

DEVELOPING SELF-RELIANCE THROUGH SPORT PARTICIPATION: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Sport participation is an essential component of social life for its role in helping children and the youth to develop skills and abilities to function effectively in society. Sustained participation in sport can also aid the development of personal characteristics that would enhance the level of self-reliance among people. Self-reliance is a key characteristic people must develop to attain their life aspirations. This paper presents a review of existing literature to highlight the importance of sport participation in helping children and the youth cultivate personal characteristics necessary for the development of self-reliance. Five sport related databases were searched for studies relevant to the review. Exploration of the extant literature suggests that goal setting, self-confidence, mental toughness and grittiness are peculiar characteristics and behaviours that can be developed, nurtured and deployed through sport participation to enhance self-reliance among young people. It was recommended that children and young people be encouraged to engage in sustained participation in sport in order to develop these characteristics.

Keywords: Self-reliance, sport development, personal characteristics, behaviours

INTRODUCTION

Self-reliance refers to the ability of an individual, a people, a community or even a nation to create a sense of clear and solid self-image, and the deployment of this image in connecting to the immediate environment as well as the wider world. It is built on three pillars, including being responsible, disciplined, and confident (Lowe, 2003; Lowe, 2013). While being responsible is related to the willingness and ability to meet the needs of oneself and those of others, being disciplined relates to the ability to make rational decisions, identify life aspirations and direct efforts towards achieving them, and being confident is about developing a rock solid belief in oneself with high sense of identity and self-esteem (Lowe, 2013). Self-reliance supports the development and deployment of positive self-image to promote one's chances and opportunities to live a fulfilling life. People who are high in these values are able to lead meaningful life through belief in their abilities

to attain life aspirations. Since a society can only be as self-reliant as its people are (Ashley, 2016), it is important that social processes are designed to encourage the development and deployment of self-reliance among the people, and particularly the youth.

Before now, most developed countries like the United States of America, and the United Kingdom built robust social welfare systems that encourage people to rely on government provision for their basic needs including healthcare, social security, housing, education, and welfare. This in turn makes many of their citizens to become less self-reliant as personal responsibilities were reassigned to shadowy sources of resources (Sniderman & Brody, 1977). However, the recent deep in the prices of crude oil coupled with other economic and political turbulences have forced these countries to consider a rethink of the level of inclusiveness of their social welfare programmes. As more and more people depended on the social welfare systems, the capacity of government to cater for the needs of all its dependents was stretched beyond limits. This is further compounded by the influx of migrants to these countries (i.e. the United Kingdom and the United States of America) primarily to benefit from the systems that offer a better life and opportunities generally. Hence, the government of these nations have no better options than to cut supplies and limit the inclusiveness of their welfare programmes (Chu, 2017). Apart from restructuring their welfare systems to cut costs, these world 'super powers' are also reducing the level of assistance given to the rest of the world (Mariam, 2017; Magcamit, 2017; Ikenberry, 2017; MacDonald, 2018;), and especially to developing countries; this is evident in the 'America First' policy of the Donald Trump administration (Gerson & Shah, 2017). Similarly, the British people's vote to leave the European Union (Brexit) in the 2016 referendum is not completely devoid of the drive towards self-reliance, as majority of the Brexit voters who voted against migration were reported to be the economically disadvantaged, (Bowden, 2016; Portes, 2016; Somai and Biedermann, 2016; Los, McCann and Springford, 2017). So, as governments become less supportive, people are forced to look inward in their struggle for survival rather than being dependent on social institutions.

Also, the less developed and developing countries (including Nigeria) have not been unaffected by the current wave of economic and political challenges facing the world. For example, the Nigerian economy reportedly slipped into its worst recession in twenty-nine years towards the third quarter of the year 2016 (Tijani, 2016) due to sharp drops in prices of crude oil in the global markets; the effects of which were further compounded by militant activities in the Niger Delta region. Consequently, governments across levels have been unable to perform the basic functions of governance. With many state governments being unable to pay workers' salaries, there have been high rates of deprivation, hunger, and poverty across communities. These challenges make the need to develop self-reliance among Nigerians more obvious than it has ever been.

