Sport for Indigenous resurgence: Toward a critical settler-colonial reflection

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Abstract
This article examines the field of sport for development (SFD) while considering Indigenous resurgence amidst Canada’s neoliberal settler-colonial landscape. While sharing challenges encountered within their practice, program staff from the Promoting Life-skills in Aboriginal Youth program revealed high levels of constructive self-criticism and reflexivity. There are three emergent themes, the adoption of which appeared essential for transforming the sector in recognition of Indigenous resurgence: growth and pace; Indigenous agency and knowledge; and political engagement. Grounded in settler colonialism and resurgence, this paper also reflects on the field of SFD and what it would mean to decolonize the practice. The article concludes by asking if non-Indigenous scholars can study SFD by subverting the colonial status quo that is also reproduced in this research field.

Keywords
Indigenous, resurgence, settler colonialism, sport for development

Introduction
Working with and for Indigenous peoples of Canada or any other population disposessed by foreign settlers involves a continuous self-critical struggle. In Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada,
Regan (2010) called for Canadians to support “true” reconciliation by engaging in their own process of decolonization via an interrogation of their position as colonizers and by acknowledging their complicity in perpetuating a colonial status quo through what she calls the “benevolent peacemaker myth.” Beyond words of apology, politics of recognition, and programs intended to fix “the Indian problem,” Indigenous scholars have called for a transformative decolonization that starts by confronting a “colonial mentality, moral indifference, and historical ignorance” (Alfred, 2010: x) to foster what Indigenous scholars refer to as Indigenous resurgence (Alfred, 2009; Simpson, 2011). This article examines the possibilities for resurgence stirred by sport and recreation-based programs for Indigenous youth to advance positive social change, well-being, and community engagement (Coakley, 2011).

Since 2003, when the United Nations institutionalized sport within the rhetoric of “international development” (Black, 2009; Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011) as a means to promote health, education, development, and peace, the sport for development (SFD) and peace sector has expanded beyond interventions in the Global South and lower income countries (Welty Peachey et al., 2017), concurrently, related critical research has burgeoned (Darnell, 2014; Henhawk and Norman, 2020). Sport-based initiatives are now also aimed at populations considered “at risk” within the Global North, as witnessed among Canadian Indigenous populations (see Hayhurst and Giles, 2013; Kope and Arellano, 2016).

As the SFD field continues to evolve and encourage more opportunities for reflexivity (Darnell et al., 2016), Giulianotti specifically called for more research among SFD practitioners because, “as reflective social actors, they are able to adapt, modify, and transform their practices and strategies in response to changing circumstances or outside criticisms” (Giulianotti, 2011: 52). Based on challenges encountered within their practice, a series of interviews conducted with the Right to Play (RTP) organization’s Promoting Life-skills for Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) program staff demonstrated high levels of constructive self-criticism and reflexivity. Using the practitioners’ words, and according to their personal perceptions, this article contains a discussion around program goals and challenges when working with sport-based programs for Indigenous youth. The observations and perceptions of past PLAY program employees are examined through theoretical lenses of Indigenous resurgence and settler-colonialism, which include settler self-critique (Tuck and Yang, 2012).

Staff members’ reflections on the structure of the PLAY program – which serves over 85 Indigenous communities in four Canadian provinces – suggest that significant concerns exist regarding the notion that practitioners’ increased self-reflexivity can both improve SFD programs for Indigenous youth and encourage the potential for resurgence within Indigenous communities. These strong, almost evangelical beliefs in the value of SFD initiatives (Welty Peachey et al., 2017), run the risk of reproducing a metaphorical rather than material understanding of the meanings behind their work, particularly when working with Indigenous communities. As Tuck and Yang observe:

There is a long and bumbled history of non-Indigenous peoples making moves to alleviate the impacts of colonization. The too-easy adoption of decolonizing discourse (making decolonization a metaphor) is just one part of that history and it taps into pre-existing tropes that get in the way of more meaningful potential alliances. (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 3)
As settler scholars, we recognize the historical and current marginalization and erasure of Indigenous voices, scholars, and ways of knowing, and acknowledge that our analysis of a primarily settler-based organization does not let ourselves or SFD organizations “off the hook from the hard, unsettling work of decolonization” (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 4). Before analyzing the interviews, settler colonialism and resurgence are discussed, followed by an overview of key critical research on SFD and Indigenous communities. After a summary of the methodology, we present significant challenges and self-reflective discourses emerging from the interviews. Several self-critical challenges were themed within a discussion analyzing issues of program growth and pace, Indigenous agency and knowledge, and political engagement. It is important to note that although this study has influenced PLAY, it is not indicative of any program changes since data collection (2012–2016).

Settler-colonialism and Indigenous resurgence

For several Indigenous scholars, settler-colonialism is the Indigenous postcolonial framework that should be applied to any research with Indigenous peoples (e.g., Tuck and Yang, 2012). Settler-colonialism distinguishes itself from postcolonial theory in that it frames power relations and land disputes as central in Indigenous-versus-settler sovereignty. For Yellowknife Dene scholar Glen Sean Coulthard, settler-colonialism is “a relatively diffuse set of governing relations that operate through a circumscribed mode of recognition that structurally ensures continued access to Indigenous people’s land and resources by producing neocolonial subjectivities that co-opt Indigenous people into becoming instruments of their own dispossession” (Coulthard, 2014: 156). Coulthard further deconstructs the Canadian politics of recognition, by emphasizing the production of “psycho-affective attachments,” such as the 2008 federal apology for residential schools, or the recognition of certain “aboriginal” rights. He suggests these moments are internalized as expressions of Indigenous self-empowerment and self-determination, but ultimately “naturalize” settler-colonial hierarchies and structures. Aboriginality, the settler-imposed “legal” identity, is therefore seen as ingrained in the colonial legal apparatus where predatory capitalism and its systems of extraction (Simpson and Klein, 2013) play a central role in dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their land, resources, and sovereignty (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005). In other words, locating decolonization within the rhetoric of social justice, anti-racism, self-governance, or resistance to oppression are subsumed within a Western, neoliberal rights-based system that has little impact for the core cause. As Tuck and Yang assert:

