Toronto Community Housing and the University of Toronto that will include skills development, gameplay, life skills content and social and networking opportunities. And drawing on advanced analyses of 2016 census data, the organizations have identified racially diverse, high-need, and low-opportunity neighborhoods for expansion of its existing community hockey programs. A new hockey coach education program for Black and Indigenous youth hockey coaches designed to 'change the face of hockey' has launched, and the pilot cohort will conclude in Spring 2022 with evaluation results to inform future rollout to other equity-seeking communities and other sports (soccer, basketball, and football). All programs described above will be offered free of cost. MLSE Foundation, the Toronto Raptors, and NBA Canada have also partnered with Sheguiandah First Nation in Northern Ontario to refurbish an outdoor basketball court, utilizing a community-engaged process including a youth advisory committee made up of young people from Sheguinandah. In regards to health and safety, MLSE LaunchPad has worked to provide customized vaccination education and resources, including expedited access to vaccine clinics at a trusted location, to youth and families in the facility's highly racialized community. Secondary research is also being undertaken to better understand the impact of provincial vaccine mandates for the sport and recreation sector on SfD participation and engagement among racialized youth. In terms of providing better sport experiences for diverse youth and fostering a more inclusive culture while addressing backlash against anti-racism, MLSE LaunchPad has created a new Sport and Social Justice program initiated by racialized coaching staff. This program for youth aged 11-14 will include sport activities, guest facilitators, discussion, and culturally relevant art components. In addition, Black History Month in February 2022 saw the implementation of a slate of youth-focused, youth-led initiatives by MLSE Foundation and MLSE LaunchPad to celebrate Black identities while highlighting Black youth in leadership roles. The MLSE LaunchPad team is also engaged in planning for a new participatory action research project exploring concepts of radical inclusion in youth sport. The innovations described above were directly informed by reflections emerging from this study on the current state of the youth SfD sector.

Finally, the study also demonstrates the need for SfD practitioners and researchers alike to remain vigilant about racial inequalities and hierarchies within sport, and the need to implement SfD policies and programs that are explicitly anti-racist. Clearly, it is insufficient to expect the simple delivery of sport to lead to racial inclusion; rather SfD stakeholders are charged with the need to deliver sport-based development programs that recognize racial diversity and meet the needs of a range of participants. The results of this study can help inform such programs.

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In sum, we argue that given the results of this study, sport participation, in and of itself, does not ensure positive experiences for all participants, further challenging the popular SfD model in which sport is a foundational construct to equalize services for underserved communities. Thus, SfD ideologies benefit from anti-racist, decolonial framing where historical inequities open consideration beyond present-moment reflections of ensuring access or participation. Rather, systemic barriers for racialized and marginalized communities are incorporated into the assessment of sport programs, and further challenges through intersectionality pointing to other possible forms of inequity that must be addressed to achieve positive sport experiences. The study explored the need to understand lived experiences of racialized participants, but also to elicit responses from dominant cultural groups to better interrogate hegemonic structures that impede equity and diversity outcomes. Challenging such perspectives will impact the success of return to play initiatives as those in positions of power must attend to inherent privilege, whereby structural barriers may be hidden within an overall desire simply to get back to what was considered 'normal.' To bring sport back after COVID-19 restrictions without fulsome consideration of possible discriminatory conditions within sport threatens efforts to move toward greater equity for all participants. To 'build back better,' leveraging the emancipatory potential of SfD must contend with limitations of understandings of racialized and marginalized communities. Incorporating knowledges contained in 'lived experience' gains crucial perspective as to how to design and deliver new, equitable sport provision while addressing historical inequities and ensuring pathways to truly 'build back better.'