Furthermore, Nigerian communities have witnessed a sharp rise in the rate of serious crimes including armed robbery, kidnapping, ritual killings, murders,

and cyber frauds (Agara, Chizea and Osumah, 2016; Nwagboso, 2018; Magnus and Anthony, 2019, Monsurat, 2020). Equally alarming, is the rate at which suicide cases were reported across communities (Aruya, 2017; Ele, 2017; Obarisiagbon, 2018; Fashogbon, Agberotimi, Olaseni and Oladele, 2019; Ebewore, 2020). To stem this tide, it is imperative that the people, especially the youths are encouraged and assisted to take advantage of all available opportunities to develop the senses of self-responsibility, self-discipline and self-confidence so that they are able to cope with hard times without turning to any form of criminality. According to containment theory (Walter, 1971), unethical behaviours occur when controls are weakened to the point of being inefficient to contain motivated behaviours in the presence of unethical opportunity. If adequately developed and deployed, self-reliance can act as an internal control mechanism to prevent young people from venturing into social vices and criminality.

Similarly, the current global outbreak of the novel coronavirus and (covid-19 disease) further strengthens the need to promote self-reliance among people (Bozkurt, Jung, Xiao, Vladimirschi, Schuwer, Egoroy and Rodes, 2020). With the current pandemic, a global economic recession is reportedly inevitable, and consequently, governments across the globe will experience a dip in their finances such that it is foreseeable that more policies would be developed to reduce investment in social welfare schemes and encourage citizens to develop more capacities for self-sustenance (Liem, Wang, Wariyanti, Latkin, and Hall, 2020; Lima, Carvalho, Lima, Nunes, Saraiva, Souza and Neto, 2020). One of such opportunities to develop self-reliance is sport participation. While the argument here is not that governments should not be responsible to their citizens, rather policy makers should exploit all opportunities to drive social processes towards creating high levels of self-reliance among the people.

Sport participation offers children and the youth generally an opportunity to develop self-reliance, because continued participation in sports demands that the participants are able to regulate a number of activities (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005), and make appropriate use of their time and resources over a long period of time (Elumaro, 2016). Accordingly, successful athletes are seen as being among the world's finest examples of self-reliance (Anita, 2014). Developing self-reliance entails setting one's priorities right, denying self of some pleasures that may have no positive contribution to one's aspirations, and being committed to the pursuit of one's desires without being deterred by setbacks or disappointments. Since these requirements are equally relevant to successful participation in sports, sport participation can be used to train people, especially children and the youth in self-reliance. Also, for sport participation to be successful, athletes must believe in themselves that they can make it (Geir, 2009), even when there are doubts coming from their family and significant others about their ability to be successful in sports. This belief is one of the reasons developing athletes take on challenges and overcome them to reach their goals (Macnamara & Collins, 2013). Having developed this attribute through sports, athletes can transfer self-reliance to other areas of life outside sport. For instance, the incumbent Liberian President, George

Weah, was an accomplished footballer who after completing a successful career in sport transferred to national politics. The same is the story of Nigerian Patrick Ekeji who after a career in football, became a seasoned administrator and rose to the position of Director General of the National Sport Commission, Abuja. Further, Segun Odegbami, Felix Owolabi, and Fatimah Yusuf to mention a few, are all examples of people who developed themselves through sports and triumphed after retirement from sport. Therefore, this article is intended to discuss some important personal characteristics and behaviours that are developed through participation in sports which in turn enhance the level of self-reliance among sportspersons.

Scope of the review

The thrust of this review is to provide evidence from extant literature on the opportunities therein in sport participation (sustained sporting activities) for the development of self-reliance among children and youth. Databases searched included SPORTDiscus (11), EBSCO (13), Physical Education Index (15), Articles Plus (10), Ovid (6) and others (8). Search words adopted included self-reliance, self-confidence, sport development, sport motivation, and personal development. Findings from relevant literature as discussed in the following sections included goal setting, self-confidence, mental toughness, and grittiness.