Decolonization is not converting Indigenous politics to a Western doctrine of liberation; it is not a philanthropic process of helping the “at-risk” and alleviating suffering; it is not a generic term for struggle against oppressive conditions and outcomes. The broad umbrella of social justice may have room underneath for all of these efforts. By contrast, decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 21)

For these authors, Canada and its citizens’ privileges were founded upon and maintain ongoing dispossession through shape-shifting forms of colonial power (Alfred, 2009; Simpson, 2016; Tuck and Yang, 2012).

In parallel with contesting land dispossession, emerging Indigenous political thought calls for processes of active decolonization, with critical individual and collective
“self-recognition” on the part of Indigenous societies, in order to renew and re-engage with Indigenous cultural forms, principles of reciprocity, and respectful coexistence between humans and the land. Simpson argues that de-colonial praxis, or resurgence, refers to:

Reinvesting in our own ways of being; regenerating our intellectual and political traditions; articulating and living our legal traditions; language learning; creating and using our artistic and performance-based traditions. All of this requires us to reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems in the dynamic, fluid, compassionate, respectful context in which they were originally generated. (Simpson, 2011: 17–18)

Advocates of Indigenous resurgence have called for “self-conscious traditionalism,” a movement of cultural revitalization, political emancipation, and sovereignty in which Indigenous people and groups should emerge “from within” (Alfred, 2009). This process “from within” does not imply “separate from”; rather, the aim is to renew relations with non-Indigenous, national, and international organizations, as well as networks of solidarity that are committed to taking shared responsibility for Indigenous resurgence and well-being as defined by the people themselves.

From a non-Indigenous perspective, Regan (2010) claimed that decolonization is about the settlers’ own reflexivity and willingness to interrogate their positions as colonizers. Such reflexivity allows settlers to reconsider the “good intentions” to fix “the Indian problem” narrative by re-centering the colonial status quo as “the settler problem”. Mirroring the Indigenous resurgence movement, Regan offered a pedagogical strategy for decolonization in truth-telling and reconciliation processes. The “turn to reconciliation” (Simpson, 2011), or the “global era of apology” (Regan, 2010), engages Canadians in confronting the truth about their history and the living legacy of colonialism. The institutionalization of reconciliation has to go beyond statements of recognition of and regrets for past experiences. Formal apologies should not equal absolution; rather, they should be grounded in Indigenous Resurgence. From the perspective of “unsettling the settler,” and drawing on Jeferess (2008), Regan reminds us that reconciliation efforts must help to transcend the thinking that keeps non-Indigenous Canadians “trapped in the roles of colonizers, [and] resistance must be understood not only as subversive or oppositional . . . but as transformational in its ability to alter world views, structures, and cultures of power” (Regan, 2010: 215).

To serve resurgence, organizations working with and for Indigenous populations should demonstrate a readiness to engage in a genuine dialogue that will be difficult and uncomfortable, while assuming and recognizing settlers’ “feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege” (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 10). In the context of sport, this means the types of sport often promoted through SFD programs and called for in the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) must advance and serve resurgence (Arellano and Downey, 2019).

SFD and Indigenous communities

While there is an extensive body of literature on the challenges facing SFD programs that is multifaceted, critical, and engages with the process of decolonization (see Darnell and
Hayhurst, 2011; Hayhurst, 2014), there is a relative absence of critical literature in SFD that highlights the centrality of either Indigenous or land-based approaches to sport (e.g., Arellano and Downey, 2019; Henhawk and Norman, 2020). The analysis of settler-sponsored sport and recreation programs for Indigenous populations in Canada has much in common with the critical appraisal of the concept of development and related practices that work within a dominant paradigm of modernization, posited as “universal” and “integrative” (Darnell, 2007). Paraschak (1995) highlighted how Euro-Canadian sports such as hockey, soccer, and baseball, are implemented as “natural” and “legitimate” forms of physical activity that have been utilized as a privileged tool of assimilation. Showing how the 1876 Indian Act was instrumental in the control of Indigenous peoples, Forsyth (2007: 96) noted that sport opportunities were shaped through constantly renewed colonial and oppressive interpretations from policy-makers. Similarly, Giulianotti (2004: 358) observed how imperial games were “utilized particularly by Christian missionaries and other imperial pedagogues to crush Indigenous cultural identities and practices”, while the Canadian state used similar tactics to defund and delegitimize Indigenous games and events, simply for including traditional events alongside Western sports and games (Paraschak, 1995, 1997).

Recognizing, along with Coalter (2013), that more recent SFD programs and initiatives are increasingly replacing previous top-down approaches with more collaborative, bottom-up, and locally sustainable initiatives, Nicholls et al. argued that even today, local voices are being silenced due in part to a lack of genuine co-creation of knowledge in a competitive world where donors set development agendas and priorities that reflect Western convictions (Nicholls et al., 2011; see also Giles and van Luijk, 2018). Essentially, SFD is driven by corporate wants, where partnership-led structures convey unequal power relations dominated by settler-oriented donors, sponsors, and policy-makers (Nicholls et al., 2011). This problem is particularly apparent given the role the extractives industry plays in sponsoring SFD initiatives, an industry with a long and complex history of colonizing Indigenous land (Millington et al., 2019; Van Luijk et al., 2020).