Notes

¹ MLSE (Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment) LaunchPad is a SfD facility located on the ground floor of a subsidized housing building owned and operated by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation. All programs and services are offered free of charge. Additional supports to decrease barriers to engagement, such as a shoe-lending program and healthy after-school snacks, are provided. Programs and services are available to youth aged 6-29 years. This relatively broad age range is intended to capture the entire period of transition from childhood to adulthood, from compulsory education through post-secondary completion and/or workforce entry. The neighborhoods MLSE LaunchPad serves have high proportions of subsidized housing and the highest density of homeless shelters in Canada (Dhungana, 2012; James, 2010; Kumbi, 2013), exhibit high rates of poverty, and are home to many low-income families, including over 3000 low-income youth (City of Toronto, 2016c, 2016a, 2016b). Approximately 50% of residents were born outside of Canada, and over 60% are racialized people, with Black and South Asian as the predominant racialized groups (City of Toronto, 2016c, 2016a, 2016b). The area also has serious safety issues with a high rate of criminal activity (Ezeonu, 2008; Kumbi, 2013; Lam, 2021)

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Table 1 – Participant demographics

	Total (percentage)	Ontario percentage
Gender		
Male*	2424 (42.51%)	(48.8%)
Female**	3278 (57.41%)	(51.2%)
Non-binary	8 (0.14%)	
Raceⁱⁱ		
Black	326 (5.66%)	4.70%
East Asian	323 (5.61%)	6.60%
Indigenous	181 (3.14%)	4.00%
Latino	110 (1.91%)	1.50%
Middle Eastern	154 (2.67%)	1.20%
South Asian	325 (5.64%)	8.70%
Southeast Asian	180 (3.12%)	3.40%
White	3423 (59.42%)	70.70%
Mixed Race	488 (8.47%)	
New Canadian Statusⁱⁱⁱ		
Not Born in Canada	1355 (23.61%)	31%
Born in Canada	4380 (76.32%)	69%
Age group^{iv}		
0-9	426 (9.69%)	1,453,445 (30.35%)
10-14	1161 (26.42%)	754,430 (15.76%)
15-19	1304 (29.67%)	811,760 (16.95%)
20-24	729 (16.59%)	894,390 (18.68%)
25-29	775 (17.63%)	874,350 (18.26%)
Parent responses (30+)	1275	
Household income (annual)^v		
Less than 20,000\$	162 (4.98%)	9.30%
20,000\$ - 30,000\$	167 (5.14%)	7.60%
30,000\$ - 45,000\$	174 (5.35%)	11.90%
45,000\$ - 60,000\$	257 (7.90%)	11.40%
60,000\$ - 75,000\$	199 (6.12%)	10.30%
75,000\$ - 90,000\$	343 (10.55%)	9.20%
More than 90,000\$	1950 (59.56%)	40.30%
Ability^{vi}		
No disability	3658 (82.89%)	
Visible disability	84 (1.90%)	
Invisible disability	376 (8.52%)	
Mental health disability	295 (6.68%)	
Who answered?		
Youth	3282 (57.06%)	

Building Back Sport:

Parent	2470 (42.94%)	
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* – Trans men included ** – Trans women included

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- ii Respondents could choose as many options as they wanted, and could write in their own response under the “other” category. When possible, “other” responses were coded into the corresponding race category (eg. “Haitian” coded to “Black”, “Tibetan” coded to “East Asian”). This is why the total survey % when all race codes are summed is equal to more than 100%
- iii It is important to note that when comparing our survey sample to the Ontario average, the averages represent the total population average, rather than the youth specific population average. This is an especially important distinction when looking at this question, as youth are significantly more likely than older populations to have been born in Canada.
- iv Though instructions stated that parents responding to the survey should list the age of the child they were filling it out for, 1275 parents listed their own age, instead of the age of their child. There is also a small possibility that some of the older respondents who listed their age as between 20-24 or 25-29 are actually parents listing their own age.
- v Survey % values represent the percentage of those who answered the household income question, excluding those answered “I don’t know” or “I prefer not to answer”, in order to facilitate comparison with Ontario averages
- vi Respondents could self-identify in one of these categories, and also could write in a disability in the “other” category. “Other” responses were coded as visible, invisible, and mental health disabilities as needed. Mental health disabilities such as anxiety or depression were coded as both mental health and invisible disabilities, while learning disabilities, dyslexia, or ADHD were coded only as invisible disabilities. Due to non-response, adding up the survey % totals does not equal to 100%.