Goal setting

Goals are the objectives, targets or aspirations that a person is trying to accomplish. When goals are put into perspectives and careful plans are made to accomplish them, the individual is more likely than not to achieve at least some if not all of his/her goals (Locke & Latham, 2002; Creed, Wong, and Hood, 2009; Wang, Sproule, McNeil, Martindale and Lee, 2011; Koh and Wang, 2015). Most young people have high aspirations about life; many youths want to become successful in education, career, family, business, politics, and ultimately become self-reliant. These aspirations must be planned for, otherwise, they may result to mere wishful thinking. However, many of these goals are often not fulfilled because of poor or lack of goal setting. Therefore, it is important that young people have the understanding of how to carefully plan for the achievement of their goals at every stage in life. Thus, goals can be set in three timeframes i.e. short-term goals, medium-term goals and long-term goals, of which goal setting becomes a key tool for time management and for maximizing the opportunities that come the way of young people as they grow older (Shilts, Horowitz, & Townsend, 2004). When properly done, goal setting helps people to focus attention on the behaviours or activities that facilitate the achievement of life aspirations; helps to sustain efforts; and to helps keep hope alive in pursuit of one's ambitions (Gagné & Edward, 2005). In addition, goal setting has been reported to boost self-efficacy (Schunk, 1991). Self-efficacy is defined as the mental process that mediates between self-appraisal information and thinking patterns, emotional reactions, motivation, and the behaviour of a person (Feltz, Short, & Sullivan, 2008). Since self-efficacy can help people become self-reliant (Parker, 1998), goal setting and indeed self-

efficacy can be used to promote self-reliance. Participation in sports requires that people, especially the youth, develop the ability to set, pursue and achieve goals from time to time (Weinberg & Weigand, 1993); without goal setting, athletes would not be able to achieve their sporting objectives. Sport men and women deploy goal setting in various aspects of their sporting career such as training and competition plans, conditioning, nutrition, and injury rehabilitation. Therefore, goal setting is an unavoidable behaviour or attribute in sport participation that can be deployed to promote the level of self-reliance both within and outside sport.

Self-confidence

The term 'Self-confidence' is used to reflect the belief in oneself and one's ability cum capacity to successfully carry out certain tasks or accomplish life aspirations. How confident an individual is, constitutes one of the influences on behaviour, thought process and direction, as well as feelings and emotions (e.g. Meyer, 2006), which in turn impact individuals' perceptions about self-worth. Self-confidence gives a positive self-image that allows people to trust in their ability to fulfil life desires, and so, helps people to look inward rather than relying on others (unnecessarily) to accomplish their objectives. Self-confidence has been reported to enhance task performance (Woodman & Hardy, 2001); promote efforts (Smith & Roehrs, 2009); and enhance emotions (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Therefore, self-confidence constitutes an important element of self-reliance, since people who are confident in themselves would trust more on personal efforts than being dependent on others. Self-confidence encourages self-reliance through enrichment of self-esteem, and self-autonomy (Heward, 2009); people who are high in self-confidence have high sense of self-respect, they are enthusiastic and persistent in facing life challenges, and thus, are reported to rely on themselves more, compared to those who are less self-confident (Quick, Joplin, Nelson, Mangelsdorff, & Fieldler, 1996; Spaaij, 2009; Slutzky and Simpkins, 2009; Nwachukwu, Ochuema, 2011; Obi, Victor and Akumjuri, 2012;). In a study of the sources of self-confidence, (Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007) highlighted preparation, previous accomplishment, competitive advantage, experience, trust and self-awareness among major factors of confidence; these factors are common attributes shared by successful sportsmen and women. Athletes use several schemes to develop self-confidence including instructional strategy (Hays et al., 2007); feedback mechanism (Feltz *et al.*, 2008); observational learning (Bandura, 2006); and mental imagery (Weinberg, 2008). Due to the key role of self-confidence in successful participation in sports, sportsmen and women are likely to possess higher levels of self-confidence than the non-sporting population (Golby and Sheard, 2004; Reed and Meggs, 2017). The good news is that once this attribute (i.e. self-confidence) has been developed especially through sports, it becomes innate to athletes and can thereafter be deployed in other life situations outside sports to enhance self-reliance.