This increasingly complex landscape with multiple competing stakeholders encourages what Giulianotti described as “intersubjective and practical flaws” between practitioners and Indigenous communities where “project workers may have a weak understanding of local conditions or poor engagements with client groups and other non-sport development initiatives” (Giulianotti, 2011: 51). In the same vein, Hayhurst and Giles suggested that the Canadian government’s “domestic transfer objective” of SFD programs to Indigenous communities shows “increasing power and presence of nonstate actors such as transnational corporations and international NGOs [non-governmental organizations]” (Hayhurst and Giles, 2013: 505). They also note this “potential shift in the sport/international development aid nexus” (Hayhurst and Giles, 2013: 506), mainly influenced by the incipient demise of the welfare system and concurrent reinforcement of neoliberalism, may create new opportunities that favor Indigenous self-determination. Similarly, Paraschak and Heine suggest that, “rather than being positioned as the object of sport’s beneficial developmental intervention, Indigenous cultures can . . . insist on cultural strengths that inhere in their own land-based physical activity practices” (Paraschak and Heine, 2020: 180). Such a shift would allow SFD initiatives to avoid the
trap of a development model that reproduces colonial discourses and moves towards adopting the sport-based calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015: 87–91).

Drawing on the work of Coalter (2010), Darnell argued that most SFD programs are not “designed to bring about social changes to inequalities, but rather to re-socialize and recalibrate individual youth and young people into the structures of privilege and dominance by which such inequalities are maintained” (Darnell, 2014: 9). Based on a neoliberal model, such programs focus more on the character development and personal achievement logic of a hyper-competitive world, and they are “discounting social issues and the need for progressive change at a collective or community level” (Coakley, 2011: 308; see also Darnell, 2010; Hayhurst et al., 2016). The lack of satisfactory empirical evidence on SFD claims is said to reinforce and serve neoliberalism, a dominant vision “in which sport essentially reproduces established social relations” (Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011: 284; see also Coakley, 2011). This critique of neoliberalism is supported by Indigenous sport scholars Henhawk and Norman, who argue from an Indigenous perspective, that SFD programming in Indigenous communities, including the PLAY program, can be viewed as an extension of modernity, with a promise of “taming and overcoming the natural world and, in so doing, overcoming the limits of their traditional cultures . . . and even ‘allowing’ Indigenous people to claim the benefits (material spatial and discursive) of full participation in contemporary society. . . .” (Henhawk and Norman, 2020: 170–171). While critics have condemned attempts to challenge and renew traditional development practices with sport, others have pursued a path toward reimagining SFD within the decolonizing narrative, including calls to create a central place for Indigenous voices and knowledge within the field (Henhawk and Norman, 2020).

Darnell argued that, “without a vigilant critical analysis of race, sport-for-development practice can reinforce Whiteness as a dominant subject position based on stewardship and benevolence” (Darnell, 2014: 11; see also Darnell, 2007). However, the substantial expansion of the SFD sector during recent decades has brought about more knowledgeable and self-reflective officials who may transform and help to decolonize the SFD field (Giulianotti, 2011; Lucas and Jeanes, 2019). Practitioners in SFD programs, who largely originate from privileged backgrounds, tend to espouse what Welty Peachey et al. (2017) refer to as an evangelical rhetoric around SFD that ignores the neocolonial implications and processes the programs tend to embody. Kope and Arellano (2016) used the critical youth empowerment model (Jennings et al., 2006) to analyze a life-skills development program for Canadian Indigenous youth. Rather than using a Western framework for local empowerment, Kope and Arellano (2016) insisted on following Indigenous scholars’ calls for resurgence (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2011), a worldview lacking in the majority of SFD research and settler based SFD programs.

Methodology
In critical SFD scholarship, the majority of non-Indigenous authors reviewed are able to name and theorize the field but do little to foster co-created knowledge. Critical research focuses more on SFD organizations and researchers than the communities they claim to serve. Paraphrasing Grimwood et al. (2019), it could be suggested that the way of framing
and defining what is understood as SFD colludes with colonizing ways of knowing and knowledge production. As researchers, how do we subvert these colonial intricacies when we are the beneficiaries? How can we address SFD beyond the reproduction of such contemporary colonial power relations? Very few SFD researchers attempt engagement with Indigenous knowledge, and only a small number engage with Indigenous critical scholarship and settler colonialism. Academic knowledge production in the field of SFD is regulated and produced by disproportionate numbers of researchers that embody Western, settler-colonizer positionalities. In a Western SFD research paradigm, Indigenous knowledge systems are pushed aside – including this paper.

Indeed, the process of conducting this research triggered our own self-critical reflections as settler researchers within a system of knowledge production and a field that shields and protects Western academic privilege, thereby reinforcing the settler status quo rather than challenging it. In addition to focusing on practitioners’ experiences, settler-colonial theory also prompts several considerations regarding SFD, such as a reformulation of research questions, the revision of practices comprising SFD, and the reproduction of the current situation, not only from the perspective of practitioners, but also from the field of academic research.

This study looks at some of the reflective and most critical discourses of PLAY program staff members and highlights several perceived challenges within the program based on “Building Meaningful Sport Programs for Indigenous Youth” (2012–2016) exploring Indigenous youth recreation-based programs through multidisciplinary lenses (Kope and Arellano, 2016; see also Arellano et al., 2018; Halsall and Forneris, 2016, 2018; MacIntosh et al., 2016). Interviews were conducted in 2014. Ten of the twelve PLAY program upper and middle management staff members participated (eight females and two males). The respondents held different positions within RTP, including managers, program officers, and program monitoring and evaluation personnel. One participant was Indigenous and two worked with Indigenous communities prior to working for PLAY. Each participant worked with several Indigenous communities in both Northern and Southern Ontario. Interviews were semi-structured, which allowed the researcher to ask open ended questions and receive “in-depth information that helps us to understand the unique as well as shared circumstances in which they live, and meanings attributed to their experiences” (Piercy, 2004: 1). Each interview lasted between 20 and 180 minutes, and primarily focused on participants’ views of the program’s evolution over time, as well as current perceived successes and challenges. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, which follows Braun et al.’s six-phase process of familiarization, coding, theme development, theme refinement, theme naming, and write-up (Braun et al., 2016). While a more systematic analysis of strengths and challenges was presented in Arellano et al. (2018), this paper cites several participants but concentrates on data from five interviews with more experienced senior PLAY staff members, each having between 1.5 to 3 years’ service with the program, and who shared a high level of critical self-reflection in their responses. These individuals demonstrated constructive reflexivity which enhanced the discussion. The other participants presented neutral, more organization-aligned perspectives, or had less experience in the program and did not address the present research question in their responses. The complete interview data were discussed elsewhere (Arellano et al.,
To ensure participant anonymity, pseudonyms have been used. The small sample size relied on the principle of “validity-as-relevance/advocacy” approach to interpreting and understanding data (Altheide and Johnson, 2013).

**PLAY program**

The PLAY program uses the power of sport and play to educate and empower “Aboriginal” children to become leaders and active participants in their communities (Right to Play, 2015). Each community goes through an annual partnership application process; selected participating communities hire a local community mentor to be trained by RTP. The community commits to pay at least half their salary, provide a safe space for the program, host occasional PLAY staff visits, and support the mentor with adequate resources. The 2018 iteration offered core programs (Youth Leadership, After School, PLAY for Diabetes Prevention, and SFD programs based on soccer, hockey, baseball, and lacrosse) combined with complementary programs (e.g., sport clinics, summer school, and female empowerment workshops). In addition to choosing their program components, all participating communities were invited and funded to take part in several special events such as the biannual community mentor training week, the annual youth symposium, as well as additional training and sport certification clinics.

The PLAY program has shown impressive growth and community reach by multiplying opportunities and building relationships (Arellano et al., 2018). Mentors encourage youth to work together in guiding activities by articulating and asserting their voices, not only in the program’s everyday practices, but through built-in activities encouraging youth to stage events in their communities. PLAY staff perceived capacity-building as well as strengthening mentoring skills, competencies, and abilities to lead youth recreation programming, as major positive outcomes of the program (Arellano et al., 2018). The week-long training programs and community representative gatherings, such as the youth symposium and mentor training, have helped to create strong, meaningful connections between participating communities (Arellano et al., 2018).

**Growth and pace: on partnerships and performance-based programming**

The rapid growth of the PLAY program, which expanded from four communities to 34 after its pilot year, is key to understanding the competitive structure of the SFD sector in Canada. The program is multifaceted and constantly evolving via new partners, funding opportunities, community input, changes in PLAY leadership, and high organizational staff turnover. Three types of partners work within the structure of PLAY: First Nations partners which request RTP programs; funding partners such as government ministries, corporations, and philanthropic foundations or individuals; and implementation partners from a variety of organizations, community groups, and institutions (Porter, 2013). In winter 2016, the PLAY program partnered with over 85 First Nations and urban Indigenous organizations, as well as 53 funding partners and 18 implementing partners, impacting more than 6000 Indigenous children and youth across Canada. In 2018, the Canadian Federal government made a CAN$50 million investment into a five-year plan.
for Indigenous social development programs, which initially included a rapid scaling up of RTP (Giles and van Luijk, 2018).

Donor-funded programs such as PLAY work in partnership with myriad entities endorsing often contradictory objectives and contrasting operational priorities (Beacom and Read, 2011). As one employee put it: “You’re pulled in all directions because we’ve got stakeholders with various different interests . . . with their own reason for being there and their own objectives for what they think the PLAY is all about” (Alexis). Funding partners are crucial for the survival of most programs, but for some of the interviewees, these new partnerships at the center of the 2011 growth compressed the original four-year program into one that focused more on performance criteria and competition for external funding. The following comment illustrates how the growth logic reproduces the status quo of the most disadvantaged communities:

I’m worried that we’re going to do more damage or that it’s not going to be helpful when we’re moving toward the [program] application process, and it’s becoming more and more competitive as we expand if you take, for instance, in regard to the competitiveness the way things are structured. If you show, as a community, that the support is there, if you show that you’re willing to contribute money, if you show that you’re more likely to do things like they want, really show that you have the capacity to host the program, then you’re more likely to get funding – to get it – as opposed to a community that has nothing and doesn’t have the capacity . . . [yet] . . . they are the ones that would really need the program. (Alexis)

Solutions are usually addressed by the organization after listening to staff debriefings. In this instance, a special program was put in place to help the neediest communities to partner with the PLAY program. The program design, management, and implementation are all very efficient, as demonstrated by the constant growth and demand for partnership. Despite the ongoing positive reception of the program, some staff members suggested that the principles guiding the design and main changes to the PLAY program relate to internal, organizational, and financial sustainability. More often than not, this financial emphasis was at the expense of community-owned programs aimed at helping participants regain their Indigenous identities.