Mental toughness

Mental toughness describes the ability of an individual to remain unperturbed even in the face of serious life challenges and adversities. Mentally tough people have an unshakeable faith in themselves and their capacity to control their destiny, hence, they would not easily bow to pressure (Crust & Clough, 2005). Mental toughness, whether it is innate, learned or both, gives people who have it psychosomatic edge that allows them to manage difficult situations better than their less mentally tough counterparts (Jones, 2002). It has been argued further that the mentally tough have a natural disposition to remain consistent, determined, focused, confident, and be in control of their tasks even when events take difficult and or unexpected turns. Thus, mental toughness can be argued to enhance the level of self-reliance in people based on its attributes as highlighted above. Developing a career in sports requires sportsmen and women to continually confront and overcome various challenges (Collins & Macnamara, 2012), some of which may come from personal, environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sources. Therefore, athletes either have the attributes of mental toughness innate in them, or/and develop these attributes through sustained participation in sports in order to get to the top. Thus mental toughness has been particularly associated with sport performance. For instance, being mentally tough is necessary to cope with endurance training and the rigor associated with camping, as well as adherence to nutrition guidance. Also, athletes spend good percentage of their time away from home, family and friends outside sport; mental toughness is required to remain focused in such circumstances. Therefore, participation in sports can be used to develop mental toughness in people, and thereby enhance their level of self-reliance outside sports. Since it is clear that the mentally tough have a positive edge over the less mentally tough individuals in relation to the development and deployment of self-reliance in real life situations, the levels of mental toughness athletes possess is also essential for the development of resilience, ability to persevere, and the other components of grittiness, without which athletic excellence may not be attained.

Grittiness

Grit is a non-cognitive trait that is defined as the perseverance and passion for long-term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Grittiness involves working vivaciously towards the achievement of one's goals and aspirations, sustaining efforts and interests towards set objectives over a long period without being deterred by failure, adversity and other envisaged plateaus (Elumaro, 2016). While a gritty person is motivated to take achievement pursuit as a 'long-distance-race' in which he/she must endure all hardships to get to the finishing line, less gritty individuals are more easily discouraged by disappointments and setbacks to goal achievement. Grittiness is particularly important because without it many people may not have fully utilised their ability to its limits before giving up on a goal. Whereas, high achievers get to the top through sustained efforts and consistently working hard on their goals. When goals are achieved, high achievers

set new ones and continue the cycles until they reach the peak of their careers. The debate on the role of talents or being a genius in life accomplishments, either in science, music, arts or sports will be lacking in depth without considering the impact of grittiness on goal achievement (Duckworth, 2016). People often see high achievers as being talented or being a genius but one only needs to have a conversation with high flyers to discover how long they have consistently worked hard on their goals without giving up before they got to the top in their endeavours. Therefore, grittiness is an attribute that must be encouraged among young men and women in order to stimulate self-reliance in them because people who easily give up on or relent on their goals may never accomplish any of them. Whereas, the determinants of self-reliance include self-belief, confidence and efficacy, these attributes are enhanced by grittiness. Though, some of the initial empirical evidence on grittiness have emerged from among military populations (e.g. Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth, 2016), research in sports (e.g. Martin, Byrd, Watts and Dent, 2015; Elumaro, 2016; Shields, Funk and Bredemeier, 2018) have demonstrated that grittiness plays a key role in sporting achievement by helping to distinguish between high and low achievers in sports. Since successful sportsmen and women are said to demonstrate higher level of grittiness compared to the low sporting achievers or non-sporting population, participation in sports can be used to develop this important attribute in young people, and by implication, promote self-reliance in them.

CONCLUSION

Amidst many other personal characteristics and behaviours that are important to successful participation in sports, which when developed in or through sports can be deployed in other real life situations, this article addressed only four key characteristics of sport participation that can be used to enhance self-reliance. Consequently, it is advised that all stakeholders and institutions involved in the process of human development such as the family, school, community, policy makers and governments at all levels should take advantage of sport participation to develop self-reliance in children and the youth. Children should be introduced to sports as early as possible, and encouraged to sustain their participation in sports, so that as they grow into full fledged adults, these personal characteristics and behaviours like goal setting, self-confidence, mental toughness and grittiness are well entrenched in them.

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