The pace of growth, pressure for results from funders and senior administrators, and the complexity of the multifaceted relationships with diverse partners are often perceived as obstacles to meaningful programming and accountability to the communities. As a staff member recalled, “We say that we feed it all back to the community, but it’s actually for the funder . . . so, the drivers are numbers, funders, funding, brand, glory, and the media; the drivers are not community-based or reciprocity” (Jordan). This logic and pressure to satisfy external metrics is seen as a diversion from efforts to create meaningful experiences for participating communities:

I can see that there are many needs within communities, and we have many communities who approach us and want to have programs, you know, which speaks positively to why we might expand. But we need to be true to ourselves as well as to those we’re working with in responding to what it is that we can actually do, what our capacity is, and not just saying yes so that we can increase numbers but making sure that it will actually be a meaningful experience for the participants . . . to me, it wasn’t about ‘let’s do more’, but ‘let’s think about what we’re doing and why we’re doing it’ so that you’re not rushing in. (Riley)
In this respect some respondents considered internal pressure from the hierarchical organization’s senior leadership to be the main proponent of program expansion. This seems a realistic observation, particularly given the program’s 2014 integration into RTP International, which made it more susceptible to centralization and standardization:

I think that the real driving force behind the growth in terms of reach really comes from senior leadership. And it’s just that idea about sport for development being this like universal solve-all and this vastly driven vision of just push through, and I think that’s really where it’s coming from. And especially now that our program is no longer a pilot project but officially part of the Right to Play programs as a whole, and there’s a lot more watchful eyes on our program . . . it truly feels one directional and hierarchical. (Alexis)

The issues raised in relation to growth and rapid expansion through the partnership-led structure and the quest for multiple sources of funding reflect how program operations align with the “global civil society marketplace; NGOs compete to win contracts to carry out development work” (Giulianotti, 2011: 54). Leadership’s drive for quantifiable outcomes appears incompatible with accountability to the communities, the co-creation of knowledge, and respecting Indigenous ways (Nicholls et al., 2011), particularly in a sector where transnational corporations are increasingly present, powerful (Hayhurst and Giles, 2013) and maintain their own agendas. The RTP’s structure affects the developmental pace of the organization, which was described by all respondents as sustaining a “high energy and stress level” (Micha). One respondent saw this as the main challenge of the program:

I think, obviously, the capacity to deliver more always, and that there’s always a lot of excitement about new ideas, and sometimes there’s not always the capacity to deliver a million new ideas. And so, people are stretched to their maximum, and that a lot of the ways that the program has run because the group is who they are and as dedicated, and the community mentors are equally willing to go way above and beyond. Maybe that’s not the most sustainable, going so above and beyond all the time. (Riley)

Fast-paced growth also drives a culture of competitiveness that is inherently incompatible with Indigenous ways. The following observation raises an interesting question: “The communities are generally happy with the program, but there is this overwhelming sensation that community members think these resources should be given to Indigenous organizations in the first place” (Jordan). This comment questions the integrity of a corporatized Indigenous youth-centered program serving 85 communities which has been managed for six years mostly by non-Indigenous people, especially as Indigenous-run organizations such as the Aboriginal Sport Circle are ignored by donors, including the Federal government (Giles and van Luijk, 2018). As Micha reflected:

I think it’s something that Right to Play constantly stumbles through, and looks to elders and the community mentors to help guide us there, and to say how much of this should we be involved in and how much we shouldn’t, and what is the proper protocol in everything that we do, and when we do it wrong, please tell us and we’ll try and do it right the next time as best we can . . . [I]t’s been difficult because there’s the constant balance of wanting to honour all the [Indigenous]
traditions and the culture in the best way possible while simultaneously being a non-aboriginal organization with limited experiences in that area as well as being an international organization that works in different cultures all around the world, and tries to make very neutral resources, and then encourages those that are delivering it to incorporate culture wherever you can.

Grassroots Indigenous programs and organizations have proven highly successful and are culturally appropriate, yet they struggle with funding and generally lack resources (e.g., Alfred, 2014; Simpson and Coulthard, 2014). A reason why Indigenous organizations and youth programs remain underfunded may be understood via SFD’s competitive political economy. The new international legitimacy of SFD, with its utilitarian contribution to human rights and the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goal objectives, underpins increased funding competition (Coalter, 2010). The competition for financial survival, growth, and performance requires resources that are scarce, especially so within Indigenous organizations.

Another reason for the lack of direct funding for grassroots Indigenous programs can be found in unconscious, internalized, and institutional discrimination practices (Darnell, 2007) combined with the “social problems industry” (Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011) that targets “at-risk” youth in need of recalibration (Darnell, 2014). For Simpson and Coulthard (2014), Indigenous land-based models of education and knowledge transmission remain undervalued as legitimate, sustainable forms of programming among predominantly Western, White, settler institutions. Discussing how Indigenous resurgence should be a sharp contrast with capitalism, Simpson advocated confronting this “funding mentality,” because it has been proven to serve the colonial status quo: “Re-centering our work means foregoing the funding . . . in favor of building relationship[s] with our territory and the Keepers of our Knowledge, things we can largely do without the support of capitalism” (Simpson, 2008: 78). Between the need for more resources for Indigenous organizations and the competitive organizational culture and environment lies the need for genuine dialogue and an openness to respect Indigenous knowledge systems and the capabilities of the Indigenous peoples themselves: both vital elements in Indigenous resurgence.

**Indigenous knowledge and agency**

The Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (Right To Play, 2008: 3) stated that SFD programs:

Seek to empower participants and communities by engaging them in the design and delivery of activities, building local capacity, adhering to generally accepted principles of transparency and accountability, and pursuing sustainability through collaboration, partnerships and coordinated action. (Right To Play, 2008: 3)

From this perspective, sport is seen as a privileged development tool that should favor Indigenous agency. Beacom and Read demonstrated how RTP went through an important shift in 2003 in order to align with these post-development trends and maintain organizational infrastructure to increase operations and support demand for their programs. The main strategic change was decentralization, shifting from the previous international
volunteer model to a new local staffing model that encouraged and valued local expertise while enhancing local capacity “to plan, implement, manage, monitor, and evaluate the program” (Beacom and Read, 2011: 342). This shift represented an important change in participation and agency, as communities and local actors potentially have decision-making capacity and stronger voices in co-designing and owning their programs.

The PLAY program reflects this shift: each community hires a local community mentor in charge of program delivery. While the capacity building and skills acquisition by the 85 community mentors are seen to be program strengths, some participants suggested that mentors experience too much pressure and responsibility: “The program is largely dependent on the success of the community mentor” (Micha); “It’s a lot of pressure on one individual within a community to be the one to create all that change” (Alexis); “When you have Program Officers running 1000 miles an hour, community mentors feel the same thing. When you have chaos in here, the emails that are sent or the conversations that are had with community mentors, they end up feeling the same thing” (Micha).

Additional pressure was felt as not all community mentors were well-versed in traditional knowledge or culture, or did not feel comfortable including Indigenous culture in the programming:

As far as it being a generational thing where there’s like more of a desire for culture among the youth and among the community mentors, I can’t really speak to that, but it’s so varied as well. I think you do have some community mentors who themselves are really well-versed in the culture and traditions of their own nation, and others who are not as plugged in and informed or in touch with it. (Jonny)

Originally when the big expansion happened, in all the curriculum made there was culture woven throughout it. And for some community mentors and communities it was very welcomed. And for others they weren’t comfortable, like community mentors weren’t comfortable leading it and didn’t think it should be part of the program (Micha).

Despite claims of community-led programming, the following suggest otherwise:

You can’t design a program without the community around the table. I can’t emphasize that any more than that . . . here’s a game from Africa in the PLAY manual. We don’t take the time to come from an Indigenous perspective around sport and play and how Indigenous peoples use it for skill development or anything like that to contextualize it, right? Around skills and knowledge and teamwork and play and everything else. (Jordan)

I feel like I should be more facilitating the experience of sharing, of people’s experiences and thoughts and ideas about the program, rather than it being me, the ‘expert’, you know, coming in, making these judgements because that’s not the case. I’m not from the community myself . . . and, you know, the ways that I’ve been trained, might not be reflective of the community’s perspective. (Alexis)

This raises the question of how a Western organization, managed primarily by non-Indigenous people, can operate without incorporating traditional knowledge. One respondent reflected on the effect on the program’s approach to working with Indigenous communities:
One of the first things that really surprised me when I started with the PLAY program was that the staff are majority non-First Nations themselves. I was expecting that the team would be more reflective of the communities that we work with. And many of them hadn’t worked with First Nations before; they actually were learning through the jobs that they were currently doing. And I think that it speaks more to the international side of programs and this idea, again, of the universal logic. (Riley)

The social reproductions of Whiteness, privilege, and dominance described by Darnell (2007, 2014) are clearly evident within the PLAY program demographics:

This idea of privilege that comes with – I shouldn’t even just say – it’s not Indigenous staff, as it’s primarily White, Caucasian and, you know, grew up in urban centers, middle-class, upper-middle-class families . . . I think that people are looking for sameness when they’re hiring without even realizing. So, it’s just like a drawing for likeness. And I think that oftentimes as well because there’s such a focus on producing, they’re looking for people who will just jump in and do rather than ask questions or perhaps, you know, change the way that things are done because they just want to continue doing the work that they’re doing. (Alexis)

The above acknowledges a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches and worldviews. It also emphasizes the social reproduction of disparities that cannot really be overcome without recognizing the profound sociocultural differences between Indigenous and settler. Organizations such as RTP must engage with decolonizing practices by critically reflecting on how to be respectful of Indigenous ways of knowing and recognizing symptoms of colonialism, as reflected in another statement made by Jordan:

If you truly have an understanding of what it means to be in meaningful relationship with Indigenous peoples, it is imperative that you have Indigenous leadership at the helm of such [a] program. I just believe so strongly about that. And that at a minimum, have at least Indigenous staff. And it’s interesting because I think a non-Indigenous person can run Indigenous programming. I think we see it, but that’s because they’ve been in a relationship for years, and they’ve been welcomed, and they get it, and they understand their privilege. I mean, they don’t understand; they owned their privilege. They make efforts to go to community, to speak with the leadership, to give tobacco to the Elders, to educate themselves, and they’re in that place. (Jordan)

These comments reflect the need to encourage and welcome more Indigenous people within SFD organizations; respecting Indigenous worldviews is key to understanding the political and cultural notion of Indigenous resurgence.

Gaudet (2016) described how Moose Factory, the first pilot community for PLAY in 2010, developed its own similar program in 2009 in response to the local suicide crisis. A community Elder started taking at-risk youth to the land to help them reconnect with nature and learn traditional Cree bush culture and skills. This gave birth to Project George, a program developed by a community Elder, which is now well-established and enacts Cree ways of connecting to the land as the main source of knowledge, food, and well-being. Interestingly, recreational sport is also an important component of the program, but the primary difference compared with PLAY is that Project George is totally
endogenous; it is grounded in Cree knowledge and territory and teaches skills such as “fishing, trapping, hunting, and setting up camp, and values such as caring for the camp and for each other through experiential and intergenerational learning on the land” (Gaudet, 2017: 130). Project George is guided by the land and the youth: “there is an element of surrender to the land, rather than control over it” (Gaudet, 2017: 131). This example demonstrates a fundamental difference between a Western program and a Cree initiative that grew and became more formally structured and externally funded. In Project George, land is at the center of resurgence, healing, and youth development, with sport only sporadically occurring; it is something they all do but is secondary to the land.

While soccer, baseball, hockey, and lacrosse (Downey, 2013) are often components of PLAY, many practitioners interviewed were aware of issues relating to the role of sport in the colonial subjugation of Indigenous peoples by de-historicizing and depoliticizing physical activity (Arellano and Downey, 2019; Forsyth, 2007; Paraschak, 1995), as well as how their actual program could be ill-equipped to craft content that was more aligned to local interests and knowledge. Robidoux (2012) highlighted how Indigenous communities re-appropriate Eurocentric sports and re-enact them using their own worldviews and meanings. These re-appropriations are witnessed rather frequently within the context of the PLAY program through a youth-led event module, which often includes cultural restoration dimensions (Kope and Arellano, 2016). However, Arellano and Downey (2019) highlighted that despite attempts to develop culturally appropriate programs with Indigenous sports such as lacrosse, that resonate with Indigenous youth, SFD programs promote an opportunity to participate in the settler society. Staging lacrosse via SFD programs transforms an Indigenous game through a nonspecific, homogenized Aboriginal identity, unwittingly stripping nationhood and imposing a politicized set of non-Indigenous objectives (Arellano and Downey, 2019). Despite undeniable attempts at developing more culturally appropriate and relevant SFD programs for Indigenous youth, to foster resurgence, Indigenous knowledge must be at the heart of such initiatives.

**Political engagement**

Beyond displays of cultural practices, some interviewees brought their critical reflections to more structural grounds. They envisioned the possibility of doing more by being more politically engaged and by building slower, stronger, and more reciprocal relationships for developing holistic and Indigenous knowledge-based programs. Despite all the work to accommodate Indigenous values, needs, and interests, the PLAY program could still be more meaningful to the local reality:

I think the program does a lot to address sort of surface-level issues, but [the communities are] deeply embedded in much more structural, deeper issues that the program doesn’t directly address. And so, to create really meaningful, deep, lasting, sustainable, impactful change; I think that takes a great deal of time and a really diverse group of people. So, one example being suicide, which is a huge issue in a lot of the communities. We don’t have staff members who are trained specifically and can assist in that, you know, and especially from a First Nations perspective. So, I think that, although our programs can provide opportunities for children and youth to look forward to things and keep them focused and engaged, I don’t think that it
necessarily addresses crucial issues of why suicide ideation exists, or, you know, completed suicides and things like that. It’s not necessarily that we have to be those experts, but we need to be partnering with people who work in all the different capacities so that we’re addressing things more holistically. It just can’t exist on its own and expect to create all of these big things that people talk about. I mean, if you look at attribution, how can you be sure that this program is contributing to that change? It’s much bigger than that. Much deeper. (Alexis)

For these respondents, understanding crucial local issues, as well as local knowledge, culture, and traditions through a more holistic approach, is something that needs to be honored, respected, and valued. Kahnawá:ke Mohawk scholar Alfred provided a clear example of how youth programs can be more significant by avoiding settler colonialist notions of sport and recreation through the example of the Akwesasne Cultural Restoration (ACR) program, which is:

A land-based and language-infused cultural apprenticeship program that gives learners the opportunity to apprentice with master knowledge holders to learn traditional, land-based, cultural practices, including hunting and trapping, medicinal plants and healing, fishing and water use, and horticulture and black ash basket making. (Alfred, 2014: 135)

The ACR program shows how a youth program can be community led, politically engaged, and driven by cultural restoration and Indigenous resurgence while contributing to other causes at the same time. This bottom-up program is grounded in efforts to counter intergenerational and historical trauma from Indian Residential Schools, colonial redress, and environmental contamination in the area. The program evolved via a slow development process that combined Indigenous researchers, local consultation, and community consensus (Alfred, 2014).

Some of the most critical respondents support the idea that, beyond keeping youth occupied, physically active, and engaged in health promotion through sport and play, fundamental values associated with Indigenous resurgence, such as advocacy, are critical when working with Indigenous peoples and should be at the heart of that relationship:

I think that such NGOs have a much greater role to play. It’s okay for the staff to talk about female genital mutilation, land dispossession, child sex trafficking, violence in refugee camps, substance abuse, or anything to do with violence against women when it’s over in Africa. But shame on whoever can’t handle it here [in Canada] because, guess what, this work can be uncomfortable, and we are not here to make people comfortable. We’re here to be in relationship with each other for the rights and all of the violations that are happening against Indigenous peoples. And that, I believe, is the ultimate foundational responsibility of any organization in Canada that works with Indigenous peoples. (Jordan)

In other words, any organization or group working with Indigenous populations should accept this political responsibility. Staff members’ statements also suggest that SFD programs are limited to a mainstream health promotion and sport participation rhetoric, which is seen as inevitable when the organization operates in a colonial system that funds growth and fosters a White settler discourse on progress and social order (Darnell, 2014). The following comment could be related to Coulthard’s (2014) thinking, seeing
such programs as playing the role of “psycho-affective attachments” while contributing to naturalizing settler-colonial hierarchies and status quo:

We could do so much better. Because we continually operate from that framework, there is nothing that shows we have moved out of the colonial framework. And that is about the power. It comes from the top down and constantly reproduces White privilege. This whole benefit thing is such a colonial gatekeeping, right, which is so linked to the history of, or to the ideological assumption of, Native people being less than because we actually have all the answers . . . we don’t actually understand the systemic and the institutional racism at all. (Jordan).

Political engagement and advocacy should be reflected in a real understanding of core Indigenous claims and struggles. This was perceived as a fundamental principle but a challenge in RTP, which may not have the capacity, or even the will, to engage itself in advancing the struggle against dispossession and all the social ills and traumas this exacerbates:

The thing that really, really gets to me, that’s part of the reconciliation plan, so it’s when we host, we should acknowledge the territory we’re in, that we bring in and celebrate Indigenous peoples and culture, and we should welcome in that way, right? That’s what we should do – recognize there is a huge history. (Jordan).

All practitioners interviewed recognized the real efforts made within the PLAY team to educate themselves and to understand the socio-historical colonial context in which Indigenous communities have evolved (see Arellano et al., 2018). However, for some staff members, this program partnership requires a clearer understanding of the reproduction of the settler-colonial status quo, power, and privilege, but also advocacy and militancy: “to decolonize our operations, I think it takes political will. I think it takes champions. I think it takes leadership. It takes tough leaders. It takes courage” (Jordan). Reagan insisted on White allies’ responsibilities to deconstruct the relations of power that underlie the myth of benevolence and peacemaking. Instead of remaining “benevolent peacemakers, colonizer perpetrators bearing the false gift of a cheap and meaningless reconciliation” critical self-reflection should serve “to question the myth, to name the violence, to face the history” (Regan, 2010: 237).

**Conclusion**

In this article, we highlight three themes perceived as obstacles to better practice in SFD programs with Indigenous peoples. These themes emerged from some of the most constructively critical reflections articulated by PLAY program officers. They appear caught in a culture of competitiveness and anchored in a funding mentality that privileges growth and numbers; a logic that is often in sharp contrast with Indigenous ways of being and youth needs. Like most SFD organizations, RTP develops programs under a universal logic: the PLAY program is managed by non-Indigenous practitioners who often lack experience with Indigenous communities. Organizational efforts to incorporate community and youth-led programming are limited and result in the reproduction
of euro-Canadian sports that are depoliticized and de-indigenized. Even when engaging with Indigenous sport such as lacrosse, the structure and context of programming tends to replace local culture rather than provide opportunities to co-create and embrace Indigenous epistemologies. Beyond compartmentalized implementations of sport-based programming, the organization deals with inequalities and social justice issues that cannot be ignored. High domestic violence, teen suicide rates, precarious mental and physical health conditions, and addiction are all symptomatic of land dispossession. A politically engaged organization should endorse a culture of advocacy that embodies the responsibility to constructively subvert and disrupt this colonial status quo.

The practitioners’ voices presented here demonstrate high levels of critical reflexive awareness, but the issues they raised could hardly be adapted and modified to transform their practice (Giulianotti, 2011). Increased sensitivity, more experience working with Indigenous communities, or individual political will and engagement are not enough to transform the sector. Paraphrasing Tuck and Yang (2012), the obstacles discussed by participants, and potential solutions to make Indigenous youth programs truly meaningful are largely metaphorical – to slow down the organization’s operations and develop slower and deeper connection with partner communities while integrating local assets, to hire more Indigenous people in senior and leadership positions, to consult Elders or knowledge holders to help develop and validate programs, and to be more aware of Indigenous politics of resistance and advocate for organizational endorsement of movements such as Idle No More – would all be positive actions and a step in the right direction (and to be fair, several of these improvements have been attempted by the organization in the more recent years). However, to favor better practices will not ultimately decolonize SFD. Such recommendations would in all probability help to alleviate settler guilt and avoid addressing the settler problem altogether. In Wolfe’s words (2006), settler colonialism is a structure rather than an event, and decolonization is more than a fight for social justice.

An important issue to raise from this discussion is the fact that Indigenous initiatives such as Project George and the ACR program do exist and are highly meaningful, legitimate programs supportive of resurgence and decolonization. They focus on communities’ needs, values and worldviews; they integrate sport and recreation-based activities grounded in more holistic views of health and wellbeing; and most importantly, they are land-based. Despite ticking all these boxes, we must ask why these programs are not considered within the field of SFD? Who determines which programs are worthy of both study and support? Must SFD programs be Western based in order to be fundable? The research field appears structured to facilitate sport sociologists’ funding for studies that demonstrate SFD is fundamentally wrong, without acknowledging that non-Western models exist and work successfully. Recognizing Indigenous initiatives as legitimate SFD entities would enable them to access existing funding structures. For example, Project George works like any SFD program; it was funded by organizations such as the Trillium Foundation and has developed appropriate programming for Cree youth (Walsh et al., 2020). Future research could focus on documenting how these initiatives serve resurgence; how they can be reproduced in other communities; or how to help similar initiatives address local concerns for resurgence and still align with funding agencies’ expectations for growth and reach with metrics that are truly centered on the wellbeing of Indigenous youth.
Settler-colonial theory establishes land dispossession as central to settler/Indigenous relations at the heart of resurgence. It re-actualizes colonial relations to the contemporary world exposing the inner connections of settler institutions, knowledge and emotions embedded in that social reality, while revealing how knowledge production structures appease settler researchers’ guilt as an integral part of the settler problem. Settler-colonial theory encourages the decolonization of the field of study and associated SFD research questions, while unlocking the restrained, metaphorically decolonial discourse presented in most SFD scholarship. Critical SFD research should strongly condemn the sector’s ongoing role in land dispossession (Millington et al., 2019), but it could also look for ways to produce a more impactful contribution to Indigenous healing and resurgence (Paraschak and Heine, 2020). SFD research should engage more with Indigenous scholars, studies, methodologies and knowledge, and become more cognizant of programs that are Indigenous, sport and recreation-based, and that are truly meaningful to Indigenous peoples. Ultra-critical perspectives in SFD do not subvert their colonial complexion; they only highlight the status quo, enable researcher settlers’ move to innocence (Tuck and Yang, 2012), and do little to support a resurgence commensurate with the repatriation of power, privilege, and land.

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